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Thank you, Foundation Against Intolerance and Racism (FAIR), for inviting me to discuss education on the 206th birthday of Frederick Douglass.

As a pre-teen growing up in Missouri City, Texas, I participated in my first leadership seminar: I read all three of Frederick Douglass's autobiographies. Applying lessons learned from the 19th century slave-turned-abolitionist, I convinced my parents to drive me to Douglass's "Cedar Hill" home in Washington, D.C. (a distance of about 1,400 miles). Imagine what an honor it was as an adult in 2003 when I gave the keynote address to and later joined the Frederick Douglass Memorial and Historical Association (FDMHA) as a member of the Board of Trustees of that home and Douglass's legacy.

Based on reading Frederick Douglass ever since I was 12 years old, I have learned many lessons from his actions and words that can be used as advice to parents with children in low-performing schools. Further, I can draw two conclusions that should not seem contradictory. One: parents and education insiders should advocate for reforms inside the public school system. Two, parents and reformers should advocate for a healthy range of choices outside of the public school system. I am not a mind-reader so I am NOT saying Mr. Douglass would have endorsed what I am saying, but my ideas are offered in the spirit of his work and legacy.

Born a slave, Mr. Douglass wasn't sure of even the day or year he was born and it bothered him most of his life. He guessed Valentine's Day 1817, because his mother called him "My Little Valentine" (documents unearthed later revealed it was sometime in February 1818). He "grew too big for my chains," escaping to freedom in 1838, then lived as a fugitive for almost a decade before friends purchased his freedom in a "ransom deal" after he fled to England to escape American slave-catchers.

From the humblest of origins, that former "piece of property" orphaned as a child became an internationally known abolitionist, newspaper editor, orator, best-selling author, influential statesman, fervent human rights advocate, and a guiding light for the emancipation movement. Mr. Douglass died on Feb. 20, 1895, hours after being

applauded by a women's organization and shortly before he was scheduled to give a speech at a black church.

Despite his greatness over half a century, Frederick Douglass was very typical in how he responded to tough circumstances: fighting or fleeing. While he didn't physically strike back, he took pride in drawing blood from Covey, the slave-breaker, and resisting slavery when he could before he finally escaped. The slaves who had the courage to stand up against the overseers got punished first, but, "while legally a slave virtually a freeman." Such slaves, Mr. Douglass noted, were "neither whipped nor shot" after they resisted. He did try what was possible to make the situation better for himself, recognizing the limitations. As he wrote, "A man's troubles are always half disposed of when he finds endurance the only alternative. I found myself here; there was no getting away; and naught remained for me but to make the best of it."

Fight

That leads me to my first conclusion that parents and reformers do need to fight within the current system. Mr. Douglass resisted slavery and planned to flee. Before he knew how to escape, he was already planning for the day he could be free. He learned to write and free himself: "I wished to learn to write before going, as I might have occasion to write my own pass."

To those who choose to stay and change things from within: No excuses. Take advantage of every opportunity. Don't use obstacles as an excuse. Don't blame racism or mean teachers. A friend of mine often says, "Before you complain about the glass ceiling, show me the bumps on your head where you tried to break through."

Mr. Douglass learned to read as a young slave when it was illegal. He never attended formal school. He never attended a public school. Some people think that is right-wing propaganda, but it is true. He was, it was said at the time by his abolitionist colleagues, "a graduate of slavery, with his diploma on his back." He was taught for a time by his master's wife and street-schooled by his white friends. He would challenge the white children to academic competitions by saying that he could write or spell better than they could. He was looking to take advantage of every opportunity. In one passage, Mr. Douglass wrote: "I have gathered scattered pages of the Bible from the filthy street-gutters, and washed and dried them, that in moments of leisure I might get a word or two of wisdom from them."

As a fugitive slave, he would even nail a newspaper to a wall to read while he did hard labor and took every opportunity to learn. Today, people complain about old textbooks. There's no book older than the Bible. When I was involved in school choice battles two decades ago, I came across a statistic that 37 percent of D.C. residents above the age of 25 read at the 3rd grade level or below. And yet, people walk by public libraries that are free and open to everyone. Some people say that class size explains why kids are struggling—and yet, Mr. Douglass talked about his experience illegally teaching 40 slaves, in a barn, in secret, how to read. No certified teacher, no computers, no air conditioning, and no excuses.

Flee

Things weren't working, so Frederick Douglass looked for an exit. That exit was on a ship disguised as a sailor. He ran from slavery, he ran to England with the slave-catchers in hot pursuit, he ran to Canada after John Brown's raid at Harper's Ferry with law enforcement in even hotter pursuit. When necessary, Frederick Douglass ran as far as his legs and brain would carry him. That doesn't seem like a hero's tactics, to run. But as the rapper Chuck D has said, "When I can't change the people around me, I change the people around me." That is, get away from people who don't align with your values or goals and instead get around people who are more suitable for you. The slaveholders weren't going to change, so it was brave and necessary for him to run. If he had failed a second time, he certainly would have been sent down to the Deep South or shot on sight.

