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The Continuing Struggle Against Unequal Educational Opportunity

August 24, 2000
The National Press Club, Washington, D.C.

The **Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO)** today enters the battle over the present and future direction of the education of Black children, particularly those from low-income families.

It is un-American to accept conditions that deny the possibility of equity for all of our children. We intentionally use the metaphor of struggle, because the history of our people is grounded in a consistent battle for equity and justice.

BAEO is allied together to actively and aggressively support parent choice to empower families and increase educational options for Black children. We will work with any individuals or groups, irrespective of race and ethnicity, that share our goal of expanded educational options for low-income families. **BAEO** has its eye on a single prize — the effective education of ALL of our children. We can no longer tolerate a situation that leaves far too many of our children stranded in an educational wasteland waiting for the next “five year plan” to unfold.

The promise of America is **equal opportunity**. This cherished goal is not reachable for poor Black children when access to quality educational options is unavailable to them.

Glaring and long-standing disparities have led to **BAEO**'s formation.

- Black children for years have lagged behind whites in all major indicators of academic achievement.
- Low-income parents — mostly of color — have much less access than middle- and upper-income parents — mostly white — to high quality schools.
- Low-income parents are much less satisfied than middle- and upper-income parents with schools available for their children.

These disparities are real. We are in a crisis situation that cannot be allowed to go unchallenged and unchanged.

- Nationwide, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) shows that in reading, math, and science, whites are much more likely than Black to be at “proficient” or “advanced” levels.ⁱ
- In Wisconsin, mirroring a national trend, the average ACT score for college-bound white seniors is 22.5, compared with only 17.4 for Black students.ⁱⁱ
- Professor Lawrence Stedman described the dimensions of the crisis as follows at a 1997 Brookings Institution conference:

"...[Twelfth] grade black students are performing at the level of middle school white students. These students are about to graduate, yet they lag four or more years behind in every area [including] reading, math, science, writing, history, and geography. Latino seniors do somewhat better...in math and writing but, in the other areas, are also four years behind white 12th graders...[R]acial gaps in achievement...are as large or larger than they were a decade ago...The conclusion is distressing but unavoidable...[A] generation has passed and the achievement of educational equality remains an elusive dream. Schools and society remain divided into two different worlds, one black and one white, separate and unequal."ⁱⁱⁱ

BAEO fears that many Americans have become numb from hearing these and other illustrations of the educational crisis, **year after year after year**. It's almost as if the nation's eyes have glazed over.

BAEO intends to shake the collective shoulders of the American public and wake it up. This is a crisis about our children and our future. We cannot, we must not, and **we will not** allow this condition to continue.

All **BAEO** asks is that low-income Black parents get a measure of the power that most American parents value and take for granted, the power to choose where their children attend school. Many different steps can be taken to pursue this objective, including educational tax credits and deductions, public-private partnerships, privately financed scholarships for children to attend private schools, tax-supported school vouchers for children to attend private schools, charter schools, home-schooling, and innovations in existing public school systems.

BAEO will use many different tactics in our struggle. We always will stand on a foundation of factual information.

We begin that process today by setting forth compelling data from the U.S. Department of Education (National Center for Education Statistics — NCEA), data that to our knowledge has received little if any mainstream attention.

In *The Condition of Education 2000*, released earlier this summer, NCES included a section called, "School Choice and Parental Satisfaction." It says, in part, that:

"By choosing the school that their children attend, parents may perceive that they can influence the quality of education their children receive. In addition, with parents choosing their children's school, schools may be prompted to compete for enrollments by improving the programs they offer."^{iv}

