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Modern Philosophies and School Voucher Programs

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### Modern Philosophies and School Voucher Programs

In February 2017, for the first time since the presidency of George H. W. Bush, the Vice President had to cast a tie-breaking vote in the Senate (Reilly, 2017). The issue that caused such division in the Senate was the confirmation of Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos. Voted as the least liked member of Trump's cabinet, Secretary DeVos continues to generate controversy (Reilly, 2017). From the time that President Trump announced his nomination of Betsy DeVos, DeVos's educational beliefs have created controversies. One of her controversial stances is that school choice should be increased through voucher programs. Voucher programs allow parents to send their students to private schools using government money. Often, vouchers are only offered to families from low incomes. DeVos claims that the test scores of the United States have continued to be average compared to other countries. To fix this, parents must have the ability to choose a school that serves their children most effectively. However, some parents cannot choose because of socioeconomic status and need a voucher to have that choice (Stahl, 2018). However, others point out that schools are not improving, especially in Michigan, where DeVos's ideas have begun to take root (Stahl, 2018). In short, DeVos argues that vouchers will increase students' performance in comparison with other countries; others say that vouchers are not working in Michigan. These are arguments about practical results. However, the underlying arguments for and against vouchers are not about the pros and cons but the purpose of education. If educators continue to argue about statistics and theories without examining the underlying philosophies, they will continue to argue past each other. Arguments for and against vouchers are rooted in the purpose of school defined by three different philosophies: neoliberalism, communitarianism, and liberalism.

### Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism views school as a supplier of goods and services to families. Neoliberalism is first an economic philosophy that advocates for deregulation in all areas of trade and a completely free market (“Neoliberalism,” 2006). While neoliberalism is an economic philosophy first, it has ramifications for how the public and governments view schools. Neoliberals see schools as another part of the economic market, a supplier of the commodity of education (Weil, 2002). Parents and students are the consumers of education, and all education should be privatized to allow for more competition. Allowing more competition should create schools that respond better to the needs of diverse consumers and produce more efficiently (Bosetti & Gereluk, 2016). Many arguments for vouchers come from a philosophy of neoliberalism. Two examples of neoliberal arguments for vouchers are the arguments of Milton Friedman and the argument that just taxation demands universal vouchers.

Milton Friedman, the father of modern voucher programs, explained his argument for vouchers in an interview with MSNBC in 2003. He explained that every family should be able to choose the school its children should attend. To make this possible the government needs to give out vouchers to families to allow them to choose any school they want. Vouchers would create a free market system that would spur on creativity, innovation, and competition in all schools. In the interview, Friedman repeatedly called parents “consumers” and compared schools to grocery stores and automobile manufacturers (“Milton Friedman,” 2003). By doing this, Friedman revealed that he believed in the neoliberal purpose of school, to offer the commodity of education. Just like grocery stores offer the commodity of food and improve through competition, schools offer education and should improve by subjection to market forces.

Another neoliberal argument is the argument of just taxation. The argument says that it is unjust for parents who send their children to private schools to pay taxes for public schools, essentially paying for school twice. The just response is to provide universal vouchers. These universal vouchers would be tax money that the government would give to every parent for education. The money could go to any school the family chose. This type of voucher would prevent parents from having to pay twice for an education they are only receiving once (Bast, 2002). In this argument, education is again viewed as a commodity that is bought by individuals with vouchers. Education is not a public concern nor the role of the government. Since education is about individual choices in neoliberalism, education should be entirely privatized (Bast, 2002).

### **Communitarianism**

Communitarianism fights against vouchers from a belief that the purpose of school is to maintain and pass on public values. Communitarianism is the belief that humans are not primarily individuals, but social creatures determined by the communities in which they live. Therefore, education should seek to maintain the welfare of society over the choices of individuals. This type of education focuses on passing on ethical values and responsibilities of citizenship (Bosetti & Gerluk, 2016). Arguments against vouchers from a communitarian philosophy use examples where vouchers undermine the common public school and hinder diverse cultures finding commonality in education. Two examples of communitarian arguments against vouchers are that vouchers historically increase segregation and that they give money to schools that promote anti-communitarian values.

