

Plan altered lives of kids and their dad

LIVES FROM 1-A

Higgins, himself a public school graduate, was determined to transfer Chrona before she entered fourth grade. But the family was struggling. A 1989 fall at the factory where he worked as a machinist for 12 years had left Higgins with two herniated discs, and he lost strength in his right leg for more than a year.

Complications prevented him from going back to work. His income dropped from as much as \$32,000 a year with overtime to a fraction of that. Things would get tougher when his marriage broke up.

Higgins had never heard of Milwaukee's school voucher program until he visited Urban Day. In fact, he didn't know anything about the school until, driving by one day, he was drawn in by the African proverb posted outside: It Takes An Entire Village To Raise A Child.

The staff encouraged him to apply for a voucher, and as fall classes were set to begin that year, he got the good news.

Higgins immediately noticed things were different at Urban Day. Parents at the nonsectarian

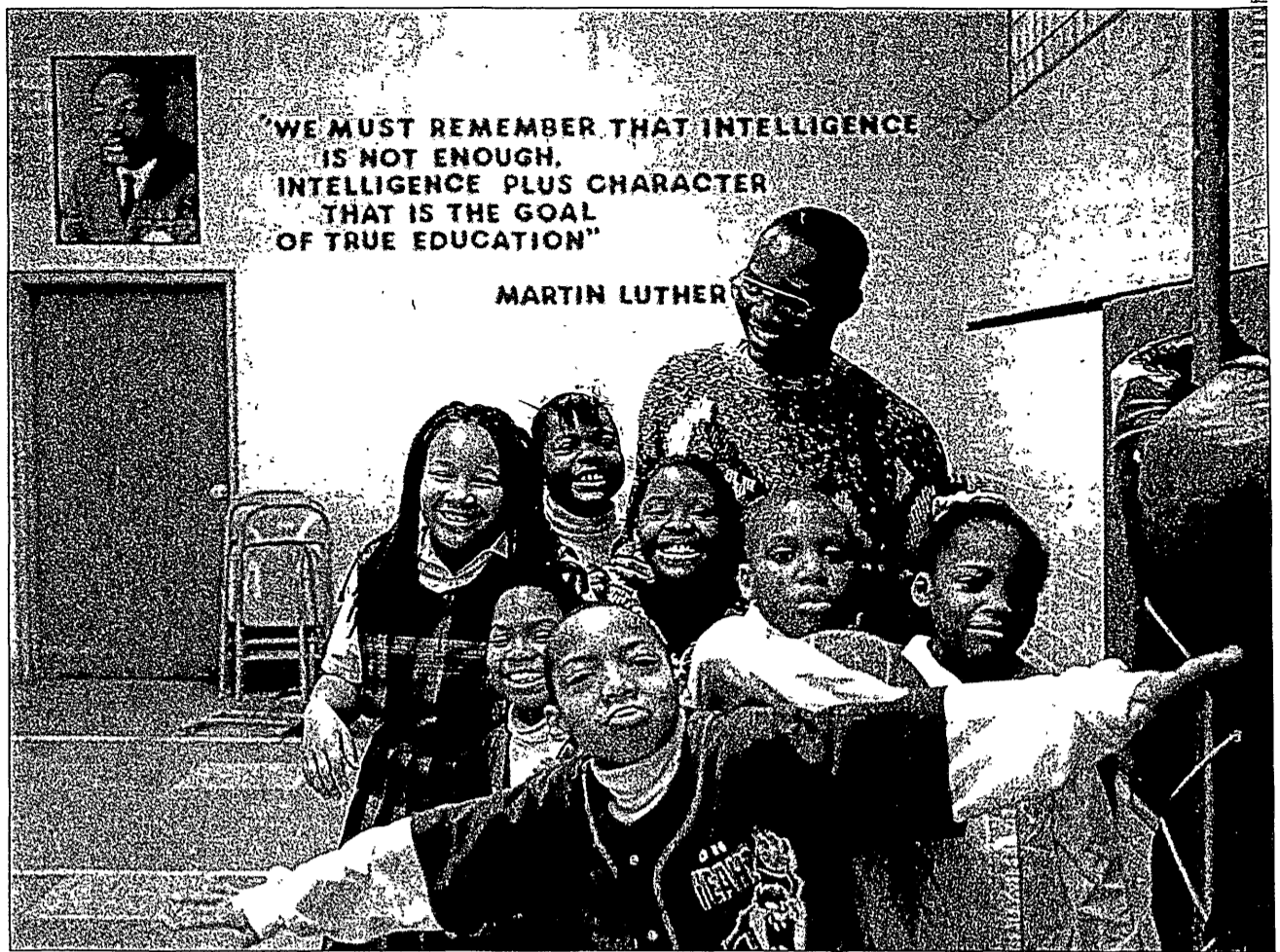
school, which serves mostly black students, have authority to hire and fire teachers, choose books and other materials and administer admissions policies.

