



This fall the Milwaukee Public Schools begin the nation's first experiment in education vouchers for low-income children. Polly Williams, the Wisconsin state representative who made it happen, was inspired by an idea proposed three decades ago by Nobel laureate Milton Friedman and promoted in recent years by conservatives in the White House and state legislatures. To gain approval for the plan, Williams formed a coalition with her Republican colleagues against the liberal establishment. Yet Williams is a Democrat who twice served as Jesse Jackson's state campaign manager.

Under the choice plan, a five-year pilot project, about 1,000 low-income children will receive vouchers of up to \$2,500 that can be used at nonsectarian private schools. The money, which will be subtracted from the city's public-school budget, will mean new opportunities for students and greater competition for the state system. If the program works, other states—some of which already allow students to choose among public schools—can be expected to follow suit.

Born in Belzoni, Mississippi, Williams moved to Milwaukee with her family at age 10. She attended the city's public schools but later sent her four children to a local private school known for its high standards and insistence on parental involvement. At 52, she is completing her fifth term as a legislator.

John H. Fund, an editorial writer for the Wall Street Journal, interviewed Williams at a hotel in downtown Milwaukee.

Champion of Choice

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SHAKING UP
MILWAUKEE'S SCHOOLS

POLLY WILLIAMS

INTERVIEWED BY JOHN H. FUND

Reason: What obstacles did the education establishment throw up to stop your choice plan?

Williams: They tried everything to stop me. After they were convinced choice couldn't be stopped, they tried to hijack the issue and came up with their own version of choice. It basically created another bureaucracy which would have supervised the whole

choice process and strangled it. The Milwaukee Public Schools would have selected the students for the choice program, not the parents. Students would have been picked if they met enough of the seven negative criteria they set up. If you were in a family of alcoholics, had a brother in prison and a pregnant teenage sister, and were inarticulate, you would have been a perfect candidate for their choice plan. In other words, a program they hoped would fail.

This fake choice plan was the product of a white, do-good liberal legislator named Barbara Nostein. Liberals backed her; they weren't for my bill. We finally won when we got 200 parents to testify for three hours in favor of my bill. In good conscience, my colleagues could not vote against those parents.

Reason: The Milwaukee Public Schools spend \$6,000 a year per student on education. That's a lot of money.

Williams: Well, that money isn't going to the kids. It's going to a system that doesn't educate them and to a bunch of bureaucrats. A lot of the money goes out the tailpipes of buses, trucking kids halfway across town so they can sit next to white kids. The average ride for a Milwaukee kid is 45 minutes. That has nothing to do with education.

Reason: Why is busing still used in Milwaukee after all these years? I understand the court order has lapsed.

Williams: They have destroyed or failed to build new schools in the inner city. If busing ended tomorrow, there would be 40,000 kids downtown and 20,000 places in school for them. They have built new, fancy magnet schools next to the suburbs to entice white kids across the city line in buses. They are busing kids from one black elementary district in this area to 104 different schools. A group of African-American parents is going to propose we modify this busing madness and start building schools kids can walk to again.

Reason: These magnet schools—can blacks go to them?

Williams: Not many. Even if they are in African-American neighborhoods they are largely filled with whites from the suburbs. People attack my plan for subsidizing private schools. Well, these magnet schools are private education at public expense. I simply say that my black parents want the same choice they do. None of the people who oppose my plan lack choice in education themselves. They have no idea what the lack of choice in education means, the damage it does when you have to go to an inferior school that will trap you for life.

Reason: Why do white liberals insist on busing instead of choice?

Williams: It's more feel-good politics for them. They think their kids are having a neat cultural experience by going to school with African-American kids. But they don't want to really relate to them; they just want to take them out to the playground with their kids so they can point to some black kids and say, "See, those are different people you should be nice to." It reminds me of a zoo. It has nothing to do with education. The theory is that if black kids sit next to white kids, they will learn better; it's insulting. I thought these people were liberals!

Reason: You castigate liberals a lot. But aren't you a liberal Democrat?

Williams: Labels do not tell you much about me. I'm not a liberal; I believe in what works. I often vote against the state budget because there are things in there I don't think should be funded.

White liberals feel guilty about blacks, and they do things to convince themselves they are helping blacks. It's feel-good politics, which is really just helping themselves. Poor people become the trophies of white social engineers.

We have to be saved from our saviors. They have been

feeding us pablum for so long, we are finally tired and demand some real meat. We want self-sufficiency, self-determination, and self-reliance, not a handout.

Reason: How do you get along with your colleagues in the legislature?

Williams: I am respected and listened to, but I must tell you that I have a better rapport with conservative Democrats and Republicans than I do with my liberal colleagues. We all agree on self-determination for minorities, and they aren't so obsessed with guilt and giving away money. I get along fine with Jack Kemp and Newt Gingrich.

Reason: Do you think they are sincere in wanting to help blacks?

Williams: I don't care. I think they are, but they don't have to be. They just have to sincerely want to push my agenda.

