

National Coalition for Public Education

The Truth About Vouchers

The guarantee of a free public education is at the heart of our nation's promise of democracy and equality for all. Only when all children have a chance to learn can everyone enjoy equal opportunities to work, achieve, and participate fully in our society. Diverting public funds to private and parochial schools through vouchers will hinder our efforts to provide a quality education for all students. We must provide an excellent education for every child, not just vouchers for a few. The way to ensure that every child has an equal and valuable education is to invest in our public school system.

Vouchers will not ensure parental “choice.” The real beneficiaries of “choice” programs are private and religious schools. Private school administrators select which students they will or will not admit. Private schools can discriminate and refuse to accept students because they have a learning or physical disability, lack English proficiency, or have other special needs. A parent's “choice” extends only to determining to which school they will submit an enrollment application. In many areas of the country “school choice” becomes meaningless either because there are no private schools or because the only private schools are religious, and might not be the appropriate denomination for the student.

Vouchers do not improve public schools through competition. Public and private schools function on different playing fields so pure competition between the two is impossible. For example, private schools choose who will or will not attend their schools whereas public schools are required to accept *all* children. Private schools can deny entrance to students with high-cost special needs such as learning and physical disabilities or limited English proficiency. Moreover, fair competition is not achieved when the funds to pay for private school vouchers are being drained from the public schools.

Voucher programs lack accountability. Private schools that accept vouchers are not accountable to the public taxpayers who pay for the vouchers. Public schools are required to meet standards in order to be accountable to the public. Private schools are not required to meet basic accountability standards, such as open meetings and records laws, or to release test scores, dropout rates, student selection criteria, and other basic information.

Vouchers do not protect the civil rights of America's students. Politicians and organizations that favor school vouchers continue to position vouchers as a “civil rights” issue. This rhetoric is particularly offensive given the current voucher proposals that would not require the private institutions that would receive publicly funded vouchers to adhere to the same civil rights enforcement and compliance mechanisms that apply to public institutions. In other words, private schools would receive public funds without a corresponding obligation to comply with all federal anti-discrimination laws—laws designed to protect our children. These laws were crafted specifically to address issues of equal access and discrimination in the first place. How does a system that would allow discrimination help our nation's children?

Vouchers are prohibitively expensive and will divert needed funds from public schools. Professors Henry Levin and Cyrus Driver estimated a decade ago that a universal national voucher program would cost \$73 billion per year, based on a voucher worth at most the average per pupil expenditure in U.S. public schools in 1990-91.¹ Corrected for inflation and the increase in student population, the figure would no doubt be higher today. Today,

¹ Levin, Henry M., and Cyrus E. Driver. 1997. "Costs of an Educational Voucher System." *Educational Economics* 5:265 - 283.

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public schools are facing teacher shortages, record-high student enrollments, crowded school facilities and increased demands for education technology. Instead of siphoning money to private and religious schools, we must have a strong commitment to safer schools, smaller classrooms, higher standards, technology, and the means to help schools meet rigorous accountability requirements.

School voucher schemes would force federal taxpayers to support religious beliefs and practices with which they may strongly disagree.

At the heart of these proposals is the goal of merging government and religion.

Voucher schemes would abandon our local public schools. Groups that have traditionally advocated for improvement of public schools oppose vouchers for parochial and private schools, as do a majority of Americans as demonstrated both by polling and ballot initiatives. Parents and the public want our leaders to focus on improving our public schools, not abandoning them for private schools.

Vouchers will not have a significant impact on student achievement levels. Nothing in the research suggests that the mere act of choosing a private school improves a student's academic achievement. Studies on student achievement in the Milwaukee and Cleveland voucher programs are contradictory and there is no conclusive evidence that voucher students showed any significantly improved academic performance.

Public voucher programs have significant implementation problems. Although promoted as the means to "save" children from "failing schools, the District of Columbia voucher program actually enrolled fewer than 75 students who had previously attended public schools in need of improvement. Indeed, more than 200 voucher recipients were already enrolled in private schools.²

² FLAWS AND FAILINGS: *A Preliminary Look at the Problems Already Encountered in the Implementation of the District of Columbia's New Federally Mandated School Voucher Program*, People For the American Way Foundation (February 2005).

Cleveland's voucher program was also touted as aid for low-income students, yet an audit found that some voucher recipients enjoy annual family incomes in excess of \$50,000. The audit also revealed inadequate staffing, lax oversight, and \$1.4 million in payments to taxi companies providing transportation for voucher students.³

Even supporters of Florida's voucher programs concede that oversight is inadequate. Florida's Chief Financial Officer asserted that the absence of accountability jeopardizes the "success of these vital school choice programs."⁴

A legal complaint was filed alleging that more than one-third of the private voucher schools in Milwaukee were not in compliance with a requirement that students must be selected on a random basis, and that voucher schools must comply with nondiscrimination laws.

Voucher programs will not help "low-income" students. Proponents argue that vouchers will help low-income students "escape" struggling public schools. Yet data indicate that students who use vouchers are less likely to be low income than their counterparts in the public schools, and less likely to come from low-performing schools.⁵ Anecdotal information also suggests that the additional costs of attending private school limit the utility of vouchers for low-income students. Furthermore, a model voucher bill promoted by the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) would authorize a universal voucher program, revealing the intent to offer no special assistance to low-income students.

³ Paul Souhrada, *The Columbus Dispatch*, January 6, 1999.

⁴ Letter from Gallagher, CFO, State of Florida to Handy, Chairman, Florida Board of Education. (December 11, 2003).

⁵ Cleveland School Vouchers: Where The Students Come From, Policy Matters Ohio (2001); Evaluation of the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program: Summary Report 1998-2002, Kim Metcalf (2003); Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, School Finance and Management Services: Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP) Facts and Figures for 1998 -2002. Data available at DPI web site at <http://www.dpi.state.wi.us>.