



# SCHOOL CHOICE SAVED MY LIFE

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Public schools aren't the answer for everyone. They weren't the answer for me. Schools in my neighborhood in Jacksonville, FL functioned less as places of learning and more as warehouses to keep kids off the street. I know — I was one of those kids.

I don't blame teachers, or parents. I'm not interested in blaming anybody. I'm only interested in making things better. And the only way to do that is to give parents and students a choice. If a student can't get the education they need at their public school, there has to be an alternative.

Thankfully, there was for me.

My early years in my Jacksonville school were not a success, to put it mildly. I seldom understood the lesson. I was often confused and frustrated. I'd ask my teachers questions, but it seemed to me that this just annoyed them. So, I stopped asking questions and I withdrew into myself. I failed third grade — twice. Fourth and fifth weren't much better. I lashed out by getting into fights with my classmates. D's and F's filled my report card. I was going nowhere. I was just another black kid in the warehouse.

But fortunately for me, my life changed the summer before sixth grade. I went to live with my godmother. She had one overriding thought: to get me into a better school. A good education, she knew, was the only way to get out of the hole I had dug myself into. She didn't have any more money than my family did, but she had a plan. That was worth a lot. She knew about another school — a private school.

Using a tax-credit scholarship — you can call it a voucher — she enrolled me at Esprit de Corps Center for Learning. Esprit demands excellence from its students. It teaches them to be warriors for knowledge and for good values. The teachers at Esprit were invested in my success. They took the time to figure out why learning was so difficult for me, and they tailored their instruction to my learning style.

Sound elite? It is. Sound expensive? It's not. In fact, Esprit actually spends less money per student than the public school I had attended.

Instead of dreading my classes, I began to look forward to them. Instead of fistfights, I began doing community service work. I even earned the National Police Athletic League's Girl of the Year award in 2009. When it was time for me to apply for college, Esprit even helped me to research scholarships and apply for waivers so that I could take my college entrance tests for free.

On June 5, 2010, I graduated from Esprit de Corps with honors, becoming the first member of my immediate family to earn a high school diploma, and eventually the first to earn a college degree, and then a Master's. Without school choice, none of this would have been possible. Why is it so hard to grasp? Why are so many people so resistant to children and parents having a choice of schools? The system, especially for economically disadvantaged kids, is broken. I've seen it up close. And I've seen what happens when it works better — when there is choice. School choice allows parents who live in undervalued neighborhoods to pick the school that best works for their children.

Of course, the opponents of school choice — the politicians and the teachers' unions who profit off of keeping poor black kids trapped in the warehouse — say it takes money away from students who need it the most. But does anybody believe that money is the problem? Washington DC, for example, spends over \$20,000 per student.

We don't need any more money. We need more choice. Let's challenge public schools to compete on quality. Only competition breeds excellence.

Prosperous parents can choose where to send their kids to school: public, private, or charter — wherever they have the best chance to succeed. Why shouldn't all parents have that choice? We have the money to make it happen. We just need the will.

None of us deserve to be imprisoned by our ZIP codes. Education is the only way out of generational poverty. I'm a living example. Let's help redefine public education to make it work for everybody. There's only one way to do that: school choice. What are we waiting for?

I'm Denisha Merriweather for Prager University.