

FORUM

Open the doors of opportunity



Darrell Allison
Guest Columnist

Leaders in the North Carolina Senate recently released a budget which seeks to expand the Opportunity Scholarship Program over the next decade. Bold and timely, I applaud this measure because it would meet parental demand. Over 22,000 applications have flooded into the Program from North Carolina families in just three year spoor positive of the growing need for educational choice. This program, which provides scholarships for low-income students to attend private schools, is empowering parents to select the school that best meets their children's needs.

How's it working out? Fayetteville mother Tanya Johnston, whose daughter receives an Opportunity Scholarship, says, "I'm one happy parent who would stand before anyone and testify that these changes have encouraged and positively affected my daughter, Joy, for the better." Kim Paylor of Raleigh says, "This school year, utilizing the Opportunity Scholarship, my son is making solid

academic gains. And due to the school's 'no tolerance' towards bullying... he can finally be free to be the best he can be."

Such parental affirmations, and many others I have heard, are heartening and embolden us to act. Families have submitted nearly 8,100 new student applications for 2016-17, including more than 3,000 renewals. However, current funding allows just 6,200 scholarships. Without intervention, funding won't keep pace with demand. In response, the Senate budget's 10-year expansion targets anticipated need by funding 2,000 additional scholarships annually. As a result, the Program could serve 33,750 low-income children through nearly \$145 million in funding by 2027-28.

Yet opposition persists. Opponents argue expansion will harm public schools. This is untrue. The Senate budget rightly addresses the primary role of public schools in educating students and provides historic pay increases for teachers. Even more critical resources should be directed to public schools in coming years. Public schools educate nearly 1.5 million of K-12 students statewide, including my two daughters. Still, I believe this: The importance of public schools' role in education doesn't

negate the need for complementary options.

Some say the beneficiaries of Opportunity Scholarships poor children are better served solely by public schools. The evidence indicates otherwise. Just 42 percent of economically disadvantaged children attending our public schools are proficient on state end-of-grade tests. Almost all schools earning an "F" on state report cards are high-poverty schools. How do low-income families feel about these odds? Of those fortunate enough to receive an Opportunity Scholarship, 90 percent choose to renew.

Opponents also stoke fear about "unaccountable" private schools, implying uniformity through state tests alone ensures a system of good schools. Paradoxically, the school leaders who raise this argument to fault the Opportunity Scholarship Program pressure our State to modify or remove some of these same accountability standards for public schools.

Certainly outside metrics are necessary, and private schools participating in the scholarship program must adhere to testing and reporting requirements. However, their requirements are not the same as those of traditional public schools, nor should they be. Spurious logic about uniformity has also been

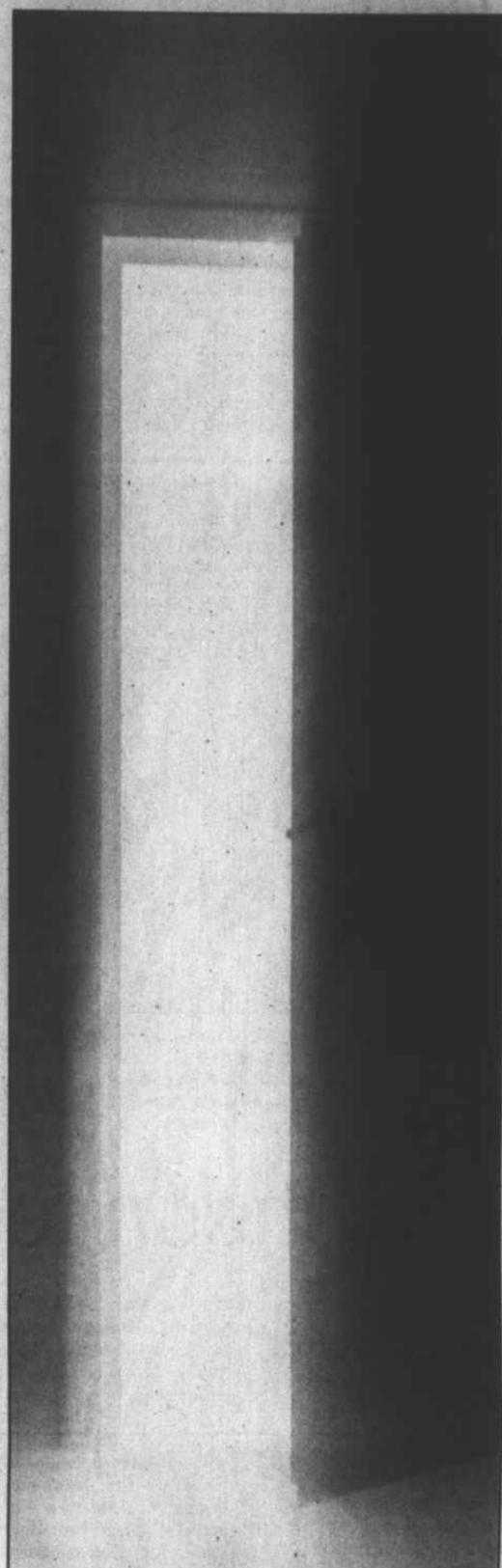
used, almost verbatim, to argue against public charter schools. Yet tens of thousands of students populate charter school waitlists, and many school districts are now advocating for a more charter-like approach: less regulation, more creativity in curricular determinations, and greater flexibility regarding teacher certification standards.

