THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

THE FUTURE OF SCHOOL CHOICE
SENATOR LAMAR ALEXANDER ADDRESSES SCHOOL CHOICE
UPON THE RELEASE OF THE
2014 EDUCATION CHOICE AND COMPETITION INDEX

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PARTICIPANTS:

Introduction and Moderator:

GROVER "RUSS" WHITEHURST
Senior Fellow and Director, Brown Center on Education Policy
The Brookings Institution

Keynote Speaker:

THE HONORABLE LAMAR ALEXANDER (R-TN)
Chairman, Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP)
United States Senate

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. WHITEHURST: I'm director of the Brown Center on education policy here at Brookings. And we're here today for two things. One is I'm going to talk briefly about this year's release of the Education Choice and Competition Index, something we've done for four years that chronicles the status of choice in the nation's largest school districts. And then we're going to hear an address by Honorable Senator Lamar Alexander that will speak to issues about education that are of concern to him, and probably he will touch on school choice in that process.

When I was in school, and even when my two children, now adults, were in school, if parents wanted to choose the school that their children attended, they either had to buy a house in the zip code of the school that they preferred for their child. Or they had to pay tuition to attend a private school. Things have really changed on that score, and they changed dramatically in a relatively short period of time.

Today most large public school districts in the US offer some degree of parental choice over the school as to which their students are assigned. Depending on the district, families can choose public charter schools, affordable private schools, magnate schools, virtual schools and most importantly I think, regular public schools, to which the parents actively apply rather than regular public schools to which they are assigned based on their zip code.

Districts differ in which of these options are available, the ease with which parents can exercise the choices that they get. The degree to which the choices system results in greater access to quality schools for students who would otherwise be assigned to a low performing school. And these things are important. In this ECCI, Education, Choice and Competition Index, we draw attention to how choices manifest in the largest districts, and we're increasingly able to analyze how it's changing over time.

The information for the ECCI is most usefully available on the interactive

website, where you can sort and produce the kind of displays you are interested in. Let me just give you a brief overview. We look at districts and provide scores based on a number of factors. The four broad ones are the extent of choice. Do you just go to regular school? Are there affordable private schools? Are there charter schools? How much choice is available in the district?

We look at the degree to which the choice process, if there is one, maximizes the match between what the parent wants and what the parent gets. And we favor there some kind of computer algorithm that assures that that match is as close as possible. We like to see common applications where a parent can apply once, rather than having to go to each school and make a separate application.

We're interested in whether funding follows kids, so that when a child chooses to go to another school, the school gets extra money because that decision has been made. And we're interested in subsidies for the cost of choice, particularly for low income parents. So in particular, if the parent chooses a school that's outside of her residential zone, does the child get transportation to that school? Or is the parent expected to get in the car and drive the child across town to get there?

This is the fourth release, and let me give you some highlights of our findings, first in terms of leaders in district choice. This year as in every previous year, the Recovery School District in New Orleans scores highest in terms of our index. It scores well in all of the things we look at. In particular, there's a high availability of choice with nearly 80 percent of the schools in New Orleans now charter schools. There's a supply of affordable private schools. There are vouchers for private school attendance available from the state, and there's virtual education. There's education online.

The school process maximizes the match between what the parent wants and what the parent gets, using a computer algorithm for which the Nobel Prize was awarded two years ago. There's a common application for all schools, including

regular public schools and charters, all one application. Information on school performance is easily available online, and transportation is provided in the form of tokens for the city bus system (inaudible) bus service.

Several of our top performers this year stand out in their use of this centralized computer based algorithm. And we think that's important. Students apply once; they receive one offer and they can match based on the closeness of what they want and what's available. New Orleans, Denver and Newark are admirable in this regard in that they include not only this one application process, but charters are part of the system. In most systems around the country, including, for example, the one in New York City, you can apply to the regular public schools, but each charter application is a one-off. You have to go to that charter school and apply there.

There are laggards as well as leaders in our index. About a third of our districts received very low scores on school choice. It means that families don't have any choice, other than the choice they can exercise by buying a house where they want to send their kid to school. Some of our low performing districts say that they offer choice, but it's a faux choice. Here is how choice can be exercised in one such district.

First the child is assigned to the child's neighborhood school. Then the parent who wants a transfer must obtain the paper transfer application form in person, at one given location for the whole district, on one particular calendar day for the whole year. Once the parent has that application and fills it out, in order for her child to be eligible to transfer schools, the student has to be passing all subjects in his or her assigned school and have a sterling attendance record. If a student is new to the district, his or her residentially zoned school must approve the transfer. A transfer is only possible to a school that has vacancies after all students in the attendant zone are placed.

Once the transfer occurs, it can be revoked if the student is not doing

well in the school to which the child is transferred. Or interestingly, if the student's parents are judged to be uncooperative by the new school. Parents must provide transportation to the school of choice. Arrivals must be punctual, and approved transfer is good for only one year. A parent has to go through the whole thing next year.