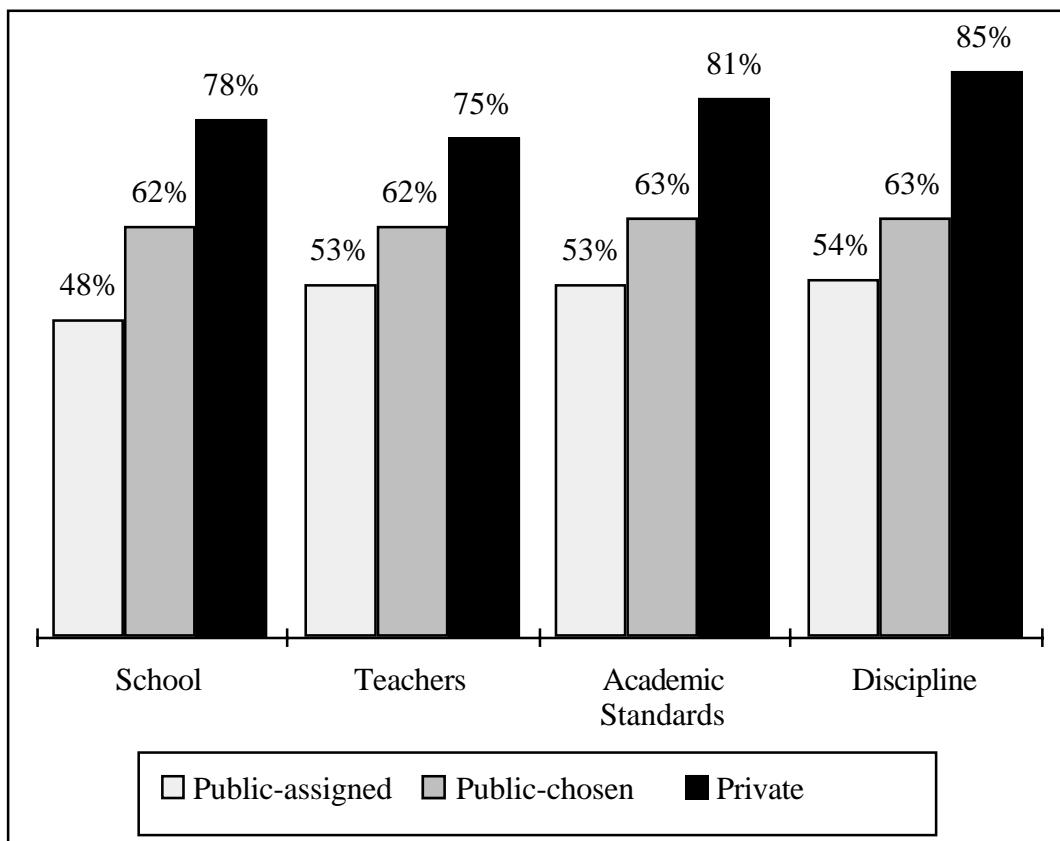
The appearance of this section signals heightened awareness of school choice and parental satisfaction as major educational issues.

Parent satisfaction

The Condition of Education 2000 says that parents who select their child's school are "more likely to be very satisfied...than parents of children attending assigned schools."

Further, it says that the greatest number of "very satisfied" parents has children in private schools or in public schools chosen by the parents. The fewest number of "very satisfied" parents were those whose children were assigned by a school district to attend a school. See Chart 1.

Chart 1. Percent of parents very satisfied with aspects of their child's school (grades 3-12), by type of choice, 1999.^v



Parent satisfaction with private schools was both higher and existed at more grades. *The Condition of Education 2000* says (italics added):

