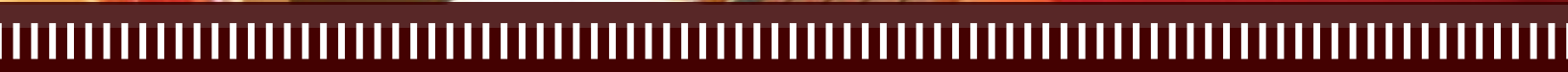


Unlocking Freedom in Education

WHO HOLDS THE KEYS TO OUR CHILDREN'S FUTURE?

By Lindsay Boyd



Maria Vargason: A Mother Knows Best

Brett and Maria Vargason moved to East Nashville long before the neighborhood became an up-and-coming hotspot made popular by its trend-setting food and music scenes. Like many families, the Vargasons considered various factors in deciding where to send their children to school. But when their oldest son Gus was diagnosed with Duchenne muscular dystrophy at age six, Maria decided to homeschool her other children at home to allow



them as much time as possible with their brother. Tragically, Gus lost his courageous battle in 2011.

Since then, Maria has continued to educate her children full-time at home, but she does not believe home schooling her children all the way through high school is the best individual approach for each of them. However, she is reluctant to send her children to the failing public schools designated for her community. As a middle-class family with a modest income, the Vargasons lack the resources necessary to afford a private education for their three children. They could apply for one of the district's magnet or charter schools, but if this year's demand is any indication, Ambrose, Amelia, and Thomas' chances of being selected are less than four percent.

You see, in Metro Nashville, there are many children on a waiting list for a better school. Each year, thousands of students participate in MNPS' "Selection Day," during which the school system randomly draws names of those students fortunate enough to have an opportunity to attend the school of their choice. Yet, while these families celebrate the opportunity their child receives, thousands others are left waiting and hoping that their chance may come next year.

Certainly, the lack of access to the more desirable schools in one's area does not necessarily mean a child cannot succeed. "I am not against public education," Maria is quick to point out. "The public model can be good for many students, but for others it can provide a disservice." Even at early ages, she recognized the unique characteristics in each of her children and how differently they learn as they mature. "Ambrose is bright, but a late bloomer," she explains. While he struggled

early in reading classes, he takes naturally to his computer science courses. His little sister Amelia, who dances in the Centennial Youth Ballet and loves making movies, evidently caught the artistic bone in the family. As the youngest child, Thomas is eager to explore, preferring the outdoors, and his temperament requires frequent breaks from the classroom structure.

As different from one another as Maria Vargason's young children are, it is not difficult to imagine how vastly different children from varying family structures, backgrounds, communities, and socio-economic conditions are from one-another. How can they all be expected to learn from a one-size-fits-all education model? As absurd as it is to believe that every child would flourish in a home school setting, why does our current system maintain that every child will flourish in the public classroom?

School Choice: The Civil Rights Issue of Our Day

Education across our country is fast becoming a new frontier of academic and developmental innovation. In 2010, the *Wall Street Journal* proclaimed that 2011 would be "the year of school choice."¹ Since that time, we have moved from a nation largely consuming a mass-education model through the public classroom to a nation seeking tailored academics for our individual children. Now, 24 states have a private school choice program. Unfortunately, Tennessee is not one of them.

Perhaps the greatest tragedy of Tennessee's inaction is the disproportionate consequences the lack of choice wrecks on minority families. According to a 2011 nationwide study, more than 40 percent of black students were zoned for schools that are underperforming, and are consequently much less

likely to graduate high school. Among high school graduates in 2010, 78 percent of white males completed high school in four years, compared to just 52 percent of black males and 58 percent of Hispanic males.²

Unfortunately, many minority Tennessee families are trapped. In his article, "Beale Street Weeps for Our Children," Michael Holzman asserts that "Recruitment for jail in the Memphis area begins in the schools." He cites data from the 2011-2012 U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights report, which found that black students enrolled in the Memphis public school system accounted for 90 percent of the 26,000 out-of-school suspensions, 11,500 in-school suspensions, and 4,400 expulsions.³