A prevalent argument against vouchers is that they enable racial segregation in opposition to the common societal value of unity. Historically, one of the first voucher programs was used in Virginia to resist desegregation. White students were able to choose to go to the integrated

public schools or to receive a voucher for private schools that maintained segregation. Even today, based on parental choice, vouchers can increase divides between races and socioeconomic statuses (Schneider, 2016). Even though vouchers have been used to segregate races, modern proponents advocate vouchers as pathways for minority students to get out of failing inner city schools. However, some argue that market competition has historically created economic and racial stratification as demonstrated by the housing market (Gooden, Jabbar, & Torres, 2016). This stratification is unfavorable in a communitarian philosophy of education.

A second argument states that vouchers can provide money to schools that do not teach the values defined as good by the community. Since individuals can choose schools based purely on preference, they are free to choose schools that do not align with the values of the rest of the community. These values could include things such as creationism or denial of climate change (Stewart, n.d.). Also, these schools could be “ideologically driven in ways that run contrary to the best interests of a diverse, democratic society” (Tabachnick, 2017). Arguments that vouchers also promote racial segregation, socioeconomic stratification, and harmful values all come from a deeper philosophy of communitarianism. In this philosophy, the purpose of education is to promote the values of the community over the choices of individuals.

### **Liberalism**

Liberalism says that the purpose of education is to develop democratic values in a pluralistic society while still allowing individual choice. The two liberal values of democracy and individual choice can conflict. Some educators with a liberal philosophy of education advocate for vouchers while others oppose them. Liberal philosophy places emphasis on both the public and private spheres of life and meaning. Therefore, the purpose of education is to prepare students for life within an equitable democracy comprised of both personal decisions and

citizenship values (Bosetti & Gereluk, 2016). The importance of equitable education in liberalism is the crux of many arguments for and against vouchers. The People for the American Way (1999) point out that school choice vouchers decrease equity, listing different groups that experience loss of equity in education because of vouchers. Some of these groups include the following: students who want vouchers but are not given one, students who go to a public school where funds are stripped away for the sake of vouchers, students who perform worse in a private school, parents who cannot choose wisely because private schools are not accountable to the community, and the community who gives their tax monies to schools that are not accountable. Bosetti and Gereluk (2016) argue for vouchers and school choice based off of the theory that there are diverse ways to discover well-being in a pluralistic society. Equitable education frees all students to pursue this discovery in their own way. Not all students can thrive in the same educational system, and vouchers enable students to find schools that meet their diverse needs. While neoliberalism argues for school choice by the ultimate good of choice, liberalism argues for school choice by the ultimate good of autonomous well-being. However, the well-being that must first be considered is the well-being of the most disadvantaged in a democratic society. To ensure that the most disadvantaged students are given equitable education for life in a pluralistic democracy, choice programs must be regulated by governing authorities (Bosetti & Gereluk, 2016). In short, liberalism defines the purpose of education as maintaining the private autonomy of the individual without sacrificing the public values of democracy.

### **Conclusion**

Neoliberalism, communitarianism, and liberalism hold to different purposes for education and therefore, hold to different opinions on school choice vouchers. In neoliberalism, education is a commodity consumed by families. Therefore, it should be consumed in a free market where

all families have the power to choose their students' education. Vouchers are the first step towards this goal of privatization of education. In communitarianism, education passes on the values that maintain the common good of the whole community. Education should be for every person and should promote the values of public agreement regulated by the government.

Vouchers have no place because they can be used to cause division and because they can go to schools that do not promote public values. Liberal education should teach students to determine their well-being freely in a way that supports democracy. If vouchers prevent some students from having the utmost freedom to learn autonomous well-being, these vouchers should be refused. However, if vouchers allow students to discover greater well-being in education better suited to their needs, vouchers should be accepted.

Overall, the issue of whether voucher systems work or not is more complicated than just statistics and test scores. How educators and policymakers view vouchers goes beyond the statistics to their beliefs on the overall purpose of education. If educators, policymakers, and community members want to have productive conversations about the future of school choice in the United States, they need to move past the statistics to the philosophies motivating arguments. Very few people will hold to pure neoliberalism, communitarianism, or liberalism. Instead, they will often be able to agree on different parts of the philosophies. When people begin to find the values they can agree on, conversations about school choice can be more coherent and productive.



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