

# Ohio school voucher program halted

CLEVELAND (AP)—A 4-year-old program that lets Cleveland students attend private or parochial school at taxpayer expense was blocked from continuing by a federal judge Tuesday, just one day before the start of the school year.

U.S. District Judge Solomon Oliver Jr. issued an injunction halting the school voucher program until a trial determines whether it violates the constitutional separation of church and state. Oliver indicated that it is unconstitutional.

"The participating schools are overwhelmingly sectarian," Oliver wrote. "Therefore, the Cleveland program has the primary effect of advancing religion."

Civil liberties and public education groups had sued to stop the program, which was one of the first in the nation when it began in 1995.

Milwaukee has had vouchers since 1990, and this year Florida began a statewide voucher program.

The state-funded program, which covers up to \$2,500 in tuition costs per child of poor families so they can attend private schools, is being conducted only in Cleveland on an experimental basis. This year, 4,000 students from kindergarten through fifth grade have signed up.

Nearly all of the 56 Cleveland schools that accept the vouchers are religious.

Although many of the schools in the voucher program are set to open Wednesday, the judge said allowing it to go forward could "cause an even greater harm to the children by setting them up for greater disruption at a later time."

Voucher supporters said they will appeal the ruling.

"This is an unmitigated

disaster for schoolchildren in Cleveland," said Clint Bolick of the Institute for Justice in Washington.

Johnnietta McGrady, who enrolled two children at St. Thomas Aquinas with the help of vouchers, said she was "terrified" by the ruling.

"I really can't afford the private school now," she said. "The kids will have to go to public school this year. There's no other way."

Cleveland public school officials met immediately to discuss how the 77,000-student district could absorb the thousands of students just one day before the start of the school year. The district had no comment on the ruling.

Supporters said not allowing vouchers to be handed out this school year would ruin the program because data should be collected for four straight years to evaluate whether the

setup improves student performance.

A similar challenge to the Ohio law was filed in state court shortly after the Legislature enacted the program in 1995, in response to concerns about the quality of education at Cleveland's public schools.

In that lawsuit, the Ohio Supreme Court ruled in May that the program doesn't violate the separation of church and state, but it still struck the program down as unconstitutional because of procedural errors by the Legislature.

Lawmakers revived the program last month in a measure signed by Republican Gov. Bob Taft, a supporter of the vouchers.

The program is similar to one started earlier this month in Florida that is under attack by the same groups challenging Ohio's program.

# Researchers: Welfare changes not helping poorest

WASHINGTON (AP)—Welfare reform has driven the poorest families deeper into poverty, while slightly raising the incomes of those who are a little better off, say researchers who hope to broaden the debate over what constitutes success.

The biggest problem, opposing camps agree, is that many families leaving welfare are not getting food stamps although they remain eligible. In 1995, 88 percent of poor kids received food stamps. By last year, it had fallen to 70 percent.

"The conventional wisdom here in Washington is that welfare reform is an unqualified success because caseload reductions have been so dramatic," said Wendell Primus, a researcher at the liberal-leaning Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, which was releasing the report Sunday. Welfare caseloads have been cut nearly in half since peaking in 1994.

"We are not saying in this report that welfare reform is terrible. We're saying we have to bring more balance to what welfare reform is all about," added Primus, who resigned a top post with the Department of Health and Human Services to protest President Clinton's signing of the welfare bill three years ago Sunday.

Enthusiasts of the reforms argue that, overall, most families are better off.

"More Americans are enjoying the freedom of independence from the chains of welfare," said a statement from Rep. Bill Archer, R-Texas, chairman of the House

Ways and Means Committee, which oversaw the reforms.

Still, even reform backers acknowledge problems. A report from the Ways and Means Committee and testimony from the Clinton administration earlier this year acknowledged that the poor are losing ground, and Sunday's study is the most extensive documentation of these suspicions.

"There are people at the bottom who are worse off. We need to do something about that," said Ron Haskins, staff director for the committee's welfare panel, who helped write the welfare law. But he argued that more people are better off.

The report, which used Census and caseload data, examined families headed by single women and found their economic situations generally improved between 1993 and 1995.

But over the next two years, the poorest 20 percent of these families lost an average of \$577 per year, with incomes falling to \$8,047 annually. Typically, these are families that left welfare but had not made up lost benefits with wages.

The situation was particularly bad for the poorest 10 percent, who lost an average of \$814 per year.

The problem, both sides explained, is people who are forced off the rolls but haven't figured out how to support themselves.

"In the old days, nobody cared about them. They just stayed on welfare forever," Haskins said. "Now, even to stay on welfare you need a certain level of competence.

There are things you must do. If not, they cut your benefits."

The report also examined families in the next income bracket. (See Welfare, Page 4)

# Furor lingers over NYC youth march

NEW YORK (AP)—The leader of a rally that included inflammatory speeches and a brawl with police a year ago has accused the city of racism for rejecting a request for another march.

Police Commissioner Howard Safir said Monday he will not issue a permit for a second Million Youth March, proposed for next month in Harlem. The dispute likely will go to federal court — as it did last year.

Safir's decision was denounced by Khallid Abdul Muhammad, the main organizer of the march which the city said attracted 6,000 people last year. Muhammad said it brought in 300,000 people — and he vowed to march Sept. 4 despite the stand by city officials.

"We want to make it clear here today that no devil, racist, cantankerous, constipated cracker like Mayor Giuliani can stop the march," Muhammad said. Giuliani's office had no comment.

Muhammad made his comments at a news conference outside City Hall during which organizers denounced Jews and whites.

The rhetoric mirrors circumstances preceding last year's march, in which the city also refused to grant Muhammad a permit. The march took place only after federal courts overruled the city.

The four-hour event featured dozens of inflammatory speeches denouncing whites, Jews, black elected officials and police.

As the rally wound down, Muhammad's closing speech ran beyond the allotted time and police officers in riot gear moved toward the stage while police helicopters flew low over the crowd.

Muhammad exhorted the crowd to beat or shoot officers if they were attacked, and some members of the audience threw barricades, chairs and bottles. Twenty-eight people were injured.



KHALLID MUHAMMAD

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