

VOUCHERS

In recent years, some education reformers have advocated the use of vouchers as a means of improving education. The idea of vouchers in education is not new, having been first proposed by the English philosopher John Stuart Mill, in 1838. Nor are vouchers unknown in other arenas: food stamps and credit cards are both vouchers of a kind.

Mill's ideas, though, did not find popular expression until Milton Friedman's 1962 book, *Freedom and Capitalism*. Among those who were influenced by that book was the government of Chile, which installed a nationwide voucher system, and Ronald Reagan, who, as President, proposed the use of vouchers in this country.

To date, voucher experiments have been small and usually in inner-city settings in communities such as like Milwaukee, Cleveland, Dayton, New York, Washington, DC, and San Antonio. Taxpayer dollars support the Milwaukee and Cleveland programs. Private philanthropists sustain the programs in the other cities.

The nation's one large, publicly-funded voucher program, a statewide system in Florida, is currently in limbo. A judge has ruled it unconstitutional. Moreover, the Florida program makes students eligible for vouchers only if their public schools fall below certain minimum standards for student achievement. So far, no Florida schools have fallen below those standards. In California, a referendum scheduled for the 2000 election would provide vouchers valued at \$4000 per child for every child in the state, including those already in private schools.

Proponents and critics alike of voucher proposals make a number of claims.

1. Vouchers will improve student achievement. By allowing students to opt out of failing schools, students can attend schools that serve them better.

To date, the evidence for this has been mixed at best. The outcomes in Milwaukee, for instance, have been hotly debated. One researcher found no difference between the performance of Milwaukee Public School children and those using vouchers. **FN** Others found differences favoring vouchers in both reading and mathematics **FN** while a third could replicate the advantage only in math. **FN** This last researcher also observed that the voucher children were in small classes, a condition known to improve achievement. **FN**

In another recent, widely reported study that purported to show students who used vouchers to enroll in private schools did better than a control group of public school students, the company that gathered and analyzed the data disavowed the researchers public statements about the conclusions. The [name of company] said the researchers' announcement of such results was premature and exaggerated the findings. There actually was no significant test score difference between students who attended private school on vouchers and those who stayed in the public schools, except in a very few limited cases. **FN**

Different researchers have obtained differing results because they have made different assumptions about the data. That, in turn, led to different analyses. For instance, one researcher who analyzed data from voucher programs in Milwaukee and New York City concluded that *if* the voucher students scored higher, it might well be because they attended smaller schools with smaller classes. FN

Other researches in other places have yielded similarly equivocal results. This should surprise no one because, in spite of advocate's statements that "vouchers work" or "the market works" the impact of local conditions affect vouchers outcomes. Voucher advocate, Terry Moe, has stated the case quite well:

Ideology aside, perhaps the most vexing problem [of voucher research] is that few researchers who carry out studies of school choice are sensitive to issues of institutional design or context. They proceed as though their case studies reveal something generic about choice or markets when, in fact--as the Milwaukee case graphically testifies--much of what they observe is due to the specific rules, restrictions and control mechanisms that shape how choice and markets happen to operate in a particular setting. As any economist would be quick to point out, the effects of choice and markets vary, sometimes enormously depending on the institutional context. The empirical literature on school choice does little to shed light on these contingencies and, indeed, by portraying choice and markets as generic reforms with generic effects, often breeds more confusion than understanding . FN (p. 20).

2. Vouchers will increase the diversity of schools and give parents a wider range of choices.

To date, no data really bear on this issue because voucher students have, with one exception (two schools in Cleveland), attended only existing schools. **NOT CORRECT. A NUMBER OF NEW PRIVATE SCHOOLS HAVE BEEN CREATED IN MILWAUKEE IN RESPONSE TO THE PROGRAM HERE. HOWEVER, SOME OF THOSE SCHOOLS HAVE CLEARLY BEEN FLY-BY-NIGHT OPERATIONS THAT COLLAPSED, IN SOME CASES STRANDING FAMILIES WHOSE CHILDREN WERE ENROLLED IN THEM.** Clearly, the voucher option increases the number of school available, but whether or not it increases diversity is another question.