This leads me to my second conclusion about Mr. Douglass and what I would say to parents with children in low-performing schools or other bad situations. It makes sense to know that Mr. Douglass often quoted Lord Byron: "Hereditary bondmen, know ye not, Who would be free, themselves must strike the blow?"

If you choose to flee, don't wait for an educational emancipation proclamation. If necessary, run. Sometimes people will say that people who support school choice are "giving up" on public education. But there is a difference between running from something and running to something. Some people may be running from bad schools and others may be running to educational opportunities. Mr. Douglass later told his former owner, "I did not run away from you, but from slavery; it was not that I loved Caesar less, but Rome more."

Forge papers or set up a P.O. Box. Any way you can get your child into a better school, do it. That may sound radical. But then, Mr. Douglass risked his own life by aiding

runaway slaves as part of the Underground Railroad. Opponents eager to convict him “of being Frederick Douglass” would have celebrated the chance to punish him for breaking the law. How can we tell parents to put the interests of administrators before those of their children? To focus on increasing choices for families doesn’t mean they hate public schools.

If it isn’t working for you, you have two choices: fight or flee. Two decades ago, I was invited by a D.C. public school teacher to give a talk to his students. He wanted me to explain to the students how I had gone from Texas, to Harvard, to Taiwan, to Korea, and finally to the Cato Institute, where I then worked as an education policy analyst. One topic he suggested: “Stay in school.” My question: “Which school?” A school with bars, metal detectors, 650 SAT scores, crime, 50 percent dropout rates? Why would I say, “Stay there”?

Tell Your Story

A final piece of advice that I have learned from Frederick Douglass: tell your story. The story of what’s going on in the schools must be told from the view of the parents and children. In the introduction to Mr. Douglass’s narrative published in 1845, abolitionist Wendell Phillips wrote: “You remember the old fable of ‘The Man and the Lion,’ where the lion complained that he should not be so misrepresented ‘when the lions write history.’ I am glad the time has come when the ‘lions write history.’”

Mr. Douglass wrote: “Viewed from his table, and not from the field, Colonel Lloyd was, indeed, a model of generous hospitality. But that the view from the fields was different.” Many discussions about education are from the view of the administrative office. “Will the school system lose money?” “Will the schools be drained?” “Are we giving up on public education? The question I ask in response: “Does school choice increase educational freedom?” “Are people better off with a range of choices instead of being assigned one for administrative purposes?”

Mr. Douglass was asked what would happen to slaves if they were given freedom. After all, many of them were illiterate, robbed of their savings, and dependent on their masters. Mr. Douglass’s response was an 1862 speech: “Free the slaves, and then leave them alone. If we can’t stand on our own feet, then let us fall.” Freedom was more important than pragmatism or efficiency.

The above is not to suggest any particular policy is a utopia. When I spoke at schools and churches at information sessions for parents in Washington, D.C., I would make it

clear to them that Plan A was for them to make sure their children got educated where they go to school now. Plan B, if we were successful, would be for us to create education options for them.

When Mr. Douglass discussed his personal experience as a conductor on the Underground Railroad, he said, “True as a means of destroying slavery, it was like an attempt to bail out the ocean with a teaspoon, but the thought that there was one less slave, and one more freeman — having myself been a slave, and a fugitive slave — brought to my heart unspeakable joy.”

When people say that school choice will save only a handful — that not everyone will fit in the boat — I am willing to concede that point and to respond in return: “A system set up so children and their families can find the schools that work best for them? That sounds like a great start for any century and time.”

The good news is that we were successful in our fight during 2002-2004 and more than 11,800 low-income children in Washington, D.C., have received Opportunity Scholarships to attend the private school of their choice as of school year 2022-23.

On this day we celebrate the birth of Mr. Frederick Douglass, I am reminded that James McCune Smith, also a former slave, said that Douglass was not fashioning "mere words of eloquence," but rather, "work-able, do-able words" that might forge a "revolution."

Mr. Douglass's words and actions continue to inspire us to this day to reform situations we are in but also to be brave enough to create new opportunities for ourselves and others.

Casey Lartigue Jr. is co-editor of “Educational Freedom in Urban America: Brown v. Board of Education after half a century” and co-author with Songmi Han of her memoir “Greenlight to Freedom.” He was a member of the Board of Trustees of the Frederick Douglass Memorial and Historical Association from 2004 to 2015. He is now chairman of Freedom Speakers International in South Korea, a non-profit that has empowered 600 North Korean refugees with English, public speaking and career development.