Reason: Suppose a conservative legislator came to you and said: "Polly, these welfare programs are a mess. Let's change them to a voucher approach. But to get Republican votes, I have to cut 30 percent of the budget out. The rest goes in cash payments directly to the poor, and they choose how to use it." What would you say?

Williams: I would go along with that. The money is wasted now, and I think it couldn't be more wasted if people spent it themselves. This paternalistic idea that poor people can't make choices is ridiculous. Poor people are some of the best shoppers, most skilled at stretching a dollar, you'll ever see.

Reason: You fell on hard times for a while. What happened?

Williams: I divorced in 1971, and our family income fell from \$20,000 a year to \$8,000 a year. I had to go on public assistance for a while. I didn't like it, and neither did my kids.

Reason: Why?

Williams: They were embarrassed. They were raised to think there was a real stigma to public assistance. They would refuse to go shopping with me when I used food stamps. After I got back on my feet, I finished college at night school. I became very active in community organizations, and eventually, in 1978, I ran for the state legislature. I lost, but I came back and won in 1980.

Reason: What impact did segregation have on you?

Williams: In the South it was always understood that you were different. You would only be served in a store after all the white people had been served. In Milwaukee, I remember trying to buy something and standing aside when a white person came up to the counter. The clerk asked me what I wanted and served me first. It was a culture shock. There was discrimination here, but it wasn't a way of life.

Reason: Judging from your comments on busing, I take it you don't think much of integration?

Williams: Integration comes in time for those who want it. A lot of African-Americans, including myself, don't believe in it. We had a civil rights revolution so we would have an equal chance at the good things in life, not to blend into white society.

Reason: What are your views on affirmative action?

Williams: Well, in theory I could see some affirmative action if it went to the people who really needed it—at the very bottom. But it never does that; it goes to people who don't need

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**The poverty industry
is worried that kids
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In their shoes, I'd be
worried too.**



it, who can make it largely on their own. And it carries with it the stigma that whatever position you succeed in getting, people think you got there because of favoritism. That can be very destructive.

Reason: What is your opinion of those black politicians, such as the mayors of Baltimore and Hartford, Connecticut, who say that the costs of the drug war are too high?

Williams: I agree with them that we have to decriminalize drugs. Three things would happen. We would make sure innocent people are no longer gunned down by drug gangs. And we would take the profit out of selling that poison. Right now, 80 percent of the cocaine money comes from yuppies. They are the ones consuming it, and they drive into our neighborhoods to buy it.

The business leaders of any major city are also willing to keep the status quo. Look at the banks, car dealers, and condo projects. Drug money is in all of them. Lastly, ending the drug war would mean the police would no longer have an excuse to come in and dominate black neighborhoods.

Reason: You were Jesse Jackson's campaign manager in Wisconsin. What does he think of choice in education?

Williams: He has never told me I shouldn't be doing this. When he has been asked, he has simply said he doesn't know enough to comment. I think he would agree with what I am doing here.

Reason: The Milwaukee papers have been very critical of your plan. So has most of the white establishment and the NAACP. Why do you think that is?

Williams: The Milwaukee papers used to be among my biggest supporters. I was their darling. Then I started asking questions and speaking up in the legislature. They didn't like that. They have been awfully unfriendly lately. A cartoon in the paper showed me with a bandit mask on holding up a public school official and demanding he surrender money to this fat, white guy from the private schools. If that isn't a cheap stereotype, I don't know what is.

The NAACP—I don't know why they oppose the plan. I guess they are just too tied in with the old system and way of doing things. This choice plan does nothing for the local power structure. It helps the people that everyone forgot—poor, inner-city kids who want a better life.

Reason: What do you say to those who think you are out to destroy the public schools?

Williams: I want the public schools to work. I think they should work at \$6,000 a year per student. Maybe if they had some competition they would have an incentive to work better. But if teachers and school bureaucrats are so worried about losing their jobs, why don't they just go out and do them a little better?

Reason: Tell us about the private schools that will participate in the choice program.

Williams: There are about six to eight schools that want to join. For many it is a sacrifice, since we had to compromise and make the voucher only \$2,500 a year, and parents cannot supplement the voucher with their own money. Many of these schools have costs of \$3,000 or \$3,300 a year.

My kids went to Urban Day School, which was started as a nonreligious school by some Catholic sisters. All of these schools are nonreligious, so there is no separation of church and state problem. They all have different races going to them.

Urban Day and the others go up to the eighth grade, and there is real discipline and learning there. Many kids who leave them and go on to public high school are shocked at the differences. Still, some 90 percent of kids who go to any of these schools finish high school, and most go on to college. They also tend to stay out of trouble.

And these schools do more than provide a good education. They help instill pride in the African-American heritage through history and other courses the public schools aren't interested in.

Reason: Why did you insist on a plan to let kids attend private schools? Why not just improve the public schools?