Now you can be pro-choice or anti-choice, but I hope we could all agree that as a choice process, the way I've just described, it is not good. The only parents who get to choose under this design are knowledgeable, have time to spend and have kids who are doing well already and don't need to transfer schools.

With three years of annual data from the nation's largest districts, we can begin to identify some normative facts on school choice and competition and search for trends. Here are some interesting, to me, descriptive findings for this year too that are good signs for choice and to not such good signs. On the good side of the ledger, in 2014, 52 percent of the nation's largest school districts made public school choice available to parents and students, either through an open application process, with no default residential assignment, or through an easy process of requesting reassignment after the default assignment occurred. Fifty-two percent. That's a lot.

The percentage of schools offering open enrolment, or an easy reassignment process, has edged up in the last three years, from 48 percent in 2012 to 52 percent this year. On the negative side of the ledger, in 2014 only 9 percent of districts allocated their district funds to students in a way that the funds follow the child in a backpack to the school of choice. And of course that's a significant liability for choice if you're the receiving school and you really don't get a lot of extra money when you're popular and students want to come there. Why would you want those students to arrive at your door?

And second on the negative side of the ledger, only eight percent of districts provide student transportation to a school of choice. Which means that choice is

only available to parents who have the time and a vehicle to get their child to another school. This is for advantaged parents, not for disadvantaged parents.

To sum up, data from our release this year and previous years, indicate that access to school choice, while certainly falling short of the universality that many advocates see as desirable, is substantial on average in large school districts, near universal in some districts and on the rise overall. At the very least, school choice offers and otherwise missing relief valve for parents who are frustrated with their child's school. And at its best, it provides a way of managing a system of schools based on market mechanisms. It allows for innovation and dynamism at the school level and a much more even playing field for school access for lower income families.

But the devil is in the details for school choice, just as it is for a district that doesn't utilize choice. And the details require attention to the parameters of choice and competition, such as the ones we include in the index. As well as to the fundamentals of choice, access and quality choice is empty if there are no good schools available to which kids can transfer.

I hope those of you who are interested in school choice will take a look at the index online, and I hope some of the information there will be valuable to you. Let me switch gears to introduce our guest for today, the Honorable Lamar Alexander. I was thinking that if I were, like, a Netflix script writer and I was asked to produce a bio for a character who was supposed to be really into education, and I wrote Senator Alexander's bio, probably the editor would say, "This is a little overboard. Maybe you should tone it back just a little bit."

His parents were educators. His mother taught pre-school. His father was a school principal. So he's literally on home ground on education issues. He graduated from Vanderbilt and NYU, both private universities, but served as the president of the University of Tennessee. So in higher education, he knows several sides of the

equation. He was two term governor of Tennessee, with an active and successful education reform record that was focused on the need for better teachers.

He's a founder of a company. The Corporate Childcare Inc. is now the nation's largest provider of work site daycare. So he knows early childhood. He was US Secretary of Education. So he understands the power and limits of the executive branch in education. Relevant to today's topic, in his previous role as ranking minority member of the Health Committee, Senator Alexander introduced a strong piece of school choice legislation, the Scholarships for Kids Act. Under that legislation, federal funds would have been reallocated such that they followed children. Each child -- each poor child would have gotten a $2000 plus voucher to take to that child -- or parent's school of choice.

He's in his third term as US Senator from Tennessee, and he's now chair of -- Chairman of the Senate Health Education Labor and Pensions Committee. In that role he's introduced draft legislation for the re-authorization of the Principal Federal Education Bill, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, passed into law in 2001, beginning of 2002. So a little stale now 14 years later.

Now when I have to introduce people as I'm doing today, sometimes I find out things about them as I'm getting ready that I didn't know otherwise. And so I ran into something about the senator, who's actually a pretty good pianist. And I searched online, and I found him playing a rendition of The Tennessee Waltz that struck me, because that's usually performed as a honky tonk tune, with a kind of oom ba ba, oom ba ba. But the senator's playing was nuanced and sensitive. (laughs) There was real music there and skillful as well.

And it struck me that that's a metaphor for how he's approaching legislation on the Hill. He's just not banging away with three chords. He's looking for solutions that work, and I'm sure you will be interested, as I am, in hearing what he has to

say. Senator? Thank you. (applause)

SENATOR ALEXANDER: Thanks Russ. That was a nuanced introduction, and my music teacher would be very grateful for that, as would be my -- my mother would have been as well. Thanks for this and Russ, thanks for your leadership on education. I -- and we, all those of us who work together on education respect what you do and pay attention to it and listen to it. So it's great to be here and great to be at Brookings, which has such a fine reputation.