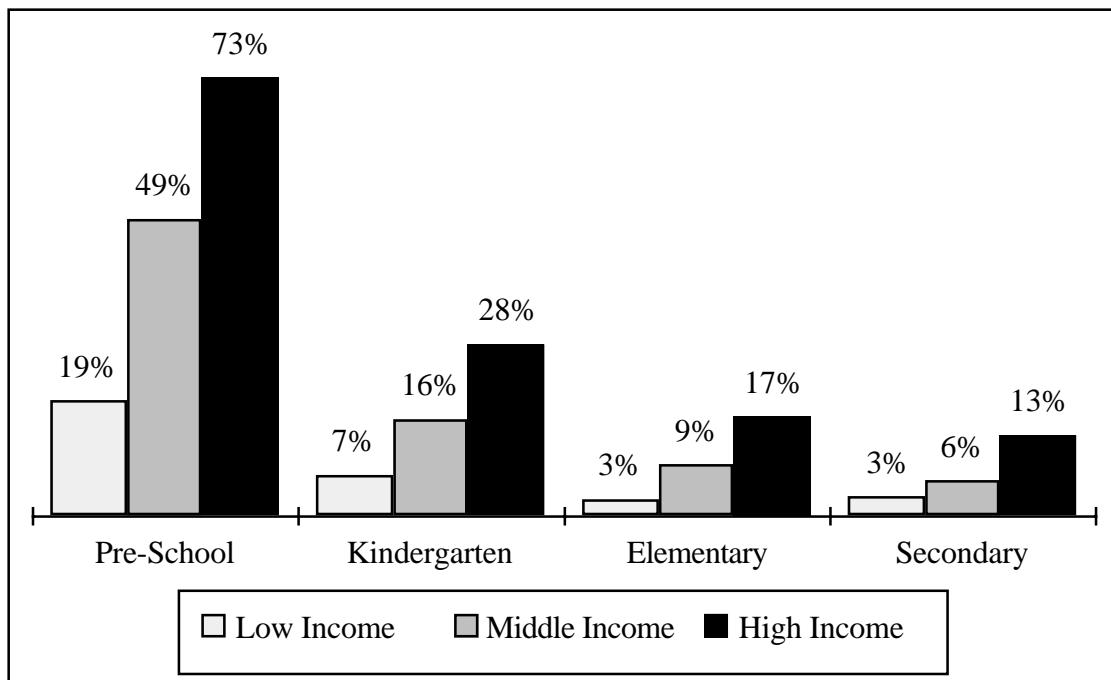
"For children in assigned or chosen public schools in 1999, parents were more likely to be very satisfied with the various aspects of schools when their children were in grades 3-

5 than in grades 9-12. *This was not the case for parents of private school children, however: these parents were as likely to be very satisfied with the school, academic standards, and discipline (but not teachers) whether their children were in grades 3-5 or 9-12.*"

Access to schools of choice

School choice is widespread in America, except for poor families. This is documented vividly in *The Condition of Education 1999*. Based on data from this report, Chart 2 shows wide disparities in wealth among parents choosing private schools.

Chart 2. Percent of students enrolled in private schools, by family income, 1997.^{vi}



The disparity in educational choices illustrated by Chart 2 has drawn the attention of several scholars. For example, as Richard Elmore and Bruce Fuller state:

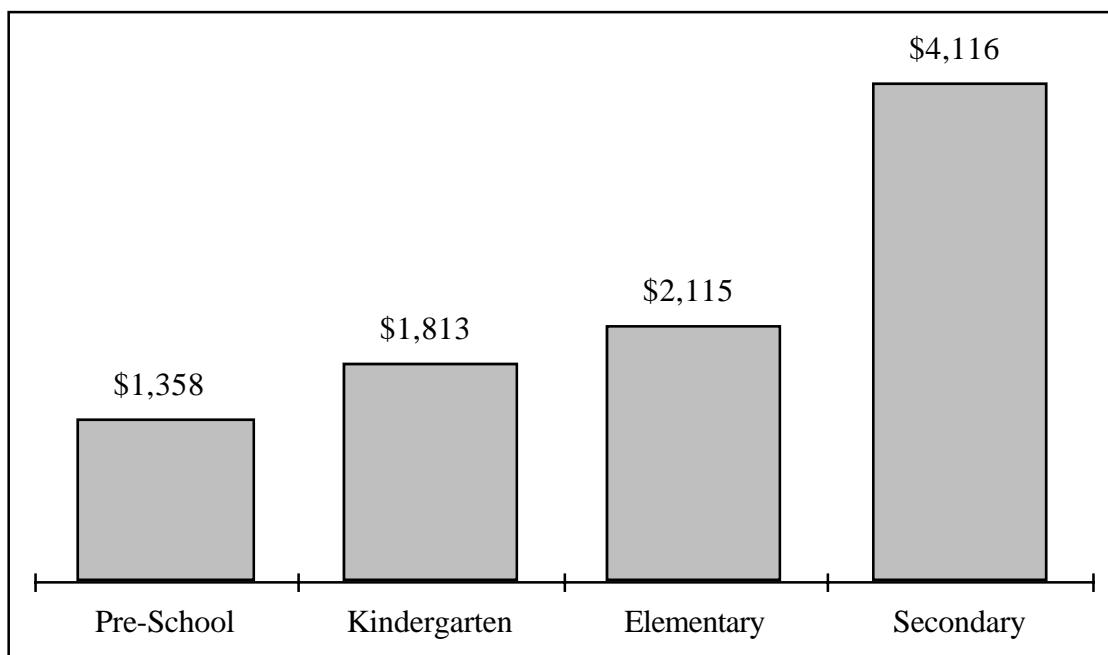
“Choice is everywhere in American education. It is manifest in the residential choices made by families [and] in the housing prices found in neighborhoods [and] when families, sometimes at great financial sacrifice, decide to send their children to private

