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School Choice is Academic

By Roberta Kitchen

School choice is not a political issue for those of us with children in the Cleveland Scholarship Program. It is not about religion, either. What it is about is getting our children a decent education. If policy makers would come down from their ivory towers long enough to talk with us and see the public schools here, they would have a strong impression of the need for school choice.

I have five children abandoned by my goddaughter, and I've struggled for years to get them into schools that work. This struggle began in earnest with my oldest child, Tiffany. I knew she was not learning in her public school. She would come home knowing nothing about her homework or claiming she had none at all. Teachers at her public school were not able to teach Tiffany and her classmates because the environment at her school was complete chaos.

Our neighborhood became infested with drugs a few years ago, and Tiffany's elementary school was no exception. There were boys there who were drug dealers—ten or eleven-year-olds—who were threatening to rape her. Like any parent, I was concerned, so I went to Tiffany's principal. She recommended a counselor, who then sent me to the police. The police knew who the boys were before I even mentioned their names. They'd had several complaints, but there was no action from the school or the police. I was so afraid for her,

I would take my lunch hour late in the afternoon so I could pick her up from school and deliver her home safely.

We heard so many stories about violence in the school that it was hard to believe. I was told that students would often make the teacher cry and had even broken her arm. Once, I met Tiffany's teacher after school to express my concern that she wasn't learning up to her potential, and the teacher's arm was in a sling. Indeed, it had been broken by the same boys who were threatening Tiffany. Despite these acts of violence, the teacher was instructed not to send any more children to the principal's office for misbehaving because the office was always full.

In despair and frustration, I attended school board meetings, but the board did not allow parents to speak. We could only express our frustration to other parents there for the same reasons, but we were never given an opportunity to speak to the board.

When one of my children was finally approved for a scholarship, I investigated several schools near our home. I asked a lot of questions about curriculum. The whole environment in the private schools was very different. Uniformed students were in their classrooms, and classrooms were in order. Teachers could leave their classrooms to speak with me in the hallway by simply telling the students to work quietly while she spoke with me in the hall. This would be impossible at Tiffany's public school because the hallways were loud with

roaming children. Every ounce of a teacher's energy was absorbed with disciplinary problems, and she had no attention left for teaching students, much less answering the questions of a parent.

If the courts should end the Cleveland Scholarship Program, I'll do anything it takes to keep my children in private schools, even though I would work myself into the ground as a single mother trying to afford it. Putting my children back in public school is simply not an option. My children are an easy target in the lion's den of the public school because I've always taught them not to resort to violence. Bullies fight them knowing they will not fight back.

People with the power to continue or end school choice in Cleveland may not understand what public schools here are like. I would ask them to come and talk to those of us who have children here before they make decisions about our lives up in their ivory towers. I would ask them to place one of their own children in these public schools. If it were their own children, they would not stop school choice. That decision would be a death sentence for our children. It's not about politics or religion or black and white. It's about our children, who can't afford to lose.

Institute for Justice client Roberta Kitchen is a Cleveland mother of five children, two of whom are in the Cleveland Scholarship Program.