I was thinking about the subject as I was working on my remarks. This is a little like Groundhog Day to me. I've been making this speech about every ten years since just after the Civil War I think. So I'm glad to be here, but I ought to warn you that I'm probably not your most reliable observer on school choice. Let me take you back to September of 1992. I was education secretary. I was invited to give a speech at Ashland University in Ohio. And I boldly predicted that by the year 2000, "school choice will not even be an issue." I suggested that by 2000, an Ashland student writing a thesis, ought to make school choice the subject of the thesis because by then it will be a matter of history. Your colleagues will wonder along with you as you examine the strange era, I said in 1992, when we granted government monopolies control of the most valuable and important enterprises in town. And so many people fought furiously to keep doors to many of the best schools closed to poor children.

They will ask, "How could this have ever happened in America? At a time when the ideas of freedom of choice and opportunity are sweeping the world." That was 1992. My prediction might not have been right, but it was because many people haven't tried to change it. As an example, in 1984, when I was governor, I dug up a speech I made at the University of the South, outlining the "deep ruts" into which American K through 12 education had fallen. One of those was the lack of school choice

for parents.

The next year, 1985, I was chairman of the National Governors Association. Bill Clinton was the vice-chairman. We embarked on a project called Time For Results, which caused all the governors of the country to focus an entire year on education. It was the first time that ever happened in the history of the governors. We divided into seven taskforces, each chaired by a governor, to ask seven of the toughest questions you could ask about American education. One question was, why not let parents choose the schools that their children attend?

Richard Lamm, the Democratic governor of Colorado chaired that taskforce. He then said, "You know it's interesting that America is the land of choices. We have 100 different breakfast cereals to choose from, 200 makes of cars. But in this one education area, we've not done a lot of choice." Then in 1992 I was education secretary. President Bush, the first President Bush, proposed his GI Bill for Children. It would have allowed states or cities, like Milwaukee, to give $1000 annual federal scholarships, new federal dollars, to each child of a middle and low-income family in that city or in that state. Families could spend the scholarships at any lawfully operated school, public, private or religious.

And up to half of the scholarship could be spent on other academic programs, like a Saturday math tutoring program or a summer accelerated language course. That was 1992. That year the Carnegie Foundation reported 28 percent of our nation's parents would like to send their children to a different school. Today that number is even higher. More than twice as high according to a Luntz global survey, which says 64 percent of parents said that if given the financial opportunity, they would send one or all of their children to a different school.

But since 1992, in those 23 years, there have been some changes in the ability of parents to choose their children's school. Russ just reported on some of those.

Today all 50 states and Washington DC, offer to some students alternatives to the school they would normally be assigned to based on their residence. Approximately 15 percent of all school aged children attend a school other than their school of residence through an open enrollment program. These are results according to the chief state school officer's information.

Policies in 42 states allow some or all parents to send their children to public schools outside their districts. Some states you're required to participate, and other states it's just allowed. In 31 states parents are allowed to choose among schools within their districts. More than 2.5 million or nearly 5 percent of all public school children are enrolled in more than 6,000 public charter schools in 42 states in the District of Columbia. Typically parents choose to enroll their children in these schools.

And then in addition, more than 300,000 children are served by 41 private school choice programs across 19 states, the District of Columbia and Douglas County, Colorado. These programs often give students who meet certain criteria, usually based on income, special needs or academic performance, an opportunity for a voucher, tax credit, education savings account to allow them to attend private schools. And also, we can't forget the option of home schooling, which is available in all states now. And parents of about 3 percent of all school aged children choose home school.

Allowing students to choose among schools is not a new idea for the federal government. Allowing federal dollars to follow students to the school of their choice has been one of the most successful strategies in American public life for 40 years. In 1944 the GI Bill allowed veterans to choose among all colleges, public or private. Today taxpayers contribute about $136 billion a year in federal grants or loans that continue to follow students to the college or university of their choice.

Most people think that's worked pretty well and helped to produce the competition and choices that have created the best system of colleges and universities in

the world. Just last year Congress re-authorized the $2.4 billion Childcare and Development Block Grant Program, which when combined with other federal and state funding, helps approximately 900,000 families pay for childcare of their choice while they work or attend school, mostly through vouchers. These are among the most successful and popular federal programs.

So why is it so hard to apply the same sorts of choices to elementary and secondary schools if we're so enthusiastic about choices at the childcare end and choices at the higher education end? I used to wonder, what would happen in Nashville if the school board simply wrote every parent and said, "What are the top three choices of schools for your child? We'll do our best to meet your preference." My guess is, they'd probably succeed in about 90, 95 percent of the cases.

What can the federal government do now to expand the opportunity that parents have to choose the most appropriate school for their children? Four suggestions: One, Scholarship For Kids, which Russ mentioned. This is a bill I introduced last year which would use $24 billion of the federal dollars we now spend each year on K through 12 and allow states to create $2100 scholarships to follow 11 million low-income children, to any public or private school of their choice.

