

Good morning. My name is Denisha Allen. Thank you, Representative Bean, for your leadership, and to the body for having me.

I grew up in Jacksonville, Florida, mostly on the Eastside. My old neighborhood, called the urban core, should by all accounts be prosperous. It is just east of downtown, near the arena where the Jaguars play, and closed off by historic Springfield. The reality is far different.

It has become the focus of many urban projects in the city, but statistics tell a sad tale. The median household income in the ZIP code where I grew up is about half the citywide average. You can buy and sell drugs easily, and crime is high. This neighborhood is also where I went to school.

I failed third grade — twice — because I couldn't read. I felt so insecure. I just knew I was stupid. I was regularly humiliated by my peers because I was two years older than my classmates. Teachers sighed when I walked through the door. Unsurprisingly, I hated school.

To me, school was not the window to opportunity but an obligation. I thought school was a place I had to go so my biological mother would not go to jail — because that had happened before. In the fourth grade, I was enrolled in a check-up program to help me get into my correct grade. But at the end of the year, I was told I didn't pass the program so I would not be going to my correct grade. Again, I felt like a failure. It seemed that my life path would follow in the same path as many of my family members, with dropping out or worse.

Then, during the summer of my sixth-grade year, my life turned around. I went to live with my godmother, and one of the first things she wanted to do was to enroll me into a good school — a small private school her church had recently opened on the northside of Jacksonville. She applied for the Florida tax-credit scholarship. And I was awarded one of those scholarships.

I didn't know my life was about to change. Every day at my new school, my teachers greeted me with a smile. I felt loved and seen.

Because I didn't read on grade level, teachers would meet with me one-on-one to help me. They saw potential in me that I never had. My confidence grew. They didn't view me as a chore but as a child of God — as a student capable of learning.

I went from making Ds and Fs, believing I would become a teen mom and a high-school dropout, to making As and Bs, becoming the first in my family to graduate from high school, then undergraduate college, and grad school — earning a master's degree and going on to work full-time in this field to ensure that as many other students as possible get this incredible opportunity.

I wasn't a failure. The public school system had failed me. Imagine all the students today who are like I once was — the ones who are trapped in poor-performing schools, who don't read on

grade level, are destined to drop out of school, become a teen parent, or spend the rest of their life behind bars.

Imagine the students who are sitting in the back of classrooms being overlooked. Imagine the students who are gifted but are not being challenged because the majority of classroom time is spent on discipline and classroom management.

Imagine telling those beautiful faces that there was a feasible alternative, that their liberation came in the form of education freedom – but only if their state leaders prioritized students' needs above the systems that had failed them.

Students in this country deserve K-12 education options beyond the singular one the government assigns, yet in many states, the opportunity for America's students, including its 7.7 million Black public school students¹, to access these potentially life-changing learning options remains out of reach.

Florida, my home state, is a notably bright exception, with more than 600,000 Black students, among the highest number compared to other states, who are achieving great things thanks to education freedom.²

For example, in the 2020-21 school year, 112,662 Black students in Florida were enrolled in non-district options that did not exist a generation ago, including charter schools, private schools via state-supported scholarships, and home education using state-funded education savings accounts.³

For context, Florida now has more Black students enrolled in choice options than 30 states have Black students *overall*, including Arkansas, Minnesota, and Massachusetts.⁴

Black students in Florida charter schools outperform their counterparts in Florida district schools, according to state and federal test data.⁵ Academic data for Florida's private school choice program shows that participants graduated from high school, went to college, and earn degrees at significantly higher rates than their peers in district schools.⁶

A 2020 report from the National Bureau of Economic Research found as the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship program grew, district schools improved. School choice doesn't just benefit students who left district schools. As choice expanded, Black students who remain in Florida district

¹ [National Center for Education Statistics: Racial/Ethnic Enrollment in Public Schools](#)

² In 2017-18, Florida had 626,289 Black students in public schools, ranking it third among states behind Texas and Georgia. [Civil Rights Data Collection \(ed.gov\)](#)

³ [Controlling the Narrative: Parental Choice, Black Empowerment & Lessons From Florida](#) (See Figure 1.)

⁴ [Civil Right Data Collection \(ed.gov\)](#)

⁵ [SAR1920 \(fldoe.org\)](#)

⁶ [The Effects of the Florida Tax credit Scholarship Program on College Enrollment and Graduation](#)

schools are also making strong academic gains, both outpacing Black students nationally and narrowing achievement gaps with white students in Florida.⁷

In the 1990s, Florida's graduation rate was 52 percent overall – and 42 percent for Black students. Now, it is 87 percent overall – and 82 percent for Black students.⁸ The same trends can be seen in national math and reading scores. In the 1990s, Black students in Florida were near the bottom relative to Black students in other states. Now in most categories, Black students in Florida are near the top.⁹

The sad reality is students in many states will never access this type of life-changing opportunity unless Congress acts. There are many proposals to provide more options to parents – like the Education Choice for Children Act – it would allow parents to have education freedom now more than ever. Since Covid, parents have been begging for more options and state legislatures have been listening. To date, five states have passed bills to provide all their students with education freedom.

School choice is a rising tide that lifts all boats. My own life is reflected in this data. As someone who saw its power firsthand, I can't wait to see the amazing things to come in this new world of wide-open options for all. I encourage Congress to act swiftly to ensure no child is left to struggle.

Thank you.

⁷ [NDE Core Web \(nationsreportcard.gov\)](https://nationsreportcard.gov)

⁸ [Florida's Graduation Rate, 1998-99 to 2017-18 \(fldoe.org\)](https://fldoe.org) The graduation rate gap between Black and white students in Florida in 2020 was 5.1 percentage points

⁹ [Closing the Racial Achievement Gap: Learning from Florida's Reforms | The Heritage Foundation](https://www.heritage.org)