schools....[I]n all instances, these choices...are strongly shaped by the wealth, ethnicity, and social status of parents and their neighborhoods.”^{vii}

More recently, writing for The Brookings Institution, Jeffrey Henig and Stephen Sugarman describe the “very considerable degree to which families already select the schools their children attend....[B]y one plausible way of counting, more than half of American families now exercise school choice [and] some families have more choice than others.”^{viii}

As Chart 2 shows, regardless of income level, the number of parents using private schools declines from pre-school through high school. A major reason is that private tuition costs rise dramatically by the time students reach high school. See Chart 3.

Chart 3. Median private school tuition, 1997.^{ix}



Rising tuition levels are a special burden for low-income parents, because tax support for them to choose private schools is almost non-existent in Grades 1-12.

This reflects a notable dichotomy in public policy, namely, the wide availability of tax support for parental choice of private education at pre-primary and post secondary levels, but little such

support in Grades 1-12.^x This dichotomy contributes directly to the disparities described by the Department in access to and satisfaction with educational choices.

Public opinion

Many Americans support an end to this inconsistent public policy. *The Condition of Education 2000* states, "Since 1991, the popularity of school choice [in grades 1-12] has grown among the general public."

Predictably, there are even higher levels of support among Blacks for expanded parental choice. School vouchers are but one of many means that can be explored to pursue that goal. A survey by the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies found that "[a]mong African Americans, support for school vouchers in 1999 show[ed] a 25 per cent increase [from 1998]...A substantial majority of black respondents (60 per cent) supported school vouchers, while only one-third of black respondents rejected them." The same survey found that "black respondents...rated their...public schools more negatively [in 1999 than in 1998], and a larger percentage...believe their...public schools are getting worse." In contrast, "whites reported fairly high levels of satisfaction with their local public schools, and they are more likely to think the schools are improving than regressing."^{xi}

Earlier this week Phi Delta Kappa issued its annual poll on education attitudes. In doing so, PDK said groups with goals such as **BAEO** favor "school reform strategies that propose diminishing or dismantling the public schools..."^{xii} PDK added that such strategies "have failed and will continue to fail."

BAEO rejects PDK's insulting and factually unsupported suggestion that those who don't share its agenda are anti-public education. PDK's pronouncement reflects an all-too-familiar, condescending attitude toward low-income parents, mostly of color, who dare to suggest that they, too, should enjoy the kind of access to educational options that most Americans, including most public school teachers, take for granted. **BAEO** looked in vain in PDK's announcement for information on how Black parents and low-income parents feel about expanding the educational options available to them. When we asked for that detail, we were told to send a check for \$95 and that a full report would be available in about a month.

As for “failed” reform strategies, what greater failure could befall low-income children, mostly of color, than the conditions that have persisted for decades in America’s urban public schools? It takes unbelievable gall for PDK to point a finger at parents of children who aren’t being properly educated and accuse them of favoring “failed” strategies.