So you'd take $24 billion of the money now spent and allow it to follow about one-fifth of all the children. Those are ones below the poverty level, to the school of their choice. The discussion draft, I've just released to fix No Child Left Behind, gives states the option of using $14.5 billion in Title One money to follow 11 million low-income children to the public school they attend.

Most people agree that Title One money, which is supposed to help low-income kids, gets diverted to different schools because of a formula that targets money to districts based on how much states spend on students. That's largely influenced by teacher's salaries. In other words, there's general agreement that the Title One money,

the $14.5 billion, which is supposed to be to help low-income children, doesn't really get to low-income children as efficiently as it should.

What's the simplest way to solve that problem? Well, let that money follow the child to the school the child attends. Russ mentioned put it in the backpack, pin it to the blouse, whatever it is. That's the simplest way to do it. Either just to public schools, which the majority seems to prefer, or to all schools, which is what I prefer.

Second, the Choice Act. This is a proposal by Senator Tim Scott of South Carolina to allow about $11 billion that the federal government now spends for children with disabilities, to follow those 6 million children to the schools their parents believe provides the best services. Senator Scott is very compelling when he talks about this. He talks about a friend with a Down Syndrome child who finds the right first grade for the child. Why not allow that parent to choose the same school for second grade and third grade? And let the federal dollars for children with disabilities follow the child to that school that the parent chooses.

I think it's important to underscore that these bills don't require states to do anything. Instead they give states the option to do this and let the money follow the child. Third, the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program, Senator Scott's Choice Act, would also expand the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program that began in 2004 and has provided about 6,000 low-income students in Washington DC with the opportunity to receive a scholarship to attend a private school of their parent's choice.

Today far more parents in the city have applied for the scholarships than have received them. And finally, four, in my final year as education secretary under President Bush, I wrote every school superintendent in America asking them to try a new idea. It was in Minnesota. They were called Start From Scratch Schools. As I remember, there were about a dozen of them. No, there were a dozen of them. They were the first charter schools. Today there are 6,000 charter schools. They have strong

bipartisan support, including from President Clinton, Secretary Duncan.

We have in our discussion draft provisions that would streamline and update the existing charter school program, to provide grants to state entities to start new charter schools and replicate and expand high quality charter schools. To provide grants to entities to enhance credit methods to finance charter school facilities. This is often the largest obstacle to a new charter school. Provide grants to charter management organizations, like KIPP or Rocket Ship in my home state of Tennessee, to replicate or expand high quality charter schools.

Our goal is to grow the federal investment in expanding and replicating high quality charter schools with a demonstrated record of success, and hold charter schools accountable for their performance.

Other senators have also made some good school choice proposals. I think of Senators Paul and Lee, Senator Rubio among three. As for the future, I think I've learned my lesson. I'm not about to make a prediction in 2015. It looks like it may be a while before school choice will be a matter of history, as I predicted in 1992. But the progress so many have made is impressive. There is plenty of opportunity to do more. As Ross Perot once told me in 1984, "Changing the public schools of Texas was the hardest, meanest, bloodiest thing I've ever tried to do."

Since I'm not going to make a prediction, then I'll end with a question, the same one I asked in 1992. If we trust parents to choose childcare for their children, and if we trust them to help their children choose a college to attend, and both these systems have been so successful and are so widely supported, then why do we not also trust parents to choose the best elementary and high school for their children? Thank you. (applause)

MR. WHITEHURST: First, thank you very much for that. One of the issues in choice is making a good choice. And when we make a bad choice of a

restaurant, it's easy to repair that. You just don't go there again, and you can go online and get customer views about whether the food's any good and what the prices are like. When we make a school choice, it's a different type of choice. It's hard to recover from a bad decision.

And so even more important to make the right decision in the first place. One of the things that I think really ought to factor into that is how do children do academically in the schools that a parent is considering a choice among? And so I'm going to push you into an issue you're handling with the ESEA reauthorization, and that is testing.

So what's your view of the role of the federal government here in requiring that states assure that parents have available information on the academic achievement that's generated by the schools that they might consider choosing?

SENATOR ALEXANDER: Well, I think they should have it, and I agree it should be disaggregated. But the question is, who should require the test, and how many should there be and what should they be used for? Under No Child Left Behind there are 17 federal tests. That's really not so many. That for a third grader that's a test on reading and a test on math and the Superintendent of Denver tested that it shouldn't take more than two hours for each test each year.

But Jeb Bush's Educational Foundation in Florida found that in Fort Myers, Florida, students had 183 tests a year. So most of them are the result of actions by the state and local government. Now maybe some of those are needed, but probably not that many. And that's probably where the over testing phenomena comes from. And the testimony we've been having suggests this, that it's not the tests that are so much the problem. It is the strict federal accountability system about what success on the tests is, what failure is and what the consequences are.

