



Voice of America's  
Private Schools

Private School  
Locator  
(NCES Web Site)



Teaching  
Jobs



Home

SEND  
US  
-MAIL

SUBSCRIBE TO  
**cape  
outlook**  
NEWSLETTER  
(click here)

# What's New?

**Testimony of  
Gail E. Foster, Ed.D.  
Black Alliance for Educational Options  
Toussaint Institute Fund  
March 29, 2001  
Committee on Education and the Workforce  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Rayburn House Office Building  
Transforming the Federal Role in Education for  
the 21st Century:  
Hearing on H.R. 1, H.R. 340, H.R. 345**



Dr. Gail Foster  
at hearing.

My testimony today is in response to H.R. 1, the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*, with particular reference to its school choice sections. Thank you, Chairman Boehner, for this opportunity to speak on behalf of so many desperate parents and educators.

I am a former New York City public high school teacher who has worked for over a decade on behalf of parental choice. I have also published research on black independent schools, inner-city Catholic schools and alternative public schools.

I founded the Toussaint Institute Fund, Inc., a not-for-profit community based organization in 1988. Founded with grass roots dollars and support, Toussaint was a spontaneous response to the very desperate pleas of low income and struggling working-class families. These parents sought help in finding and accessing good schools for their children. Their children were trapped in schools that stunted their intellectual, social and academic growth, and they were desperate to get them out. Toussaint's mission is to help parents find good schools for their children in the public and private sector and to help communities create them. In 1988 the Toussaint Institute Fund established the nation's first grassroots inner-city private school scholarship program targeting low income black male students in poor performing public school districts. We sent second and third grade boys who had been targeted for special education to

independent schools founded by African American educators and churches attempting to provide children in their communities with quality options. These schools were able to be effective with these children in mainstream classes.

Last year, I became a founding Board member of the Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO), a national organization which seeks to create, promote and support efforts to empower black parents to exercise choice in determining options for their children. BAEO members believe that "Parents without the power to make educational choices lack an indispensable tool for helping their children secure an effective education." The Black Alliance for Educational Options' board and membership is comprised of black people from across the political spectrum: Democrats, Republicans, and Independents; conservatives, moderates, and liberals. My testimony today grows out of my work with thousands of New York parents through the Toussaint Institute Fund and hundreds of African American school choice activists through BAEO.

I understand that the concept of school choice has passionate political and philosophical meaning for many people. I know many good and selfless individuals, public officials, labor leaders and public school administrators take exception to HR1's school choice components for reasons that are as respectable as the philosophical and political positions in support of school choice. I support school choice for those parents who do not have it, as does the Black Alliance for Educational Options and the Toussaint Institute Fund. However, I do not choose today to make the philosophical or political case for school choice for one reason: The millions of African American parents who, according to poll after poll, are in favor of school choice, are not supporters of school choice for reasons that are political and philosophical. They do not prioritize political or philosophical issues over the survival and well being of their children. They are just like you here in Congress and on this committee and my fellow witnesses.

The parents of these children are ordinary, good, loving parents who are driven by maternal and paternal instinct and love, to insure their children's survival and well-being. They are like President Bush and former President Clinton. They are like the presidents of our various teachers unions and like the CEO's of this nation's business community. They are like me and like you. When it comes down to parenting janitors, and waitresses, and subway conductors, and dishwashers and grandmothers raising grandchildren on public assistance, and unemployed people, and people who don't speak

English well, and people who themselves did not graduate from high school all of these people love their children as much as all of you. And like you, they feel compelled to make their children's education a priority that comes before politics and philosophy. So, on their behalf I am going to stop and change voice now. I am going to speak in the voice of the thousands of parents with whom I have worked over the past thirteen years; of the millions of African American parents crying out in the wilderness. Their voice is not Democrat or Republican, right wing or left wing. It's the voice of American parents.

Before I continue, I must remind you of that which I am sure on some level you must already be aware. These parents know that each of you have chosen the best school possible for your child. You chose the best public school or the best private school and you had a wide range of options from which to choose and you used whatever financial, political or social resources at your disposal to do so.

And so they ask:

*Why won't you let us choose also? We love our children as much as you. Our children have hopes and dreams just like yours. And like you, we would never put politics before our children's needs. Can't you see that we are not talking about Democrats or Republicans here. Please have some compassion for us. Our children's lives are at stake.*

*You have no idea what it is like to be trapped in poor performing schools like the ones in our neighborhoods. Some of you used to live in our neighborhood. Some of you still do. Yet you use your resources to escape the worst schools. And now you are saying to us that for philosophical and political reasons, you are compelled to prevent us from escaping. Why?*

*You tell us that we should stay in these schools and work from the inside to improve them. If working within these schools is such a good idea. If that's the best way to love and nurture our children's growth - then why didn't you stay and do so?*

*You tell us that giving us choice will make things worse for our children. But it didn't make things worse for your children. You tell us that the public schools will become dumping grounds for children from the most disempowered families. The worst public schools have been dumping grounds for the most disempowered families for decades! They became dumping grounds when you left. School choice*

*won't solve all of this nation's sociological contradictions. But it will save my child, the way it saved yours if you'll give me a chance.*

*You tell us that if we just wait for you to secure another political victory, you will be able to implement your long-term plan for improving the public schools in my neighborhood. Why is it that your children can't wait four more or eight more years, and ours can? You've been tinkering with the public school system for decades and nothing has changed.*