Williams: We've tried to do that for years, and the best we get is, "Well, we're the experts, you are just parents." We're tired of that excuse. Look, if you go to a doctor and you stay sick, at some point don't you have a right to a second opinion? The choice plan is our second opinion. The folks who run the poverty industry in this town are worried that kids will get a better education at schools that cost half the amount they spend on the public schools. In their shoes, I'd be worried too. ■

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THE TROUBLE WITH HUBBLE

BY T. A. HEPPEHEIMER

The failure to properly shape the Hubble Space Telescope's mirrors offers a sharp view of something that is often quite fuzzy—the inner workings of government. The Hubble trouble is a chance to judge a government-funded activity by standards of success that are grounded in the experience of the real world.

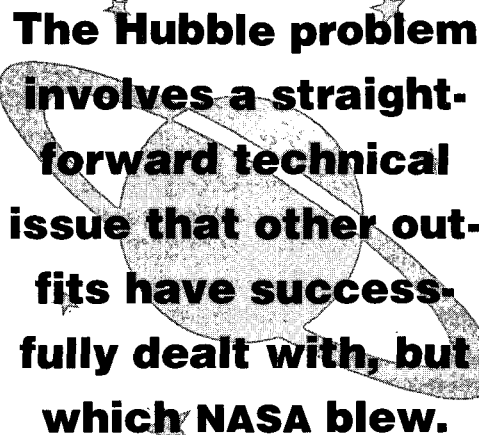
The Hubble telescope had for years been hailed as the instrument that would stand at the pinnacle of astronomy, offering the clearest and sharpest views of the faintest and most distant objects in the universe. To achieve such goals, at a cost of \$1.5 billion, its design featured the most exquisite precision ever achieved in polishing large mirrors, along with a dazzling array of the most advanced electronic instruments.

But the Hubble failure did not involve the high-tech parts of the system, in which the risk and difficulty were greatest. It involved a straightforward but crucial matter: the overall shape of the main mirrors. These are in a configuration known as Cassegrainian, which astronomers have used for more than a century.

In this arrangement, light from a distant galaxy falls on a gently-curved "primary mirror," which in the Hubble is 94.5 inches across. This mirror's shape resembles that of a large and shallow saucer with a hole in the middle. The light reflects from this primary mirror and falls on the secondary mirror, 12 inches across in the Hubble, which bulges outward like a cake in its baking pan. Then, reflecting in turn from this mirror, the light passes again down the telescope's length and through the hole in the primary mirror, coming to a sharp focus. This arrangement makes it possible to point and operate the telescope with ease.

The problem is that one of these mirrors was formed in the wrong shape. It is

very much as if your optometrist were to give you the wrong eyeglass prescription. Such an error, of course, should have



The Hubble problem involves a straightforward technical issue that other outfits have successfully dealt with, but which NASA blew.

been found in ground testing, and the faulty mirror sent back to be reshaped. But the proper tests weren't performed.

Why not? The answer is not clear. There appears to be a good deal of technical similarity between the Hubble telescope and the nation's large military reconnaissance satellites. One looks up while the others look down, but both types of spacecraft have been built by Lockheed Missiles and Space Co. and have featured high-power telescope elements built by the Perkin-Elmer Corp. (now a division of Hughes). *Aviation Week and Space Technology*, the industry weekly, reports that the Air Force offered NASA the chance to test the Hubble mirrors using its spy-satellite facilities, but NASA turned it down on the grounds that the people working on Hubble would have had to get top-secret clearances.

To reproduce such test facilities would have cost \$100 million or more. But within a budget of \$1.5 billion, that might have been the proverbial horseshoe for want of which the battle was lost. And some telescope experts say a simpler, far

less expensive test would have detected the flaw. Eastman Kodak Co., which bid unsuccessfully for the project, proposed a final-assembly test that would have cost about \$10 million.

What is indisputable, however, is that other organizations have not had such problems. In size, shape, and arrangement, the Hubble mirrors closely resemble those of the 100-inch telescope on Mount Wilson in California—which went into operation, successfully, in 1917. They are much smaller than those of the 200-inch Mount Palomar telescope, which began operating in 1948. The Mount Wilson instrument was built at such an early date that its elements had to be carried up the mountain by

mules. But that was not too early, nor was Mount Palomar too large, to preclude successful testing prior to construction.

Moreover, the past quarter century has seen an enormous upsurge in telescope building. New instruments have featured mirrors nearly as large as Palomar's. And no astronomer has had to complain that any of these instruments didn't work properly because the engineers, in effect, had worked from the wrong blueprint.

It is true that the Hubble mirrors are far more precisely shaped than these earlier ones and feature automatic equipment for exact focusing. But these niceties are not the source of the problem. The knowledge necessary to design proper Cassegrainian mirrors is presented in such standard references as the *Amateur Telescope Making* series, which can be found in any good university library.

The loss of Hubble may justifiably be seen as merely the tip of NASA's iceberg. The agency has received a great deal of criticism: for a space shuttle fleet that costs too much and underperforms, for increases in the time and expenditures