Each year, Higgins contracts vowing to attend parent/teacher conferences and to volunteer at least 20 hours at the school. Higgins was most impressed by teachers who welcomed him to sit in on his daughters' classes anytime.

In a school that relies heavily on parental involvement, Higgins admits he didn't always carry his load.

Then, one day at a school meeting, Higgins listened as some parents complained that others were not doing enough to help. He got some prodding from a teacher, too. Spend more time at the school, she suggested; be a role model for young boys whose fathers aren't at home.

"I was very shocked by that," said Higgins, who now volunteers at the school every day, even though he is studying for a degree from Milwaukee Area Technical College. "I didn't really feel people in the Milwaukee public schools wanted my time. And I didn't think it was needed at Urban Day, either."



Anthony Higgins, a single parent with children at Urban Day School, frequently stays after school for hours to assist children with homework and to supervise recreational activities.

Voucher plan's true test is coming in court

By SCOTT STEPHENS
PLAIN DEALER REPORTER

MILWAUKEE — Foes of school vouchers won the battle last August when they persuaded the Wisconsin Supreme Court to put the brakes on a plan to expand the city's school choice program to religious schools.

Now comes the war. On Feb. 27, the state's high court will hear arguments on whether it is constitutional to use public money to pay tuition at religious schools.

The outcome of the Wisconsin case is of acute interest to educators and lawmakers everywhere, particularly in Ohio, where a pilot voucher program that includes religious schools is slated to begin in Cleveland in September.

"It will be the vanguard case," said Richard A. DeColibus, president of the Cleveland Teachers Union. "It's essentially what they're trying to do in Cleveland, which is to fund the Catholic school system with public dollars."

"If it prevails in the U.S. Supreme Court, public education will come under attack everywhere," he added.

The Wisconsin ruling is expected in the spring, but both sides predict the case will eventually end up in the U.S. Supreme Court.

Choice advocates believe the court is warming to the idea of using public money for religious schooling. A recent court ruling allowed a student-run Christian

magazine at the University of Virginia to receive public money.

"We feel very confident," said Clint Bolick, litigation director of the Institute for Justice in Washington, D.C., a group representing the pro-voucher Parents for Choice. "The time is right for this kind of case to be heard."

Anti-voucher forces hope the high court will remain steadfast in its traditional defense of the separation of church and state.

"We're optimistic," said Peter Koneazny of the American Civil Liberties Union in Milwaukee. "By granting the injunction, it's an indication the court considers our argument to have merit."

Choice advocates argue that public money is already used to

support some Head Start programs in churches and government scholarships that can be used at religious-based institutions, such as Notre Dame or Marquette universities.

Voucher opponents counter that Head Start programs are not religious-oriented, even when they are held at churches, and that college students are adults who can make their own religious decisions.

Advocates say vouchers do not go directly to schools but rather to parents who spend them at a school of their choice, religious or nonsectarian.

"If they just gave parents \$3,000 and let them make the choice of the type of education

they wanted to use it on, that might be true," Bolick said. "But the money does go, more or less, directly to the schools."

Both sides agree a successful court challenge in Ohio could temporarily block — or even eliminate — the planned voucher program in Cleveland, which depends heavily on parochial schools.

DeColibus' union is expected to join the ACLU and others planning to mount a court challenge to the Cleveland program. Milwaukee's choice program is not the first to end up in court. In 1994, Puerto Rico lost its 2,000-student voucher program after a court ruled the island's constitution barred sending public money to private institutions.

VOUCHER SCHOOLS

The Ohio Department of Education has approved the following schools for Cleveland's school voucher program:

