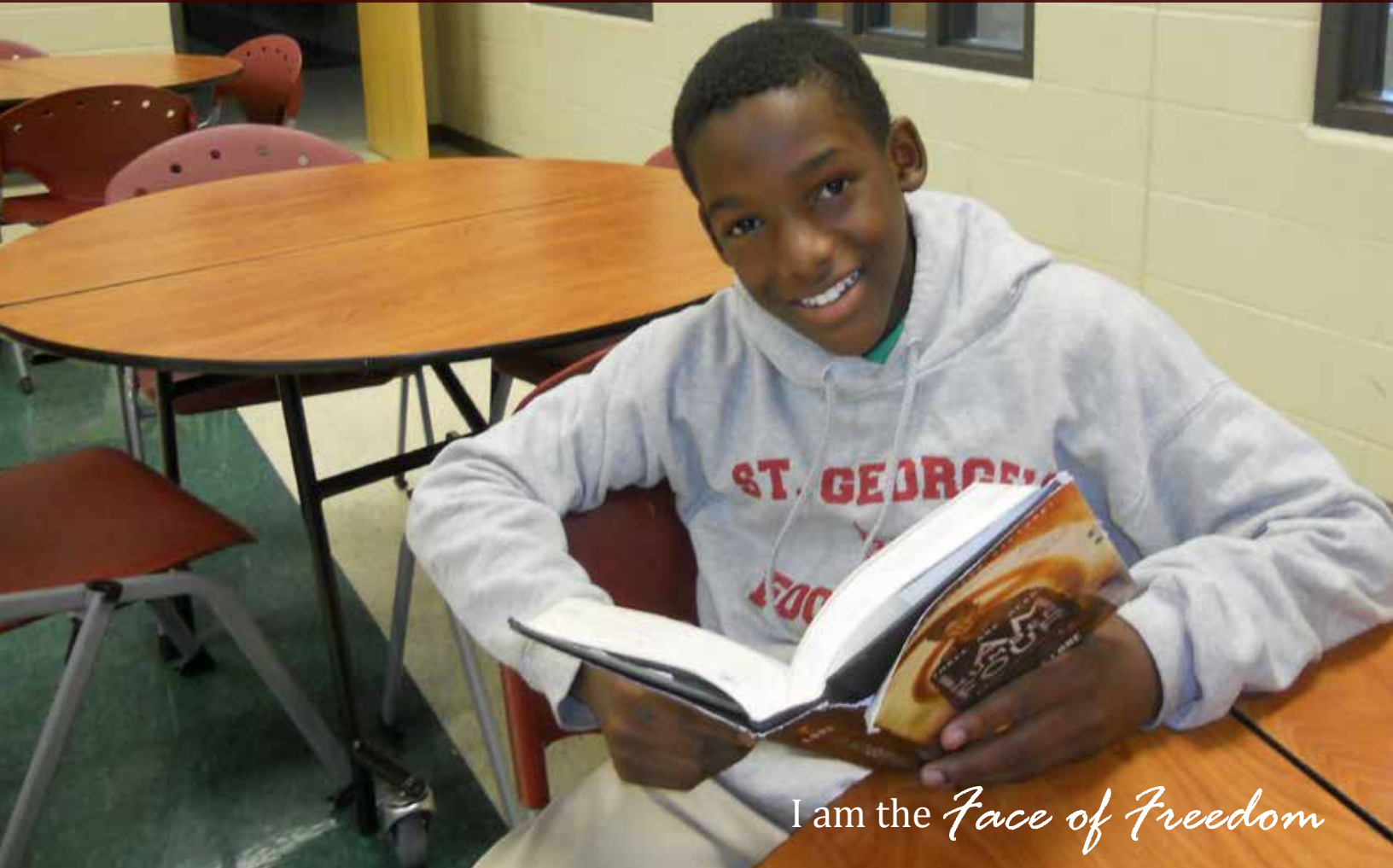


The Choice is Ours

EMPOWERING TENNESSEE FAMILIES THROUGH OPPORTUNITY SCHOLARSHIPS

By Trey Moore and Scott Sumner



I am the *Face of Freedom*



Faces of Freedom



Trapped in the System

Brett and Maria Vargason moved to East Nashville 18 years ago, long before the neighborhood was widely recognized among the South's trendiest culinary and music scenes. To hear Maria say it, "We were East Nashville before East Nashville was cool."