And that that causes these tests to be used in inappropriate ways, or it

causes these tests to cause schools to offer a lot more tests. And so Marty West, whom you know very well, testified that the solution for that was to keep the 17 federal tests, but recognize that the federal definition of success, failure and consequences hadn't worked, and that states over the last 15 years have done a very good job of creating their own accountability systems.

So have federal tests and let states decide what success is, what failure is and what to do about success or failure. So I'm listening to that. I put choices into the draft. I haven't made a decision about that. I'm very reluctant to put the federal tests back in unless there's some change in the so-called accountability system.

MR. WHITEHURST: And so do you see the federal government's role here as including some prohibition on this explosion of tests at the district level? Or is that a reach that's too far for the federal government?

SENATOR ALEXANDER: I think that's reaching too far. I mean, that's the kind of federal mandate I used to complain about when I was governor, and we have too many of. That's sort of the national school board I don't like. I think Senator Baldwin of Wisconsin has a pretty good idea. She has an amendment that basically would put a spotlight on that. And so it's almost a truth in testing. This test required by your local school board, not your federal government. (laughter)

I think that would cut the number of tests in half or a lot more. But I think the most persuasive -- much of the most persuasive testimony has come from those who say, the tests are fine. The disaggregation is fine. Knowing the results is important. But don't make us just use it for everything. Let it be one part of an assessment that school districts and states make about schools and children and teachers, and let the people closest to the teacher and closest to the child figure that out.

MR. WHITEHURST: There is -- we were talking about this briefly before we came into Falk this morning, but I see a tension, particularly among Republicans,

about the role of the federal government vis-à-vis education. With one direction being, let's revert to the kind of state and local district control as we had before No Child Left Behind. And the other being, let's do something radical like Scholarships For Kids, so that parents are in control. And I think there's some tension on the left about these directions as well. Do you think my analysis of this is off base? Or is that tension there?

SENATOR ALEXANDER: No, I think you're right about it. I mean, Senator Whitehouse of Rhode Island has really been the most critical of what he calls the huge federal bureaucracy imprint on local decision making in schools. He's said more about that in our committee than anybody. And he's not the most conservative. He might be the most liberal senator on the committee.

As I was talking to a Conservative senator on the floor yesterday who's worried about sending too much power back to school districts, it wouldn't do anything and it would be intimidated by the local teacher's union. So you've got that back and forth going. My own experience, I mean, I've had some experience with this. I mean, in 1983 and '84, Tennessee became the first state to pay teachers more for teaching well, and it took a year and a half brawl with the National Education Association.

And then when I left office, they watered down what we'd done. We had a very successful master teacher program which 10,000 teachers voluntarily went up this career ladder. They were paid more for it. We raised taxes to support it. They had 10, 11 month contracts. Looking back on it, it looks pretty good. Many teachers today thank me for it. And when I left office, as I said, the NEA watered it down.

Still I -- so when I came up here, people said, well, Alexander's going to -- he's going to want to make everybody do that. And I'm against that. I mean, I don't think Washington can tell states and communities how to evaluate teachers, how to make their schools better. I think you can encourage it. I think you can enable it. I don't think you can order it. Tom Friedman the columnist said the other day to a group of us that

one of the two rules of life he paid the most attention to was, he never met anyone who washed a rented car. In the same sort of way, if you don't own the teacher evaluation system and if you don't own the success of the school, it's not going to last very long.

You might get an order from Washington that might help raise scores for a while. But after awhile there's no lasting effect to that. And there's been a huge backlash to it, just to higher standards, i.e. Common Core, and to teacher evaluation imposed from here.

MR. WHITEHURST: I by the way have washed a rented car. But I never --

SENATOR ALEXANDER: I'll tell Friedman about that.

MR. WHITEHURST: I never changed the oil in a rented car though. I certainly did not go there. I'd like to give those of you in the audience an opportunity to interact with Senator Alexander. I'd ask you to raise your hand and already I see you're eager to do that. And when I call on you, wait till you get a microphone. Stand up, tell us who you are. Ask a question. Don't make a speech, and try to be as brief as you can, from National Public Radio.

MR. SANCHEZ: Eli Sanchez with National Public Radio. Senator, maybe a two part question. Number one, the Supreme Court has said vouchers are fine. Why haven't we seen more states move for either statewide vouchers or even urban school vouchers? I mean, where has the voucher movement gone? And number two, what do you say to the civil right community that says, some of the things you've said and talked about in reauthorizing ESEA, worries them in terms of how to protect the most vulnerable children, minority kids, non-English speaking kids, poor kids, are you hearing from the civil rights community about their concerns?