BAEO invites PDK to visit Milwaukee, ground zero in America for expanded educational opportunities. Thousands of Milwaukee parents, in private AND public schools can testify to the educational gains that are occurring as a direct result of more parent empowerment.

The Role of the Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO)

BAEO commends the Department of Education for recognizing, in *The Condition of Education 2000*, the issue of parental school choice and satisfaction. Yet, the glaring inequities illustrated by its own data call for a more prominent, vigorous, and uncompromising declaration by the Department that these inequities are intolerable. They are too important to remain buried in a report.

The disparities described in this paper are foremost in the minds of the national network of Blacks who have formed **BAEO**. These disparities, effectively confirmed by the U.S. Department of Education, are more than unacceptable. They are repugnant. They are un-American.

BAEO’s mission is to eliminate these disparities. **BAEO** will pursue that mission as long as low-income parents, mostly of color, have less access to high quality educational options for their children than do middle- and upper-income parents, the majority of who are white.

ENDNOTES

ⁱ The College Board. “Reaching the Top,” A Report of the National Task Force on Minority High School Achievement, 1999.

ⁱⁱ Walters, Steven. “State again ranks at top in ACT scores — But gap between black, white students continues to perplex officials,” *The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, August 17, 2000.

ⁱⁱⁱ Stedman, L. "An Assessment of the Contemporary Debate Over U.S. Achievement," School of Education and Human Development, State University of New York at Binghamton, presented in May 1997, at The Brookings Institution.

- iv The Condition of Education 2000, Section 4, p. 61. The publication cites Viteritti, J., *Choosing Equality*" School Choice, *The Constitution and Civil Society*, Brookings Institution, Washington D.C., 1999.
- v The Condition of Education 2000, Section 4, p. 72. Source: National Household Education Survey, 1999 (Parent Interview Component).
- vi Condition of Education 1999, Section II, p. 58. Source: U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, October Current Population Surveys. Low income is the bottom 20 percent of all family incomes; high is the top 20 percent; and middle is the 60 percent in between.
- vii Who Chooses? Who Loses?, Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 1996.
- viii School Choice and Social Controversy, The Brookings Institution Press, 1999.
- ix Condition of Education 1999, Section II, p. 58.
- x In grades 1-12, tax support for low-income and-or low-performing students to enroll in private schools exists in Milwaukee, Cleveland, and Florida. Educational tax credits and deductions are available in Minnesota, Iowa, Illinois, and Arizona. Maine and Vermont have programs where some students may receive tax support to attend private schools outside their communities.

In contrast, before first grade, tax-support is widely available for educational choice at both governmental and non-governmental institutions. In fiscal year 1997, nearly \$4 billion in federal funds supported Head Start programs, a large number of which were operated by private institutions and often are located in religious institutions. Almost 800,000 children, most aged 3 and 4, attended these programs. (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.)

Both major candidates for President in 2000, and many other candidates for elected office, support multi-billion dollar programs of tax credits and other support to let more parents choose early childhood education programs, including those offered by private and religious institutions.

As for post-secondary education, the Department of Education's website describes many programs that provide grants, loans, or work-study support for students at private, religious colleges. Tax support for attendance at such institutions increased dramatically after the 1944 enactment of The Servicemen's Readjustment Act, commonly known as the GI Bill, which provided educational assistance for World War II veterans. In succeeding years, a wide range of federal programs have been enacted for students planning a post-secondary education at a private school. These include Pell Grants, Ford Loans (formerly Federal Direct Student Loans), and many others.

In fiscal year 1999, tax support for public and private post-secondary education programs totaled \$18.2 billion (U.S. Department of Education). A majority of states supplement the federal support with their own programs that let parents and student enroll in private religious colleges.

- xi Bositis, David. "1999 National Opinion Poll — Education," Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies. The Joint Center is "a national, nonprofit institution that conducts research on public policy issues of special concern to black Americans and other minorities." See <http://www.jointcenter.org>.
- xii "Policy Implications of the 32nd Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll," *Phi Delta Kappan*, September 2000, page 49.