We must face reality: our K-12 system does not educate poor, mostly minority, students well. Could it be that the 400-plus private schools participating in the Opportunity Scholarship program might have something to teach students and us about innovative approaches to educating poor children?

Thousands of low-income families, for whom doors of opportunity have already opened, surely think so. But outside, more, like La Toya Allen of Charlotte, are waiting. "I want to do all I can so that [my son] won't become another statistic," she says.

For him and many others, doors of opportunity needn't be half-closed. Now is the time for North Carolina to open wide the door of opportunity.

Darrell Allison is the president of Parents for Educational Freedom in North Carolina.



The New York Times



It's not just Donald Trump: The media is out of control

supporter. I was pretty sure she was going to win. Those who had been doing the math expected this as the final outcome. But to call it before millions have even had the opportunity to cast their vote is a total overreach on the part of the media.

This last turn of events is only one in a long list of perversions to the election process that, I believe, is fueled by the media and threatens our very freedom. First there was the 11-ring circus that was the Republican primary where the multiplicity of voices gave rise to the carnival barker that is Donald Trump.

Had the Republicans been able to field an array of qualified candidates who intelligently debated the serious issues that face our country, we might have gotten a serious presidential contender that offered a realistic alternative to the Democratic nominee.

Instead, we got a presidential primary reality series orchestrated by a television personality whose arrogance is superseded only by his proclivity to lie and misrepresent both himself and his opponents. This was facilitated by the media who used the entertainment value of a Donald Trump candidacy to boost ratings, with little thought given to the impact of this free coverage on the democratic process. No other candidate could have afforded to buy the time that was freely given to Trump to espouse his stupidity, hatred, bigotry and racism, which, unfortunately, were

embraced by millions of Republicans.

For ratings, the media allowed Trump to suck up all the air in the room, leaving no space for thoughtful, meaningful debate. Each news day has been dominated by his most recent outrageous antics, with few media questioning either the veracity or the news worthiness of his statements. Now, in the 11th hour, some media have stepped up to challenge Trump, but it is too little, too late.

And then there is the Democratic Primary. Neither Bernie nor Hillary has gotten much attention, until now. Oh, there was momentary coverage when someone attacked Hillary for this, that or the other. Bernie got some airtime when he claimed unfairness in the Democratic Party primary process, but for the most part, neither has received much media play as it relates to their basic platform.

For the media, it is all about personality and perception, seldom about substance. If it is not about Benghazi, emails or Bill, if it doesn't involve raging against the system or millennials who are disenchanted with the status quo, then it's just not going to get airtime. Media coverage has focused on what separates us, what vexes us rather than issues that will impact our future and determine our path in a world facing many serious challenges.

Our nation must address issues associated with global warming, nuclear threats, social unrest, aging seniors, childcare, equality for women, minorities and others outside social norms. We have no time for "must see TV."

The freedoms given the media were provided to ensure the free exchange of ideas, a fundamental tenet of a free society. As one trained as a journalist, I understand the sacred nature of this provision in our

Constitution. But what the modern day media has done with the freedoms afforded it by our Constitution is nothing short of sacrilegious.

I certainly fear government intrusion into the inner workings of the media. But somehow, someone must determine what is true journalism and what is entertainment. It is, I believe, unethical for the media to cause millions of Americans to feel that their votes are irrelevant. When ratings become more important than democracy, when being the first to break a story is more important than the impact that breaking news will have on millions of Americans, it appears to me that the media have fallen short of the lofty expectations of our Founding Fathers.

Could this announcement not have waited until the polls closed today [June 7]? Of course it could, but not if you wanted to be first.

It is my prayer that those states casting their ballots [on June 7 were not] deterred by media whose desire for ratings is the sum total of what they have become. I hope that voters cast their ballots despite the unethical ratings hungry behavior of some media. Every vote counts, regardless of what the media says. It must for our democracy to stand.

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announcing Hillary Clinton as the presumptive nominee for the Democratic Presidential Party. This election season has given pause to thinking Americans. The system is broken. We must do something to bring this democracy back into balance.

Don't get me wrong. I am a Hillary