SENATOR ALEXANDER: Yes I am, and I am in fact meeting with some representatives of that today. In the '70s or '80s I might have found that more

persuasive. But in the Southern United States where suddenly we have so many African-American mayors and others on local school boards, that's not very persuasive to me. And I don't buy the idea that the only people who cherish children are in the United States Senate or the US Department of Education. I actually think people cherish their children more in their homes and in their communities.

And I think it's really sort of arrogant for people to suggest that you become a more caring person by taking a plane ride to Washington from Nashville or Knoxville. And therefore you know so much better about what to do in the communities at home. So I think people at home cherish their children. I think Washington can encourage and enable, as I mentioned in my talk. I remember when President Reagan came to Knoxville and endorsed the -- our Master Teacher Program and actually helped pass it in the state legislature. I thought President Obama's visit to Knoxville this year to talk about Tennessee's community college program will probably cause that to be adopted in other states.

But I think, as I look at the progress states have made on goals, standards, teacher evaluations, school choice and testing and accountability systems over the last 30 years, I think that's where the action should be.

As far as vouchers, it's a puzzle really. I once said to a fellow senator, I said, "You know the Pell Grant is a voucher." And she said, "It is not. I'm opposed to vouchers." And there are probably two reasons it hasn't spread more rapidly. It hasn't had enough Polly Williams', the African-American woman in Milwaukee who really led the fight working with Tommy Thompson for that school choice program. It's much more persuasive when she says, "My children need this," rather than some well meaning person from outside who says, "This will be good for you."

And then in rural areas, vouchers are harder to understand for many people. Senators from those states are reluctant on vouchers. But your point about

urban settings is an awfully good one. I mean, why wouldn't you in an urban setting where you have low-income children, let the money follow a child to a better school? And you have entrenched opposition to that from the teacher's unions. It's the single thing they hate the most, and from most school boards.

MR. WHITEHURST: Let's see, woman here in the aisle.

SENATOR ALEXANDER: I'll try to give a short answer next time.

MS. MCNABB: Hi, LuAnn McNabb with the National Council of Teachers of English. I had a question. My understanding that this --

MR. WHITEHURST: A member of that organization --

MS. MCNABB: I'm sorry?

MR. WHITEHURST: I used to work with you all in establishing English standards. It wasn't easy.

MS. MCNABB: Oh, dear. (laughter)

SENATOR ALEXANDER: Let me tell you my English teachers. I tell all my new staff when I meet high school kids and they ask me what to take in college, I say, take as much English as you can so you can learn how to write a clarity of sentence, because so many of the college graduates don't know how. And I tell them the story about Mrs. Martin Badget who was my senior English teacher in Maryville, Tennessee. And she made me, when I was a senior, stand up in front of the class and write on the blackboard 100 times the word "just." Because I was saying "just" and she said, "Lamar, if you grow up saying just, you'll never amount to anything." (laughter) So I have a great admiration for what your council does.

MS. MCNABB: Well, thank you. Well, my question is, is I understand that the standardized tests that were implemented in the '90s were to hold schools accountable for taxpayer funds that were going to our public schools. So if you're advocating for money to follow the child to private, parochial and charter schools who are

not subject to these tests, how will you hold those schools accountable and make sure taxpayer funds are used wisely at those schools?

SENATOR ALEXANDER: Well, that's a good point. The question I guess first, parents -- we do that with colleges. We do that with childcare centers. We allow parents to make the judgments, relying on the available information. And perhaps we should say to the taxpayer -- second, we would allow that money only to go to accredited schools. So if the school is not accredited by the state, then you couldn't go there. So that's two checks on it.

The third question would be, do we require that those same -- that those schools also take the same tests? I don't know the answer to that. I'll have to think about that.

MR. WHITEHURST: I would just -- a correction to your question. Charter schools are subject to the same tests as regular public.

SENATOR ALEXANDER: Public charter schools.

MR. WHITEHURST: Well, they're all -- charter schools are public schools. And so they're subject to the same --

SENATOR ALEXANDER: Well, there are some private charter schools, are there not?

MR. WHITEHURST: Charter school I guess as we define it in our data collection are public schools that operate under charters from the state, rather than private. So they're subject to the same tests. In Louisiana, which we report on in our ECCI this year, kids who were supported with private vouchers take the same tests as kids who go to (inaudible).

SENATOR ALEXANDER: So I guess I'm thinking of public schools operated by non-profits or by private companies. But you define those as a public charter school still, taking the same -- I see.

MR. WHITEHURST: Same tests.

SENATOR ALEXANDER: So there is -- I agree with that. Better answer than I had.

MS. STANLEY: I'm Roberta Stanley. I'm (inaudible), most recently with the National School Boards Association, previously with the State of Michigan. K -12 education in my experience was normally a bipartisan or a nonpartisan topic, and the Congress has kind of moved in other directions. Would you please speak to your relationship with Patty Murray and how you hope to bring the committee along down a bipartisan path on behalf of public education?

