

Kimberley Thoresen

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### Vouchers for Education: Public and Private Choices

Frederick Douglas said in his Blessings of Liberty and Education speech that "education... means emancipation. It means light and liberty. It means the uplifting of the soul of man into the glorious light of truth, the light by which men can only be made free." The issue of providing equal educational opportunities to the nation's youth continues to pervade the debate of whether parents and students should be able to choose their school. In the 1950s, economist Milton Friedman argued that "higher levels of satisfaction with schools will flow from maximizing the freedom of parents to choose schools" and his idea continues to be drastically debated today (Schneider, Buckley, Kucsova, 2003). Friedman believed that by increasing competition for students schools would be forced by the market to improve. Yet the lack of adequate funding, uncertified teachers, and large classes lead some public schools to fail to provide for the success of many children. As a way to give students a way out of failing schools, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 attempted to federally legislate the opportunity for choice schooling. However, numerous problems erupted regarding qualifications for the program and funding for the choices.

Today the question remains unanswered of whether voucher programs truly solve the problems plaguing public education, and varying viewpoints continue to compete in the political and legal realm regarding the topic. In numerous school systems that have implemented public and private funded voucher programs there are mixed feelings about the success rates. Some studies have gauged the satisfaction level of parents. One particular study focused on the attitudes toward schools located in Washington, D.C. Research found that generally the parents

with students in choice charter schools were more satisfied with the school initially, but the levels of positive ratings tended to decrease over the course of the school year (Schneider et al., 2003). Essentially parents were pleased with the novel experience for their children, but their satisfaction did not endure with time.

Despite the fact that a recent survey found 95% of adults in the United States think they should be given more choice regarding the education of their children, there are few studies that provide definitive answers on choice schooling success rates (Metcalf & Tait, 1999). Both the Milwaukee and Cleveland evaluation programs found positive effects with choice schools for third grade students, but the data did not generalize across all of the age levels (Metcalf & Tait, 1999). There is very limited evidence to date regarding academic performance of voucher students, yet “when prior achievement and relevant demographic variables are controlled, the achievement of voucher students is not consistently different from that of public school students” (Metcalf & Tait, 1999). Assessments of voucher programs in New York have found varying evidence for the increase in test scores of minority students that were given the choice to go to private schools rather than remain in the public system (Peterson, 2003). Peterson and his colleagues found increases in African American students’ scores after three years in the choice schools. However, it is hard to know exactly which factors contributed to the higher test scores. It could have been the smaller classes, smaller schools, or better learning environment. Also, these vouchers were not seen to improve test scores of other ethnicities (Peterson, 2003). Although not enough data may be available to show that students in choice private schools are actually performing better than students in public schools, one study remains compelling. In July of 2006 the Education Department released a study that found public school students performed about as well and better than private school students on some basic skills tests (Brauhn, Jenkins, & Griggs, 2006). If the Education Department found that public students were doing as well or

better than some private school students, then voucher programs in favor of placing public school students into the private schools would be useless.

Beyond the achievement level debate are numerous other concerns involving participation, funding, and programming. Voucher programs target “Participating families [who] are of lower income than typical public school families, they come primarily from ethnic minority groups, and they are usually headed by a single mother” (Metcalf & Tait, 1999). The voucher programs in effect currently involve a small number of families that applied for available funding. “In Milwaukee, fewer than 7% of eligible families apply for the voucher program, and in Cleveland the percentage is slightly smaller” (Metcalf & Tait, 1999). However, whether the application rates reflect fundamental satisfaction with public schools, indifference, or an information gap cannot be determined until additional data is gathered. The DC voucher program of 2004 did not receive enough applicants for the funding that was made available for 1,600 district children (Blum, 2004). Since the slots were not filled, a lottery was used to provide funding for some of the lower income students already attending private schools (Blum, 2004). This seems a bit counterintuitive to the public education system. Rather than furthering the support of students that remained in the public schools, the city gave funds to students already in the private schools.

Although the voucher program attempts to solve the problem of inequity in public schools, many people do not believe that this choice is the right choice. Barbara Miner focuses attention on the ideas that voucher programs divert funds away from public schools and into private schools that are not accountable to standardized tests or inclusive learning environments (Miner, 2003). Students who receive vouchers are not guaranteed admission into their first choice private school. Many of the schools have limited spots and use a lottery system to fill their vacancies if applications exceed their capabilities. Also, vouchers are only available for a

fraction of the students in failing schools which leaves the majority of the students behind. Additionally many of the private schools do not provide special education services for their students, so essentially any students requiring special education can not attend these voucher accepting schools (Miner, 2003). It remains a fact that “75% of private schools do not offer special education programs” (NEA, 2002).

Many people argue that middle and upper class families choose their residences and can move into neighborhoods with good school systems, so the current voucher programs target lower income children who do not have as many opportunities. Under the NCLB plan, “the lowest achieving children from low-income families” were given priority for transfers (NEA, 2002). However, the ideology behind the institution of vouchers is that a system should exist in which vouchers will be used for everyone. The National Education Association displays extreme dissatisfaction with the idea of using vouchers with public education. “According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, only 71% of private school teachers are licensed, compared to 97.4% of public school teachers” (NEA, 2002).

Rather than focusing tax payers’ money for education on vouchers, educational reforms should work to ensure smaller class sizes, increased teacher training, and equity distribution of funding throughout the districts. Ensuring educational accountability is also an essential goal for improving education on the whole. One has to wonder whether sending students to a different school through vouchers and choice really leaves a school accountable for their performance failures. If schools are not held to standards of achievement, then there is no way to gauge if students are truly receiving equal educational opportunities.

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