

The Miami Herald

December 2, 1999

A mom's view of school choice

Brenda McShane lives in Pensacola. Her daughter Brenisha attends the Montessori Early School through the A+ school-choice program.

I am the mother of four children, and my experiences with Pensacola's public schools have been frustrating and sad. My oldest son dropped out of high school and now is stuck in a dead-end job. My youngest son was held back twice and now is in a dropout-prevention program. And my oldest daughter reads far below her grade level and regularly must attend summer school. Thus I was not surprised when the Florida Department of Education gave F grades to the elementary schools that my children have attended: Spencer Bibbs and A.A. Dixon.



**BRENDA
McSHANE**

last year. I thought that I would have to send her there for another five years and feared that she would develop the same problems as my other children.

The opportunity-scholarship program, however, has lived up to its name for my family: It has given my daughter the opportunity to receive a good education. After signing up for the program, I sent Brenisha to the Montessori Early School for first grade. Her experience there so far has been wonderful. Although she has attended the school for only a few months, her reading and spelling already have improved dramatically, and she is solving math problems that I don't even recognize! She receives far more individualized attention than she did at A.A. Dixon and is studying many more subjects. For instance, she is learning Spanish, sign language and music. The school is allowing

A BETTER EDUCATION

My husband and I, however, had no choice but to send our children to these failing schools. While both of us work, we can't afford private-school tuition. That's why I was so happy to hear about the new opportunity-scholarship program. My youngest child, Brenisha, 6, attended kindergarten at A.A. Dixon

Brenisha and me to learn together. Her teachers send home sign-language exercises, for example, for us to do at home. This way, I am more involved in my daughter's education and get to learn about new topics, too.

The class sizes at my daughter's new school are much smaller, and the students behave better, treating each other with kindness and respect. I must confess that I was a little worried about sending my child to a school where most of the students are white. She is African American, and I wasn't sure how she would be treated. Thankfully, this hasn't been a problem at all. I haven't detected any prejudice at the school whatsoever. My daughter has made many new friends and has joined the Brownies. She also has a wonderful relationship with her teacher and is enthusiastic about going to school.

The other day, we saw her teacher at the mall, and Brenisha hugged and kissed her. My children never reacted that way to their public-school teachers.

OUR FINAL HOPE

While I am very pleased with the education that Brenisha is receiving, I remain worried about her future. The American Civil Liberties Union and other groups have gone to court to end the opportunity-scholarship program. If the ACLU succeeds, Brenisha will have to go back to the same public schools that failed my other children. I pray that the opportunity-scholarship program will be saved. I am not a well-educated woman, but I want better for my children. I was not able to send my older children to a school that provided them with a good education. Because of that, they are not doing well today. Brenisha is my last child and represents my family's final hope. Now that she is in a good school, no justice system worthy of its name should force her to leave.

The Institute for Justice represents Brenda McShane and her children in their fight for the ability to choose a school that best fits their needs.