Today, publications like the *New York Times* praise the area east of the Cumberland River as a town being brought to life one great plate of food at a time.¹ Never mind the Cumberland, the community's resurgence even has people across the Atlantic talking about its music. Great Britain's second most popular newspaper website, *The Guardian*, claims "there are more thrilling new bands in East Nashville than anywhere else on earth."²

High praise, indeed, but not every facet of this community has experienced the type of renaissance exemplified by the explosion of gourmet restaurants and underground recording studios. Once attracted to the area by real estate bargains and trendy lifestyles, young families in East Nashville now struggle to find acceptable education options for their children. According to Maria, "every mother in our neighborhood is jumping through as many hoops as it takes" to find the education that best fits her child's needs.

Doubtless, many East Nashville families made up a large portion of the 54,000 Metro Nashville students who recently applied for schools outside their zone. A few thousand of these families held a "winning ticket" to the school of

their choice by the end of what Metro Nashville Public Schools glowingly refers to as “Selection Day.” But what about the more than 50,000 students who did not hit the education lottery jackpot?

Maria Vargason fears being one of those many parents holding losing tickets when it’s time for her oldest child, Ambrose, to enter high school.

Maria and her husband, Brett, moved to East Nashville in 1995. An entrepreneur, Brett founded a music production and emerging artist management company after moving from Detroit to pursue his dream in the industry. Maria, a Nashville native, worked for the Ford Motor Credit Company after college until the birth of her first child, Gus. After that, she left to become a stay-at-home mother and eventually gave birth to three more children.



Like many families, the Vargasons considered various factors in deciding where to send their children to school. But when Gus was diagnosed with Duchenne muscular dystrophy at age six, Maria knew in her heart the only answer was to teach her children at home. This would allow her other children to spend as much time as possible with their oldest 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 best. As seventh grader Ambrose approaches high school age, Maria is already concerned about what to do when the time comes to choose a school.

“We’re zoned for bad schools,” Maria says, “but even if we were zoned for good schools, they would not necessarily be a good fit for each of my children.” Maria recognizes that each child is unique, and she appreciates a customized education experience not typically provided by a one-size-fits-all model like public education. “I am not anti-public education,” she is quick to point out. “The public model can be good for many students, but for others it can provide a disservice.”



She notes the unique characteristics of each of her children. Ambrose is “bright, but a late bloomer” who struggled early with reading. Now in seventh grade, he is very interested in computer science. Learning new things comes easy for his sister, Amelia, who in sixth grade is a member of Centennial Youth Ballet and loves making movies. “She’s very artistic,” Maria says. Their youngest child, Thomas, a third grader, has shown an affinity for baseball and the outdoors, but his temperament requires frequent breaks during school.

The Vargasons consider themselves a middle class family, but like many young families they lack the resources to pay for a private high school for their children. They could apply for one of the district’s magnet or charter schools, but if this year’s demand for these schools is any indication, Ambrose’s chances of being selected are less than four percent.

As a result, Ambrose, like so many unique children, is simply trapped.

A Rising Tide That Lifts All Boats

Tennessee’s urban public education struggles are well-documented. According to the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) rankings, nearly three out of five black fourth graders do not read at basic levels, and barely one-tenth read at proficient levels.³ This is atrocious by any standard, and, contrary to popular belief, poor educational outcomes are not limited to Tennessee’s urban hubs. In fact, Tennessee’s white students do worse relative to their peers than the state as a whole, ranking 48th and 50th in fourth grade reading and math, respectively, among the 50 states and District of

Columbia.⁴ Statewide, only 26 percent of students read at proficient levels.⁵

With a “report card” like this, Tennessee has considerable room for improvement across the board. And while opportunity scholarships are not a panacea for Tennessee’s ailments, school choice has consistently shown—in nine academic, “gold standard” studies—to improve educational outcomes for opportunity scholarship students.⁶ Notably, 20 of 21 studies have shown that school choice programs also improve test scores among students in affected public schools.⁷ That is, not only do opportunity scholarships help students who utilize them, but also those students who remain in public schools.

Most importantly, not a single study has shown that these programs harm public schools. Such undeniable evidence undermines the common refrain from unions, school boards, and superintendents that school choice programs do not improve student performance and are harmful to public schools. The overwhelming evidence shows they improve education outcomes for all parties involved, and are truly a “win-win” for communities.

