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OPINION

# Guest opinion: Time to address the pressing need for school choice options

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**By Elizabeth Beshears and Denisha Allen | American Federation for Children***This is a guest opinion column*

In a recent column, John Archibald wrongly recommends fighting de facto segregated schools in Alabama by keeping Black, brown, and low-income students trapped in them. Instead, as advocates for empowering families and ensuring equitable access to quality education, we believe it's time to address the pressing need for school choice options.

Mr. Archibald highlights the demographic shift in Birmingham City Schools, where only 1% of students are White. This statistic underscores a harsh reality: those with means, typically White families, have already sought alternatives through suburban or private schools. Meanwhile, remaining Black, brown, and low-income students, whose parents cannot afford such options, are left behind in underperforming schools.



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Students in these schools deserve more than a plan that simply doubles down on the same systems that failed these same students in the first place. It is essential to recognize, first, that the desire for school choice is not limited to a particular political ideology. In fact, 73 percent of Black Democrats support school choice. Black mothers, in particular, are growing tired of waiting for change. They want the best for their children, and they are rightfully demanding options that meet their children's unique needs.

Moreover, the demographics of students benefiting from school choice programs nationwide are telling. Seventy percent of students in public charter schools are Black, and Black families represent the fastest-growing group within the homeschooling movement. In Alabama the limited school choice options we do have are used primarily by minority students. It's clear that Black and brown families are embracing school choice as a means to access a quality education that they feel traditional public schools are all too often failing to provide.

Throughout history, Black school founders have been instrumental in providing educational opportunities where traditional systems fell short. Their actions exemplify self-determination, creating pathways for Black students to achieve academic success despite systemic barriers. This legacy underscores the value of diverse options within education, ensuring that every child has a chance to thrive, regardless of their background.

And, more options are needed, especially since less than half of Birmingham third grade students are expected to pass the state's reading assessment.

Rather than perpetuating the racist legacies of redlining and white flight, we must prioritize solutions that ensure all children have access to the same opportunities. School choice programs, like the CHOOSE Act currently being debated in the Alabama Legislature, offer a lifeline to families trapped in schools that simply are not providing a chance at a better life.

Contrary to bogus claims repeated by Mr. Archibald that ESAs drain state budgets, evidence from states like Arizona actually shows a budget surplus. The financial support provided by ESAs is only a portion of the amount the state would spend to keep a child in public school, even as it empowers parents to choose the educational environment best suited for their child's needs. Evidence from other states, like Florida, where Denisha resides, shows that a rising tide raises all boats; Florida has seen remarkable improvements in student outcomes and teacher pay since implementing statewide school choice initiatives.

Critics may argue against school choice, but their privileged positions often betray their true beliefs. Mr. Archibald himself chose not to enroll his children in Birmingham City High Schools, indicating a lack of confidence in the very system he defends. Our experiences, both as mothers and advocates, drive us to fight for increased education options for all children, just like Mr. Archibald had, regardless of race or socioeconomic status.

After her own life-changing experience benefitting from Florida's school choice programs, Denisha founded and now leads Black Minds Matter, which underscores the importance of celebrating Black excellence and advocates for high-quality educational opportunities. As a mom residing in Birmingham, questions about education quality and safety hit close to home for Elizabeth. Her upbringing, being homeschooled before attending a small rural public school then moving five hours from home to attend high school at a selective enrollment public school, mirrors the choices many families seek today.

School choice is not a luxury but a necessity for Black, brown, and low-income students striving for academic success. It's time to prioritize empowerment over perpetuating failing systems. Let's heed the voices of parents demanding better for their children and embrace policies that promote equity, excellence, and opportunity for all.

*Elizabeth Beshears is the National Director of Communications Strategy for the American Federation for Children and the AFC Growth Fund. Denisha Allen is a Senior Fellow at the American Federation for Children and Founder of Black Minds Matter.*

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