

Virginia Media Alert:

Thomas Jefferson Institute for Public Policy

9035 Golden Sunset Lane

Springfield, Virginia 22153

703/440-9447 · info@thomasjeffersoninst.org · www.thomasjeffersoninst.org

Statement of the Thomas Jefferson Institute upon the selection of Gerard Robinson as Virginia Secretary of Education

"We are particularly pleased by Governor-elect Bob McDonnell's selection of Gerard Robinson to be the next Virginia Secretary of Education. Mr. Robinson's career demonstrates that he will bring a singular focus to the Governor-elect's effort to improve academic achievement among educationally at-risk students.

"As a policy researcher, he understands the need for, and potential of education reform. As a practitioner who has helped create quality charter schools, he understands the challenge of ensuring reform is effective. And as a former 1.8 GPA high school student who made his way up academically to a degree from Harvard University, he is absolutely committed to advancing the education of all students.

"We're confident Secretary-designate Robinson will reinforce the need to create a high expectation of success focused around a mission-driven curriculum at all public schools - charter or traditional - and the Commonwealth is well-served by his appointment."

Background Reference:

Speaker advocates charter schools as option for blacks

by CYNTHIA HOWELL ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

Nov 5, 2007

The president of a national organization that works to increase and promote school options for black children visited Little Rock on Friday to offer encouragement to the Arkansas planners of existing and proposed charter schools.

Gerard Robinson of Atlanta, the president of the Black Alliance of Educational Options, told a group of about 40 people meeting at Regina's Hospitality House in east Little Rock that affluent families have had the ability to choose schools for their children for many years, but poor and working-class families have had far fewer school choices.

"Our mission is to increase quality parental options to empower families and create more

options for black children," Robinson said about the nearly 2,000 members of the nonprofit, Washington, D.C.-based alliance.

Robinson's remarks were made on the brink of the Arkansas Board of Education meeting scheduled for Monday and Tuesday to evaluate and decide on a record 12 applications for new open-enrollment charter schools proposed for opening in August 2008. Planners of several of the proposed schools are black. And several of the proposed schools would be located in central and east Arkansas communities that have large black populations, including Little Rock, North Little Rock, Brinkley, Helena and Osceola.

If all the proposals are approved, the number of the taxpayer-financed schools would more than double the state's 11 existing open-enrollment charter schools. The charter schools operate according to the terms of a charter or contract with the state. They can be exempted from some of the rules that govern traditional schools and, as a result, can be more innovative.

In return for that flexibility, they are held to stricter student achievement standards.

"We're here to help your state, your community in any way we can help with charter schools," Robinson told the group that included former Little Rock Superintendent Roy Brooks, who is now a consultant to three proposed charter schools for downtown Little Rock.

"We are here to help with the tough conversations that have to happen," Robinson said.

"The tough conversations about race because America was built on race, the tough conversations about money because we have seen that in every state we've gone to and the tough conversations about who is in charge. BAEO is here for the long haul. We have a proven track record. We don't have all the answers, but you don't either."

The Black Alliance for Educational Options was established in 2000, in the aftermath of symposiums held in 1999 and 2000 at Marquette University on the topic of educational choices for black families. In addition to the national group there are state and city chapters in places such as Atlanta; Buffalo, N.Y.; Milwaukee; Richmond, Va.; Philadelphia; and New York, as well as in states such as Texas, Ohio, Minnesota, and Colorado.

The alliance conducts public-awareness campaigns about educational options that include traditional and charter public schools, home schools, and publicly and privately financed scholarships to private schools.

It also works to promote high-quality options. Earlier this fall, using grant funds from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the alliance opened the Boys' Latin of Philadelphia Charter School.

Additionally, the alliance hosts annual conferences on developing and exercising education choices and works to build political support for education options.

"We are putting ourselves in the position to be an information factory," Robinson said.

Robinson, a Los Angeles native, who has worked as a legislative staff member in both California and Virginia, noted Friday that school choices other than traditional public schools have been largely supported by the Republicans. Support from Democrats is rare. He urged that to change, saying that today's black and low-income students will become voters who will question why elected Democrats failed to come to the aid of black students trapped in low-performing schools.

In response to questions from the audience members, Robinson said he supports high-quality traditional schools, and the nation's 4,000 charter schools serving about 1 million students in 40 states and Washington, D.C., are not a threat to the traditional public schools. In the handful of cities where there are significant numbers of charter schools, the competition often results in better traditional schools, he said.

"Public schools are surely working," Robinson said. "We're simply saying that charter schools can work alongside the public schools to help kids who for some reason haven't been helped in a traditional schools. That's why we say parental choice. Let the parents decide what is best for their child."

The Arkansas Charter School Resource Center, funded by the Walton Family Foundation and housed at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville, sponsored Robinson's appearance in cooperation with the Education Consortia Inc., of Little Rock, one of the applicants for a new charter school.

"I really think it is important for black and Hispanic parents to make informed decisions about schools for their children, Caroline Proctor, executive director of the resource center said Friday. "They may not choose charter schools but they should know they have that choice and I don't think they do now," she said.

Robinson was previously a Senior Fellow at the Institute for the Transformation of Learning at Marquette University from 2004 to 2006. As executive director of a nonprofit organization in New York City, he helped open a charter school in New Jersey. He's also worked with school reform and charter schools in Milwaukee.

As a high school student, Robinson aspired to be a professional football player but was injured in his senior year. Left with only a 1.8 grade point average, he attended community college for three years, finally passing algebra at age 20. He earned an associate degree from El Camino Community College, a bachelor's degree from Howard University, and then a master's degree in education from Harvard University.