Opportunity scholarships have also proven to be a good deal for taxpayers. In 2009, Tennessee taxpayers spent on average \$8,895 per student in public schools.⁸ Yet, according to a 2012 survey of Tennessee’s private schools, the median tuition for private elementary schools and secondary schools is less than \$5,500 and \$6,300, respectively.⁹ This represents potential savings of 30 to 40 percent for taxpayers per scholarship student.

Additionally, since scholarships are only equal to a portion, not the full allotment, of the dollars designated for each student, the savings remain in the public system. Thus, as opportunity scholarship programs grow, so do the per pupil funding levels in public schools, all without having to raise taxes. This is just another example of how school choice represents a rising tide that lifts all boats.



School Choice Success in Tennessee

Fortunately, in Tennessee, we need not rely solely on data and academic studies to see the positive effects of school choice. The Memphis Opportunity Scholarship Trust (MOST), a privately funded scholarship organization designed to help low-income families in Memphis attend private elementary and secondary schools, is a walking school choice success story. In existence since 1991, MOST has transformed thousands of lives simply by allowing parents to choose a school more suited to their child’s unique needs and talents.

Marshall Shanks, a Memphis seventh grader attending St. George’s Independent School, is a perfect example of the positive impacts that occur when we focus on the needs of children here in Tennessee. Marshall has attended St. George’s since pre-K, and now halfway through high school, he participates in golf, lacrosse, basketball, and band, all while maintaining a 3.4 GPA last year. He takes a rigorous course-load that includes pre-algebra, French, and Latin.

Marshall's mom, Marilyn, is grateful to MOST for their opportunity. "Our private school experience has been a blessing. We are fortunate to have a choice," she says. While Marilyn is thankful, she sympathizes with the plight of those less fortunate, and realizes that more should be done. When asked about the prospect of having more opportunity in Tennessee, she responded, "To have a choice of assistance would mean the world."

Sadly, many of Marshall's peers are not so fortunate. Marshall and Marilyn, a single mother, live in a neighborhood rife with challenges. The hopes of many youth are slipping away, as young people fall prey to drugs and other illicit activities. Not afforded the same opportunity as Marshall to benefit from a quality education, they have been left behind.

Although Marshall has escaped this dreadful future, he does not plan to desert his neighborhood any time soon. Taking the initiative, he has developed a plan called "One Block at a Time" with the hope of helping others through the revitalization of the area in which he still lives today. Blessed with opportunity, Marshall is already giving back to his community at only 14 years of age.

Another example of opportunity scholarships having a positive impact in the lives of children is Jeremy Upton, a fourth grader also attending St. George's Independent School. He has been given the same opportunity through the MOST program. Jeremy's mother, Tiffany, notes that "The opportunity to choose my son's school has made all the difference in the world. He loves his teacher and he loves to learn." Tiffany realizes that while she is fortunate to be able to send her son to a school of her choice, not every parent is lucky enough to be in her position. She feels that



without the opportunity of school choice, parents, communities, and most importantly, children are missing out greatly.

"As a parent, having the option of choosing to apply funding where we feel best speaks to the needs of our child is one of the best assets we have," she said.

She further expressed her support for more school choice options by pointing out the benefits she and her son have attained through a better learning environment. "The holistic approach to families and to education is here in the private school setting. I do think that you'll find, through accountability, the family's needs and definitely the child's needs are put above anything else." And this is how it should be, after all.

If only we would provide the same paths of opportunity to the thousands of kids across Tennessee like Marshall and Jeremy. Differences would be made not only in the lives of these children, but also in the communities where they live.

Rising to the Occasion

Unfortunately, the number of families like the Vargasons, who are currently trapped, vastly outnumber the families benefitting through the MOST program. If Tennessee's goal as a state is to provide the best educational opportunities for our children, we fall woefully short. But Tennesseans do not have to accept these circumstances; unfortunately, we simply choose to let it continue.

Parents across the country, in Arizona, Florida, Louisiana, and Indiana, among others, benefit from robust school choice programs that finally put them in control of education decisions. There are currently more than 255,000 children participating in 34 school choice programs in 18 states and Washington, D.C.

The power of choice for Tennessee's parents is long overdue. We are called to do what is best for our children, and other states are readily and successfully answering this call. It is time for Tennessee to rise to the occasion and provide meaningful education options for all Tennessee families.



To learn more about school choice in Tennessee, scan this code or visit ChooseMeTennessee.com.



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"Faces of Freedom" is a Beacon Center series to educate Tennesseans about the barriers to prosperity brought about by poor public policy. By providing real-life stories of real-life citizens, Tennesseans can better understand the impact public policy has on their lives.



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