SENATOR ALEXANDER: It's good. My relationship is excellent with Patty Murray. And she's smart. She's a member of the Democratic leadership. She's accustomed to getting results, and I like working with her. Every one of the hearings we've had since the year started have been "bipartisan" in the sense we've agreed on the witnesses and we've agreed on the topics. I talk with her regularly. I mean, my goal is working with her to establish a bipartisan process, to get a bipartisan result.

Now the Senate hadn't been used to a process in the last five years because Senator Reed hadn't allowed it. But you don't have to have a bipartisan bill to start with. You have to have one at the end though because the president has to sign it. So what I'm hoping to do is agree with Senator Murray on a fair and open way, to take the draft that I've presented and have it fully amendable in committee. Take it to the Senate floor. Spend a couple of weeks there. Have it fully amendable in the Senate Committee, on the floor.

Take 60 votes to get to conference. In the conference there are three players. One is the House, which will have passed its bill by the end of February. One will be the Senate, and one will be the president of the United States, who could veto it, and then it would take 67 votes to override him. So somewhere along that way, I am very

hopeful and optimistic that a bipartisan process will create a bipartisan result. But we don't have to have a bipartisan bill to begin with. It's nice if we do, but we don't have to. That's why we have the committee, the floor, the conference and the president. All as a check on that.

MS. STANLEY: I won't say -- I went to one of the hearings (inaudible).

SENATOR ALEXANDER: Which one was that?

MS. STANLEY: The one that (inaudible).

SENATOR ALEXANDER: Yeah, it was good. Well, when you have -- when we agree on the witnesses, you get more variety, more diversity and you learn more.

MS. STANLEY: But the give and take between the senators (inaudible).

SENATOR ALEXANDER: And one other indicator, I worked for the last two years with Tom Harkin. And everybody said, well, you'll never be able to work with him because all the Democrats are liberal and all the Republicans are conservative. We were the most productive committee in the Senate. We passed 25 bills out of our committee that became law. And we did it by looking for areas of agreement. So I'm doing the same with Senator Murray. Our relationship is a new relationship. We haven't worked together before, but so far I'm very, very pleased to be working with her.

MR. WHITEHURST: Gentleman here on the aisle.

MR. PRICE: Dave Price, educational consultant. Senator, how do you respond directly -- in America we don't argue about apple pie, but we do argue a lot about education. So the critics -- say a teacher, let's put it in the hands of a teacher, who says, this is going to destroy public school as I know it. We hear that criticism all the time. You've addressed some of it, directly to the --

SENATOR ALEXANDER: Say what will?

MR. PRICE: You hear from a lot of public school teachers, also in

unions, that school choice will destroy public education. Obviously you don't believe that. But if you were speaking to a teacher right now, what would you say to that teacher?

SENATOR ALEXANDER: Well, I would say that we have 70 years of a controlled experiment that proves that's not true. Because since 1944, and I say this as a former president of the University of Tennessee, with my tie on, on National Signing Day for football (laughs), today after -- since 1944, we give out an enormous amount of money to help a student go to college, $100 billion in loans, $33 million in Pell Grants. Half the students have a federal grant or a loan that you can spend at Notre Dame, Yeshiva, Nashville Auto Diesel College, Kaplan, For Profit, any of these places. Or the University of Tennessee.

And 80 percent of our college students choose a public institution, for the voucher that they have from the federal government. So it's not only not hurt public education, it's helped it. In the same way building a Nissan plant in Tennessee helped save General Motors in Detroit. It gave it a little bit of competition, and it knew it had to shape up or go out of business.

MR. WHITEHURST: Gentleman in the back.

QUESTIONER: Good morning Senator Alexander, Senile Mansikani from The Raven Group. I was curious that if a state adopts, say social and emotional learning standards, which most would say would have a positive effect on academic achievement, what role should the federal government play to support those standards? Either in ESEA or somewhere else.

SENATOR ALEXANDER: To support it? I'm not sure.

QUESTIONER: Yeah. So, for instance, could Title One funds be used to help support meet the needs of those social, emotional learning standards? Should the standards be a part of the state's accountability framework?

SENATOR ALEXANDER: Well, standards should be, but I think the

state should decide what the standards are. There was a suggestion yesterday by one witness that it ought to be limited to evidence based tactics. Maybe that's good, but every time you let the Department of Education -- give them a little opening, well, they'll write a whole ream of stuff about defining what evidence based is. I mean, just to give you an example, I stuck in the law provision on the low performing schools, there are six ways that a state is allowed to fix a school in the bottom five percent.

And so I put a seventh in, a law that said that -- but a governor may come up with his or her own way to do it, subject to the approval of the education secretary. And what did the Department of Education do? It wrote a big long regulation about all the -- about what a governor could decide to do. And I said, "Arnie, that defeats the whole purpose of the point."