One might draw from the more extensive literature about charter schools, for whom the same claim is made. There, studies have found that the charter schools do not serve as laboratories for innovation. Indeed, one evaluation of charters in Michigan found that nothing had been tried in a charter school that hadn't already been tried in public schools. Once again, international evidence of the results of the competitive market on schools also clearly shows rather than stimulating diversity in schools and curriculum, exactly the opposite seems to be the case. Most schools become even more alike and tend to employ methods and curricula that have not been proven to succeed. FN – CAN WE ELABORATE?

3. Vouchers will increase accountability. Unhappy parents will vote with their feet and their

pocketbooks, making the schools directly accountable.

There is to date no evidence that this will happen. As noted, the schools in voucher programs are long established schools (two earlier exceptions to this in Cleveland have been converted to charter schools). Furthermore, it is often extremely difficult for parents who do not have flexible jobs and must often depend on public transportation to move their children around a city. While a few children may be helped by vouchers, there may be even less financial support for inner city schools in the long run. Parents who “choose” to keep their children in under-funded schools because of the problems we just mentioned will be then be blamed, thereby once again working against school reform. **POINT NEEDS CLARIFICATION.**

Perhaps more importantly, accountability measures that are regularly applied to public schools are not applied to voucher-accepting schools. Florida, for example, awards public schools letter grades, A-F, based largely on test scores. The pupils in a school that receives an F for two consecutive years become eligible for vouchers. But the private schools that accept these students do not have to administer the tests that were used to grade the public schools in the first place. FN Similarly, Catholic schools in Milwaukee have refused to release test scores, scores that would be a part of the public record in public schools. FN Free market principles hold that for markets to work consumers must have access to high quality information about the product. This does not appear to be forthcoming from voucher schools.

4. Vouchers will make public schools more responsive to parents' wishes because, again, parents have the option to leave.

Again, there is no evidence that this is happening. A study of existing public and private schools found that differences in communities overwhelmed differences in governance. That is, public and private schools in suburban neighborhoods resembled each other. Public and private schools in poor urban neighborhoods resembled each other, but differed from the schools in the more affluent communities. FN

Public suburban schools were actually more responsive to parents. These parents, the authors noted, thought they had both a right and a responsibility to take an active role in their children's education. Private schools were more successful at telling parents that in matters of curriculum and instruction, all decisions rested with the school. FN

In poor areas, both public and private schools struggled to involve the parents. One could say that these schools were trying to hold the parents accountable. Private schools were more successful at this than public schools because they could make involvement a condition of admission. On the other hand, the involvement usually did not involve academic activities. In poor public schools, parental involvement was dominated by complaints about a poor grade or an "unfair" disciplinary action. FN

5. Vouchers enable poor people to obtain a good education for their children.

Because, as previously noted, achievement outcomes from voucher programs are in doubt, this

might better be stated as "vouchers might allow a few poor people to get a better education for their children."

In addition, the number of existing private schools in the nation could handle only about 4% of the existing public school children in the nation. Free-market theorists would likely contend that new schools would spring up to handle the demands, but this is questionable. For one thing, the existing for-profits such as Edison and Tesseract have yet to be profitable. FN Tesseract, staggering under \$50 million in debt in spite of \$8000 tuition, barely avoided total collapse heading into the 2000-2001 school year. FN Nobel Learning Communities is profitable--and charges \$6500.00 tuition. FN

Moreover, as those who wished to start charter schools have found, it is extremely difficult to obtain space or funding to build space for a new school. FN And while Catholic schools, which have been hemorrhaging pupils in recent years would no doubt welcome the vouchers, many other private schools have no inclination to expand. FN? **Huerta op-ed**

ARGUMENTS AGAINST VOUCHERS

1. Vouchers drain funds from public schools.

This clearly occurs. People have ***NOT*** made much over this to date because the voucher population is small and because increasing enrollments in many districts offset the losses.

THIS IS WORTH LOOKING AT MORE CLOSELY: IT STRIKES ME THAT PRIVATE VOUCHER PROGRAMS ALSO MIGHT DRAIN FUNDS BECAUSE THEY DECREASE A SCHOOL'S POPULATION BASE, THE USUAL WAY IN WHICH STATE AID IS ALLOCATED.