*Yes, we support charters, vouchers and tax credits for low-income and struggling working-class families, home schooling and anything else that gives us the same chance you had to escape these dungeons that are the schools the poorest and least empowered are forced to attend. Escape from a failing school is not something one does as part of a long-term political strategy. Escape implies crisis and urgency - Life and Death. In four years, my bright and capable kindergartner will be in third grade. And I can predict she'll be two years behind in reading and math based on the documented performance of my neighborhood school. In four years my somewhat hyperactive second grade male child will have been inappropriately labeled emotionally handicapped or learning disabled and sentenced to a special education system with a documented 90% school drop out rate.*

*In four years, my low achieving sixth grader will be a freshman at one of the lowest performing high schools in the state and he will have begun acclimating himself to the "drop-out" culture that pervades his high school. He'll begin to expect to drop out the way 75% of his school's senior class cohort did. I will begin fearing for his life. In my neighborhood when young males drop-out they end up in prison.*

*In four years my oldest son, the one whose pediatrician told me when he was five that he thinks he's intellectually gifted, will be a senior in high school. He had no chance of attending the renown Bronx High School of Science, because the elementary and intermediate schools he attended do not instruct students in the reading, writing and math skills that would have prepared him to take the test. So he attended his neighborhood high school. He's a good student so I know he'll graduate. But there is no college counselor in his high school. Too late in his senior year he will discover that there is something called the SAT and that he should have taken it months ago if he had any interest in going away to college. Discouraged, and assuming that he's blown his chance at the medical career we dreamed of for him,*

*he will try instead to take a civil service exam for the fire department - only to discover that he lacks the basic eighth grade reading and test taking skills necessary to score high enough on the exam. He is intelligent enough to have become a doctor, but will lack the basic academic skills required to pass a test for a good civil service job. I worry that he will give up on his dreams of having a fine family and adequately providing for them.*

*This is the story of my children. And in the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., this is "Why we can't wait."*

*We need legislation now that allows us now to have a choice of a quality education for our children. In the words of the No Child Left Behind Act, "There must be an escape hatch for students trapped in failing schools that do not teach and will not change." Federal dollars should be used to "give parents the option of removing their children from failing schools and sending them to a different public school or a private school." We need to "compel failing schools to improve and help to close the achievement gap between disadvantaged students and their peers."*

*We are appealing not to your political persuasion, but to your hearts. Our children's futures are as precious as your children's. Please look into our eyes the next time you see a television piece on a low performing public school. Please look into our eyes and know that we are just like you. We are parents who love our children and who deserve the right, the chance to escape dead-end schools, as you have.*

Finally, Mr. Chairman, may I offer one last comment as an African American educator: There are also many African American and other educators who are not caught up in the politics of school choice. They simply feel a professional and human compulsion to provide quality public and private school options for the children in their communities. Some have founded small and struggling, low-tuition independent schools. Others have attempted to establish alternative public schools, and now many seek to open charter schools. These dedicated educators need strong charter school legislation and strong school choice scholarship legislation so that they can continue to meet the growing need and demand for quality school choices in their communities.

Please find attached a copy of the research paper I authored which documents much of what I have said in this presentation with particular reference to the performance of the children in our

scholarship program and black independent schools in New York. It is entitled *Historically black independent schools*, and is published in a book edited by Diane Ravitch, and Joseph Viteritti, City schools: Lessons from New York. Also below is a bibliography of my other publications in this area, including my research with the RAND Corporation, which documents the performance of choice public schools, inner-city Catholic Schools, and the Student Sponsor Scholarship Program. Below this is a listing of informational publications for parents and educators published by the Toussaint Institute Fund. Literature published by the Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO) may be secured at its website: <http://www.baonline.org>.

Thank you Chairman Boehner again for this opportunity to speak on behalf of so many desperate parents and educators.

**Published Research on Toussaint Institute Fund's Early Intervention Scholarship Program, and on Inner City Private Schools Performance**

Foster, Gail, E. (2000). Historically black independent schools, in Ravitch, D. and Viteritti, J., City schools: Lessons from New York, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Foster, Gail, E. (1992). New York City's wealth of historically black independent schools. Journal of Negro Education. Vol. 61, No. 2.

Hill, Paul, Gail Foster and Tamar Gendler. (1990) High schools with character, Santa Monica: The RAND Corporation.

**Community Guides Published by the Toussaint Institute Fund**

Foster, Gail E. (2000). Public and Private School Options for Your Child, New York: Toussaint Institute Fund.

Foster, Gail E. (1999). Parent and community guide to vouchers, New York: Toussaint Institute Fund.

Foster, Gail E. (1999). Charter school resource guide, New York: Toussaint Institute Fund.

Foster, Gail, E. (1991, 1994). New York and New Jersey directory of independent schools owned by African Americans. New York: Toussaint Institute Fund.

## **Other Publications**

Foster, Gail, E. (1989). Cultivating the thinking skills of low achievers: A matter of equity. Journal of Negro Education. Vol. 58, No. 4.

## **Links to Related Web Sites**

[Toussaint Institute](#)

[Black Alliance for Educational Options](#)

[House Committee on Education and the Workforce Hearings Page](#)  
[Top of Page](#)

[\[HomePage | What is CAPE? | What's New? | Newsletter | Public Policy |](#)

[Private School Facts | Blue Ribbon Schools\]](#)

---

***COUNCIL FOR AMERICAN***

***PRIVATE EDUCATION***

***PMB 457***

***13017 Wisteria Drive***

***Germantown, MD 20874***

***301-916-8460***

***301-916-8485 (fax)***

***cape@capenet.org***