So generally speaking, I like to give -- I would like for states to be able to give -- to make their own decisions about the use of Title One money. And if I were the governor, I would adopt the provision that I put in my draft, which is to allow the Title One money to follow a low-income child to the school the low-income child attends, which would be a $1300 scholarship for each child, and let the parent and that school decide how to use the money.

MR. WHITEHURST: Woman in the first row.

MS. DANIELS: Hi Senator Alexander. Nice to see you. I'm Samira Daniels. I was actually one of the parents involved in the school choice program in Summerville, Massachusetts. So I'm community director of Summerville Public Schools. So I've been with this issue for a long time myself.

For me, if I had to narrow down an issue in terms of what is the battle, I think, in terms of school choice and quality of public education, is what constitutes critical thinking and how and when should that be introduced if it's deemed important enough? Because in the educational forum, that is the sort of nub issue. Are we teaching and are

the kids learning a kind of critical thinking that will advance and help to sustain a viable future? And I'm wondering how the school choice plays into that and whether that is a priority that you see that we should address more vigorously.

SENATOR ALEXANDER: Well, it would give the parent an opportunity to choose among schools that emphasize critical thinking, if that's what they chose to do. I mean, either the parent chooses it or the local school board dictates it, or the state dictates it, or Washington tries to dictate it. And over the last ten years, Washington has become sort of a national school board, taking very good points like that and trying to apply it to 100,000 public schools. I would prefer to move those decisions back toward the classroom, back toward the child, the family, the community of people who are nearest to the children, and give the parent more authority to choose among options. 'Cause I don't think I'm wise enough to answer that question for everybody. I think a parent should have a chance to.

MR. WHITEHURST: And I would add to that. I mean, I think most of the political pressure we see around these sorts of decisions are when they are top down. And so the controversies around the Common Core I think are not fundamentally about whether the standards are good or bad. It's whether everyone should have to be subject to those standards.

SENATOR ALEXANDER: No, if it's Common Core you're talking about, Common Core was rocketing right along until Washington got into it. I've talked to a former Democratic governor the other day and said, "We," he said, "created Common Core, working together over 20 years and adopted the parts of it that we agreed with and parts we didn't, depended on the state." But when it was perceived in our state that Washington was requiring it, a huge backlash developed, which continues today.

And I think if -- what I hope our legislation does is simply outlaw that and just say, Washington can't tell a state to adopt Common Core or any other academic

standard. And I think if that's true, and people in Tennessee, for example, know that nobody here is making them do that, that probably they'll go back to where they were and take a good part of the Common Core that they already had before Washington got involved. But it needs to be there -- I mean, back to the -- Russ may wash his rented car, but if Tennesseans feel like academic standards are being imposed on them, especially from here, they don't like it.

MR. WHITEHURST: We have time for one more question. If you think that the penultimate question is going to be yours and is going to be superb, then raise your hand and I will do the best I can to -- and smile a lot. I'm going to pick the gentleman here who is holding up his hand and has on a nice tie and is smiling a lot. So go for it.

QUESTIONER: Thank you. Charles Lutvack. I'm a student at Carleton College. Senator, there's a body of research that shows that it's more expensive to educate poor students in poor districts, rather than poor students in wealthier districts. So I'm wondering how your proposal to reauthorize No Child Left Behind will address the idea that funding directly following students will hurt those poor districts.

SENATOR ALEXANDER: I think it would help the child from a low-income family because the money would follow the child to the school the child attended. Now the research shows what, that you're better off leaving the child in the neighborhood school in the poor district? Is that the point?

QUESTIONER: (off mic)

MR. WHITEHURST: That, for example, it's more expensive to provide education in Washington DC where it's a concentration of poverty, because it's urban and it would maybe provide education services for that same child in Maryville, Tennessee. And so maybe there needs to be a differential voucher amount rather than a common voucher amount that takes into account the kind of cost of services.

SENATOR ALEXANDER: Well, there's so many variables between Washington DC and Maryville, Tennessee. The schools I went to still consistently have the highest academic scores in the state. They probably spend 60 percent of what is spent per student in Washington DC. And it's pretty much middle, low-income community. There's not many rich people in the community I came from. I'll have to think about that research. I don't know that -- I mean generally speaking, I think -- I mean, I used to use the example of College Station, Texas, where you've got, on one side of the tracks, where all the professors live. You've got schools with more money on the other side. You've got poor kids with less money.

I always thought that if federal dollars followed the child to the school they attended, that these schools on the other side of the track, where 80 or 90 percent of the kids are at low-income, they'd have a lot more money than they do under the property tax distribution system that most states have. I still think that's probably true.

MR. WHITEHURST: Well, thank you very much for being with us.

SENATOR ALEXANDER: Thank you for the question though. That's a good question.

MR. WHITEHURST: Thank you in the audience for joining us today.

SENATOR ALEXANDER: Thank you Russ.

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