

Statement before the United States Congress
House Committee on Education and the Workforce's
Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education
"Helping Students Succeed Through the Power of School Choice"
Nina Cherry
February 2, 2017

Good morning, Chairman Rokita, Ranking Member Polis, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee. It is an honor to be here to share my family's school choice story with you.

My name is Nina Cherry. I live with my husband, Demetrius, and our four children in Tampa, Florida.

School choice provided my family with the hope and stability my children badly needed. And, from the school choice community we've been welcomed in to, I know my family's story is not all that unique. For parents, it's not about public schools versus private schools. We are just looking for schools that meet our children's needs.

My children were thriving in wonderful, A-rated Pasco County public schools, but when my husband's sales commission plummeted, we lost our permanent home. Without our home, our children were no longer zoned for the public school where they learned and thrived.

It was an extremely difficult time for us. We spent several months couch-surfing as a family of six, staying with friends and family until my husband could find a new job. As we bounced from school zone to school zone, I decided that I didn't want my children's education to suffer because of our family's economic struggles.

I heard about Florida's tax-credit scholarship program from a friend and immediately applied. I was so relieved, and beyond thrilled, when my children were granted scholarships. I began looking into some of Florida's 1,700 private schools that enroll tax-credit scholarship students. When I toured Tampa Bay Christian Academy, I knew everything was going to be okay. The scholarships provided by Florida's program enables us to send all four of our children to Tampa Bay Christian.

During that dark time, I was so grateful that Demetrius and I could concentrate on getting back on our feet knowing we found a school that would best meet our children's educational needs. Florida's tax-credit scholarship program was a lifeline for our family, and I am so thankful we live in a state with school choice programs.

Our entire family has felt welcomed by the school choice community, and our school. Tampa Bay Christian provides the family environment I wanted for my children, especially during this hardship.

Since my children enrolled in Tampa Bay Christian, I have joined the school's staff as the Administrative Assistant. I also serve as the Senior Class Advisor and mentor older girls at the school. With my employee discount, we pay some tuition for each child, but the scholarship makes educating our children in the environment that works best for them possible. Our children are thriving at Tampa Bay Christian, and all four of them are on the honor roll.

Some people who don't really understand school choice programs claim that they don't have enough accountability. For my children's education, the primary accountability rests with Demetrius and me. If we don't feel that the school is serving our kids well, we are empowered to communicate our concerns to the school. If we decide another school would meet our children's needs better, we can move them to that school. In Florida, the tax-credit scholarship follows the child even if the child transfers during the school year.

One of the reasons we chose Tampa Bay Christian is because it holds my kids to high expectations and there is a culture of high achievement. Also, Florida tax-credit scholarship students have to take an annual test. At Tampa Bay Christian, my children are assessed annually in math and reading, and the teachers can use the test results to help my kids learn more throughout the year.

I know my school choice story is not unique. There are over 97,000 students using Florida tax-credit scholarships this school year. There are over 400,000 students nationwide benefiting from private school choice programs, plus millions of students benefiting from charter schools, magnet programs and open enrollment.

I am very supportive of providing a wide range of options to families. Children vary in so many ways. Families' situations change and students' academic and emotional needs can change, as well. School choice programs like the Florida tax-credit scholarship program allow parents to find the environment where their children will learn best.

Chairman Rokita, Ranking Member Polis, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, I want to thank you once again for holding this hearing and communicating to families across the country that you are committed to expanding their educational opportunities. I hope that sharing my story here will help make an impact on other families.