Some people have claimed that vouchers will actually increase funding for public schools because the voucher is less than the per-pupil-expenditure of the public school. FN This view mistakenly assumes that the public and private schools divide a fixed sum of money per child. This arrangement could happen, but, in fact, schools report their attendance on a "count day" and those who are not there don't count. ***CLARIFY***

2. Vouchers will "skim" or "cream" higher achieving students, thus leaving public schools with a higher proportion of more difficult to education children and fewer funds for that education.

In several instances, students using vouchers had higher test scores ***than their peers before*** they

entered the voucher programs. FN Parents of these children tended to be wealthier, better educated and more involved in their children's education both at school and at home. FN

3. Vouchers will have negative effects on teachers and administrators, as well as students.

The data also indicate worrisome effects on teachers and administrators. While some might claim that vouchers do not cause added hardship for schools, an extensive body of international research on placing schools in a competitive market can lead to exactly the opposite conclusion. FN Much more time is spent on maintaining the image of a "good" school, with much less time spent by teachers and administrators on curricular substance. Since it is comparative test scores that determine whether a school is "good" or "bad," children who do perform well on such reductive tests are seen as welcome. Those who do not are often discouraged or are marginalized. FN Once again, the vast majority of children harmed by such reforms are exactly those whom voucher supporters state they are supporting. These conditions exist not because teachers do not already work extremely hard or are uncaring. Rather, markets in schools seem to worsen, rather than improve, work load, pressure, and access to resources. FN

4. There will be a loss of accountability.

Although voucher proponents hold out the goal of more accountability, it is possible that, in fact, there will be less. As noted, in some instances, the schools that receive voucher students do not have to administer the state tests. In the area of finance, private schools can avoid the kind of audits that are routine and public in public schools. ***[We could get specific about financial scandals in Milwaukee voucher schools.]***

This again is an area that has received little attention because the number of voucher students is small. It certainly seems reasonable though, that if the voucher movement attains any size, the public will demand an accounting of how the public dollars are spent and what they accomplished. With "accountability" on the lips of so many people in regards to public schools, it is hard to see how this could be avoided for private schools.

Indeed, John Jennings has observed that in Europe, where government subsidy of private schools is common, the private schools are often constrained by the same rules and laws that govern public schools: they must have teachers with the same certification, they must offer these teachers the same salary, they must follow the same curriculum and, in some instances, use the same pedagogy. FN

4. Vouchers will cost private schools their autonomy.

This is perhaps the converse of #3 above. A number of educators in Christian schools, for instance, oppose vouchers because they believe that vouchers will inevitably lead to control by the government. FN Home schoolers in California are opposing the November, 2000 referendum on vouchers for the same reason. FN. **[ALSO, BISHOP IN LA. OPPOSES VOUCHERS – I**

HAVE A NAT CATH REPORTER CITATION FOR THIS]

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5. Vouchers will destroy community. When a family commits to a public school, it commits to good education for the entire community. A family using a voucher is acting only in its self-interest. **[WE EITHER NEED TO OFFER EVIDENCE AND ELABORATE OR DROP THIS POINT. I SUGGEST COMBINING IT WITH POINT #6 BELOW, BUT TAKING THEM OUT OF THE ENUMERATION AND INSTEAD RECASTING THEM IN A CONCLUDING ARGUMENT.]**

6. Vouchers will remove discussion of social issues from the public domain. Jeffrey Henig captured this problem well:

Rather than simply focusing on the strengths and weaknesses of private vs. public institutions as service-delivery mechanisms, we need to focus on the differences between private and public institutions and processes as vehicles for deliberation, debate and decision making. The real danger in market-based proposals for choice is not that they might allow some students to attend privately-run schools at public expense, but that they will erode the public forums in which decisions with societal consequences can democratically be resolved.

The market orientation considers education as a product of public and private decisions; as such the issues involved are generic ones applicable to other domestic policies. But education also has a special status as a producer of values, perspectives, knowledge, and skills that will be applied in the ongoing enterprise of collective deliberation and adjustment.

While the risk of abuse [from inappropriate socialization] must be acknowledged, public schools have another characteristic that makes this risk potentially manageable. Compared to other forces of socialization--the family, religion, the mass media--the schools are more open to public scrutiny and democratic intervention (pp. 200-203).

The public schools are, in Benjamin Barber's phrase, "workshops of our democracy" (1995, p.34). This space need to be strengthened and protected, not turned over to a market.