- Archbishop James P. Lyke Elementary School — 18230 Harvard Ave.
- Ascension School — 4400 W. 140th St.
- Blessed Sacrament School — 3389 Fulton Rd.
- Birchwood School — 3170 Warren Rd.
- Calvary Center Academy — 9510 Buckeye Rd.
- Covenant Kindergarten — 11205 Euclid Ave.
- Euclid Avenue Congregational Day Care — 9606 Euclid Ave.
- Golden Christian Academy — 2204 Petrarca
- Hanna Perkins School — 2084 Cornell Rd.
- Holy Name Elementary School — 8328 Broadway Ave.
- Holy Redeemer School — 15712 Kipling Ave.
- Immaculate Conception School — 4129 Superior Ave.
- Islamic School of the Oasis — 1192 Hayden Ave.
- Lutheran Memorial School — 3269 W. 43rd St.
- Marotta Montessori School-Fruitland — 11450 Franklin Blvd.
- Marotta Montessori School-Glenville — 11404 Lake Shore Blvd.
- Metro Catholic Parish School — 1910 W. 54th St.
- Ministerial Head Start & Kindergarten — 12025 Shaker Blvd., #400
- Montessori School of Holy Rosary — 12009 Mayfield Rd.
- Mount Pleasant Catholic School — 3845 E. 131st St.
- Our Lady of Good Counsel School — 4419 Pearl Rd.
- Our Lady of Mount Carmel West School — 1355 W. 70th St.
- Our Lady of Peace School — 12406 Buckingham Ave.
- Ramah Junior Academy — 4770 Lee Rd.
- Second New Hope Christian Academy — 2917 E. 116th St.
- St. Adalbert School — 2345 E. 83rd St.
- St. Catherine School — 3443 E. 93rd St.
- St. Francis School — 7206 Myron Ave.
- St. Ignatius Elementary School — 10205 Lorain Ave.
- St. Jerome's School — 15100 Lake Shore Blvd.
- St. John Cantius Elementary School — 2357 Tremont
- St. John Nepomucene School — 3777 Independence Rd.
- St. Leo the Great School — 4900 Broadview Rd.
- St. Mark's School — 15800 Montrose
- St. Mary Byzantine Catholic Elementary School — 4600 State Rd.
- St. Mary School-Collinwood — 716 E. 156th St.
- St. Mel Elementary School — 14400 Triskett Rd.
- St. Patrick's School-WP — 17720 Puritas Ave.
- St. Rocco's School — 3205 Fulton Rd.
- St. Stanislaus School — 6615 Forman Ave.
- St. Thomas Aquinas/St. Philip Neri School — 9101 Superior Ave.
- St. Vitus School — 6111 Glass Ave.
- Villa Montessori Center — 5620 Broadway Ave.
- West Park Lutheran School — 13712 Belaire Rd.
- Westside Baptist Christian School — 9407 Madison Ave.

Catholic schools champion school choices

By DESIREE F. HICKS
PLAIN DEALER REPORTER

CLEVELAND — The eighth-grade class at St. Adalbert School has 20 girls and eight boys. The ratio, Principal Lydia Harris says, tells a lot about the sacrifices poor families face to give their children a private education.

There is nothing unusual about the number of boys and girls who enter kindergarten at the E. 83rd St. school, which draws mostly from Fairfax, one of the city's poorest neighborhoods.

But as the children get older, parents strapped for cash often transfer their sons to public schools, Harris said. They figure the boys are tougher and can handle the change. This is particularly true of families struggling to pay tuition for more than one child.

"It breaks my heart. If their parents had had a way, those boys would still be here," said Harris, a staunch supporter of a program that will give about 1,500 Cleveland children public money to attend private schools like St. Adalbert next fall.

In 34 years — 23 in the classroom — Harris, a soft-spoken, no-nonsense administrator, has molded a program that is in high demand by parents who like the Catholic school's blend of academics, Afrocentric culture, religion and familylike atmosphere.

She instills pride in her students and stresses that they can be anything, achieve any goal, if they work at it. Ask the eighth-graders how many plan to graduate high school, and every hand shoots up. Ask them how many plan to attend college, and the hands stay raised.

Harris prefers to stick to the basics of academics. "I don't get into fads, because they die."

The school has a 125-pupil waiting list, and families wait two years or longer to get into Harris' program, which offers classes from kindergarten through eighth grade.

Lately, Harris has appeared at local forums and on television, championing a \$5.5 million state-funded pilot program that will give about 1,500 Cleveland children vouchers worth up to \$2,250 to attend private and religious schools next school year.



St. Adalbert Principal Lydia Harris has built a program in high demand by parents who like the Catholic school's blend of academics, Afrocentric culture, religion and familylike atmosphere.