As these children are dislodged from their school environments, they are falling through the cracks of our education system. Holzman goes on to note "three-quarters of Memphis' black students are not reading at grade level by ninth grade." And although Shelby County's Unified School District (now merged with Memphis City Schools) claims a 71 percent graduation rate for African-American students, their combined average ACT score was more than 25 percent lower than the national average.⁴ These facts lead Holzman to conclude "while 70 percent of Memphis students may graduate from high school, few of them are career or college ready. After all, three-quarters of black students in Memphis could not read at grade level when they were in eighth grade." In reviewing the performance statistics of the largest Memphis area post-secondary schools, the data supports Holzman's suspicions.⁵

These sad statistics may explain why school choice is overwhelmingly popular in minority communities. In the Beacon Center's 2012 school choice survey conducted with the Friedman Foundation, nearly 60

percent of Tennesseans polled supported educational choice—with highest support coming from young voters and African-Americans.⁶

Fortunately for a select few, they are able to escape the barriers and find hope.

Marshall Shanks: A School Choice Success Story

As Maria Vargason’s testimony proves, the power of a devoted mother can make all the difference in a child’s life—and the story of Marilyn Johnson and her son, Marshall, is certainly another powerful example. Despite losing her husband when Marshall was just 13 months old and living in a difficult Memphis area neighborhood, Marilyn was determined to find a quality education for her son.

“We knew he was going to a private school,” Marilyn says, explaining that she made this decision with Marshall’s father before he passed away. She was determined to give her son an opportunity to escape the crime and destitution of his current surroundings. When she learned about the Memphis Opportunity Scholarship Trust (MOST), Marilyn knew it was the right decision for Marshall.

“MOST has been so nice,” Marilyn says. “They have continued the funding as long as he maintains a certain GPA and all the community service that goes with it.” Marshall, now in high school, has earned more than 80 hours of community service.

“The child has to put forth the effort and want the education, too,” Marilyn explains. MOST shares her high expectations for Marshall, and Marilyn appreciates the commitment to success in school and

beyond.

“Their vision matches my vision,” Marilyn says. “He has to watch his attitude, and when people meet him for the first time, they ask what school he goes to because they know there is something different about him.” In fact, Marshall truly is an extraordinary student and member of his community. Not only does he complete his required community service hours, but at just 12-years-old, he launched “One Block at a Time,” a revitalization project he hopes will help others who reside in the neighborhood he still lives in today.

Marshall’s hard work is already paying dividends. Marshall will soon participate in a Harvard University leadership program, followed by a science program at the University of Tennessee.

“You cannot afford not to invest in your child,” Marilyn says. “You have no choice. It’s an investment. You pay for it now, or you’ll pay for it later.”



Ricki Douglas: A Story of Perseverance

Unfortunately, Marshall's story of triumph and opportunity is an exception and not the norm. Fourteen-year-old Ricki Douglas continues to wait and hope that she might have the same chance at chasing her dreams in a safer environment that encourages academic excellence. "I want to be a cop one day," Ricki explains. "I'll work in the canine unit because I love dogs so much, but I also want to go into schools and talk about why bullying is so bad."

For Ricki, who attends Maplewood High in East Nashville, school is both a form of stability and a place of unrest. Her father lives out-of-state while Ricki is being raised by her mother Carla and stepfather, Anson, who moved to Nashville from Memphis. "Memphis had no opportunities," says Anson, who ultimately decided to come to Nashville for work. In the fall of 2014, after Carla was forced to have unexpected surgery for a serious health condition, Ricki's family experienced financial strains and were uprooted from their home. Ricki was enrolled in the "Hero Program" for students without permanent housing so that she could continue receiving transportation to school.



Yet, while Ricki was able to retain some semblance of normalcy as a student, her classroom setting can many times be just as turbulent. "I see teachers get hit by students and kids fighting on my bus a lot," Ricki describes. "I just try to ignore it, but sometimes it just feels crazy."

Despite her circumstances, Ricki's optimistic outlook remains constant. Her hopes of becoming a law enforcement officer help to fuel her determination to overcome the challenges she faces at home and at school, while she waits on Tennessee lawmakers unlock opportunities for her find an environment in which she can feel safe.

It's No Longer About Private vs. Public

Just as Marilyn Johnson and her son Marshall remained vigilant in their pursuit of a better education, that same spirit has propelled the academic field to enter a new horizon of innovative education opportunities.

