

Re-imagining Our Schools

Winsome Earle-Sears column: Creating a better education for Virginia's next generation

By Winsome Earle-Sears

Feb 5, 2022



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It is time for the commonwealth to shift gears. We need to have good schools for all children in all communities, and all ZIP codes. We need to return power to all parents. We need to give all children more opportunities.

Returning choice back to parents for their child's education is not about doing away with public schools. But we cannot do it with "one size fits all." It is not about public or private, online or bricks-and-mortar. It is about making them all better so that every child has an opportunity for a quality education.

We need to return choice back to parents for their children, to help them stimulate generational change and create generational wealth. Wealthy parents already have choices. Many politicians exercise choice and send their own children to private schools, yet at times, they will vote to deny the opportunity to others.

However, poor children — especially children of color — have been denied access to a good education for far too long. As a result, parents start disengaging with their child's education. They lose hope.

All children deserve hope and a future. Last year on the campaign trail, I heard from too many parents who had lost hope for the future of their children. They asked questions of me such as, "Are you telling me that I have to send my child back to *that* school? Why can't I send my child to another school?" It was heartbreaking because that mom was dealing with modern-day redlining, with certain children relegated to underperforming schools.

These questions I faced were in neighborhoods that had not seen a candidate at their doors for too long. Some parents had lost hope for their children years ago. Many parents have known a sense of frustration for years. The pandemic of the last two years now has demonstrated it to all parents.

As a mother of three daughters, former state delegate, former vice president of the Virginia Board of Education, prison ministry leader, director of a women's homeless shelter, a business owner and now lieutenant governor, I know the importance of a quality education.

As a poor, Black immigrant family, the thing that got our family out of poverty was a good education. Success starts with graduating high school. Every parent wants their child to graduate from high school ready for life: every child, no exceptions, whether they're going off to the military, trade school, college, certification program, work or a combination of those.

If you can't read, you can't succeed. Did you know that more than half of **low-income fourth- and eighth-graders in Richmond and Petersburg cannot read on grade level**? In fact, many of them are up to two grade levels behind and almost never catch up.

And it is not just the *state* exams. In the National Assessment of Educational Progress, **only one-fourth of Virginia's low-income students are scoring "proficient" or better.**

And those are the scores *before* the pandemic. **The learning loss has been devastating: Before the pandemic, Black students and those who were economically disadvantaged trailed in the pass rates. The pandemic has widened the performance gap.**

Visit a prison — and I ran a prison ministry — and **60% of the prisoners are functionally illiterate.** Change begins with greater literacy rates.

We need to recognize that every child is different. Families need a variety of options to educate their child. No one system can do it all for everyone. Let's give parents the resources so they can make the right choice for their children.

We can do that with an Education Savings Account, by utilizing the Virginia Education Improvement Scholarship Tax Credit, and by opening more charter schools, lab schools and virtual schools. We can do that by helping public school programs become even more successful.

Everyone in the commonwealth has a stake in this. We all depend on good schools to provide a good education for good citizens, good government, good property values and good jobs. We live in a great nation and a great state. Great education will ensure it is there not only for us but for future generations.

Frederick Douglass once said, "Education means emancipation. It means light and liberty. It means the uplifting of the soul of man into the glorious light of truth, the light by which men can only be made free."

Please join me to ensure that a better education will always be there for the next generation. Let's give all Virginians a hope and a future.



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