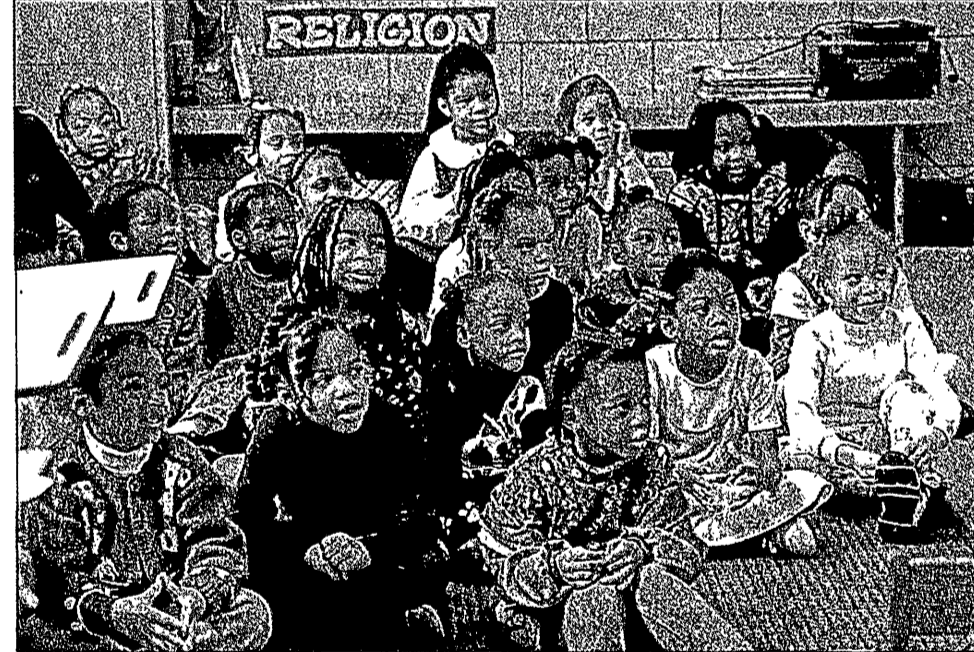
Barring a successful court challenge, Cleveland will become the first place in the nation to allow public money to be used to pay for tuition at religious schools. In fact, more than half of the schools that have signed on to participate in the program for children in kindergarten through third grade are Catholic schools throughout Cleveland.

"We have consistently supported the concept of choice in education," said Sister Carol Anne Smith, secretary of education for the Diocese of Cleveland.

"The parents of all children pay education taxes, so our belief is all children should receive the benefit of the tax dollars they pay," Smith said. Diocesan officials have consistently stressed this point with Ohio lawmakers, she said.

"I don't think there's any question that Catholic schools are flat out behind tuition vouchers, and they are a driving force," said John F. Witte, a University of Wisconsin-Madison professor who has extensively studied Milwaukee's state-funded voucher program.

Catholic schools have had a longstanding presence in cities



Four years ago, St. Adalbert split kindergartners into separate classes — boys in one, girls in another. Today, children in kindergarten through third grade learn in same-sex classes, as the experiment expands each year to include another grade.

like Milwaukee and Cleveland. The schools have survived even as parishioners moved to the suburbs, partly because non-Catholic parents have come to see them as affordable alternatives to troubled public systems.

"We've always been a champion, if you will, of trying to ensure that parents have the right to choose schools for their child," said John Norris, superintendent of schools for the Archdiocese of Milwaukee.

The Milwaukee Archdiocese was set to participate in Milwaukee's voucher program this year until the Wisconsin Supreme Court issued an injunction this summer that blocked religious-school participation. By that time, classes had already started for some students whose parents were counting on tuition vouchers worth \$3,616. So the archdiocese decided that students would not be forced to leave because they couldn't pay. Private sponsors and parishes in the archdi-

ocese donated money to cover the shortfall.

Maintaining that commitment can be costly, and declining enrollment and rising costs have forced some Catholic schools to merge or shut down. Many that stay in business need support from the local diocese.

The Cleveland diocese's Inner-City School Fund, which began in 1987 and relies heavily on corporate and foundation support, funnels \$1 million a year to 10 schools. In Milwaukee, the archdiocese subsidizes two city schools to the tune of \$350,000 annually.

At St. Adalbert, parents participate in two fund-raisers a year to raise \$150 per child to supplement the \$750 tuition. And parents volunteer after school to run basketball teams, the French club, cheerleading squads and other activities that public schools pay advisers to supervise.

Tuition vouchers would lessen the burden on families like Regi-

nald Lathan's and offer the prospect of a stable income source for schools.

"Sometimes, it's hard to even know whether I'm going to have the tuition money," said Lathan, who moved from Warrensville Heights to Cleveland several years ago so his children, Reginald Jr., 7, and Sharnae, 13, could attend St. Adalbert.

Lathan, who works part time and attends Cleveland State University, has managed to get by so far but worries what will happen next year when Sharnae enters high school. He would prefer to keep her in a private school, but tuition will cost more and his budget is already stretched thin.

"That's what bothers me most — that money would determine which school a child attends, or if they're able to choose a school," said Harris, who sent an application for the voucher program home with each of her students.

"It's not the child's fault if the family doesn't have money."

Approval is pending for the following schools:

- St. Agatha/St. Aloysius School — 640 Lakeview Rd.
- Mount Pleasant Christian School — 10615 Lamontier Ave.

The following schools were given temporary approval pending a charter:

- HOPE Bridge Avenue School — 3800 Bridge Ave.
- HOPE Cedar Avenue School — 8869 Cedar Ave.
- HOPE E. 53rd Street School — 3395 E. 53rd St.
- HOPE Lorain Avenue School — 12517 Lorain Ave.