Marshall has excelled in his private school, but as Jonathan Butcher, Beacon Center Senior Fellow and Education Director at the Goldwater Institute, and Lindsey Burke, Will Skillman Fellow in Education at the Heritage Foundation explore in their report, "Expanding Education Choices: From Vouchers and Tax Credits to Savings Accounts," the menu of school choice options has significantly broadened over the last three years. "Education is on the verge of a new frontier," Burke and Butcher explain. "Online virtual schools are spreading around the country, and charter schools now account for some two million students. Parents are able to find hundreds of educational applications on an iPad or use programs such as Skype

or instant messaging to find tutoring programs for their children anywhere in the world.”⁷

Indeed, we have families here in Tennessee that are already exploring these new approaches to learning for their children—to the extent that our tightly controlled and heavily restricted education system will allow.

Meet the Trevinos: Exploring Education's Virtual Frontier

When Arika Trevino rushed her son, Matthew, to the hospital in the middle of the night after his allergies caused his eyes to swell shut, Arika noticed that his recorded weight was off. He had started that first grade year at 54 pounds, but was down to 42 pounds. How could that be?

“I went to bring this up with his teacher, and she told me that he doesn’t eat lunch at school,” Arika says. “I asked when she was going to tell me this, and she told me that she didn’t think I’d want to know.”



Understandably frustrated, Arika pulled Matthew and his older sister, Amber, out of school and enrolled them in Tennessee Virtual Academy, an online public school for students in grades K-8. Arika noticed a difference in her children right away.

“[Matthew’s] teacher was awesome,” Arika says. Matthew, diagnosed as autistic, did not have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) at his former public school, but teachers and specialists at Tennessee Virtual Academy worked with Arika to develop specific approaches for Matthew.

“Matthew’s speech delay actually shrunk a little bit that first year,” Arika says. “They let him work at his own pace with his studies, and both of my children are above grade level now.”

“I do think that each child is different, and I don’t think the option that I chose for my kids is for everybody,” Arika says. “But if brick and mortar is not working for you, there are other environments for them to learn in.”

As Arika and her family attest, the virtual world of academia is a modern twist on homeschooling, which remains a popular choice for many parents who may be seeking an alternative to the “brick and mortar” public and private schools in their area.

Who Should Hold the Keys to Your Child's Education?

These stories highlight the importance of handing parents the keys that may unlock doors to a better education for their children. In fact, when asked, parents across our state overwhelmingly support the opportunity to make these decisions for their children's futures.

A 2012 survey conducted by the Beacon Center and Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice found a disparity between where Tennessee children are currently enrolled and where their parents would like to send them. For example, 92 percent of children were enrolled in public schools, seven percent in private schools, and less than one percent in charter schools, according to the survey results. Yet, according to the same survey, 40 percent would choose to send their child to a public school, 40 percent to private schools, nine percent to charter schools, and eight percent would homeschool their children.

Indeed, we now see this menu of options explode with new opportunities, including online virtual academies like the school Arika Trevino's children attend. Yet, Tennessee remains one of 26 states without a statewide school choice program. Students like Marshall Shanks must hope that privately funded charitable programs can continue to support their chances for a brighter future. But Maria Vargason's children will not have the same opportunities as Marshall and children in Florida, Indiana, Louisiana, Georgia, and 15 other states that are exploring the limits of the education horizon. Until school choice becomes a reality in Tennessee, thousands of children will remain trapped, a quality education lying just beyond their reach.

1. Jonathan Butcher, "School Choice Marches Forward." *Education Next*. Vol. 13, No. 1. Winter 2013. <http://educationnext.org/school-choice-marches-forward-2/>.
2. Reince Priebus, "Why School Choice is a Civil Rights Issue." CNN. May 17, 2014. <http://www.cnn.com/2014/05/17/opinion/priebus-school-choice/>.
3. Michael Holzman, "Beale Street Weeps for Our Children." *Drop Out Nation*. September 4, 2014. <http://dropoutnation.net/2014/09/04/beale-street-weeps-for-our-children/>.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. "New Poll: Tennesseans support school choice." The Beacon Center of Tennessee. June 15, 2012. <http://www.beacontn.org/2012/06/new-poll-shows-tennesseans-support-school-choice/>.
7. Lindsey Burke and Jonathan Butcher, "Expanding Education Choices: From Vouchers and Tax Credits to Savings Accounts." The Heritage Foundation. Special Report #136. July 26, 2013. <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2013/07/expanding-education-choices-from-vouchers-and-tax-credits-to-savings-accounts>.

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