

The Great Voucher Fraud

by Laurence M. Vance, Posted March 25, 2005

The mantra of “school choice” is repeated endlessly by proponents of educational vouchers, and is getting louder. But does an income-transfer program cease to be an income-transfer program just because it is recommended by conservatives, libertarians, a Republican president, and free-market economists?

Advocates of educational reform are agreed on one thing: the doleful condition of the public school system. But instead of proposing a free-market solution, the panacea offered for improving the education of American youth is usually government vouchers. The federal government would provide each child a voucher worth enough money to fund his education. Parents would have the “choice” of the school on which to spend the voucher. The school would then redeem the voucher for payment from the federal government. If this was describing anything but vouchers for education, it would be denounced as an income-transfer program as well as a subsidy to private industry, courtesy of the U.S. taxpayer.

But rather than being viewed as another income-transfer and corporate-welfare program, vouchers have garnered the support of many conservatives and libertarians who would otherwise be outraged if taxpayer money flowed anywhere but into education. Because of the opposition to vouchers by the National Education Association, the American Federation of Teachers, and local teachers’ unions, many ardent defenders of the free market have latched on to the voucher movement. Many conservatives who only recently talked about abolishing the federal department of education now support increased government funding of education through vouchers. Some libertarians claim that vouchers will improve education by fostering competition. The Milton & Rose Friedman Foundation is pushing vouchers under the rubric of “educational choice.”

The voucher solution is understandable coming from conservatives, since they generally have no problem with using the state to further their political and social agendas. However, for libertarians to embrace a government program such as vouchers is indeed troubling.

Yet vouchers themselves are not a bad idea. There are many private voucher programs in existence. Even in the ideal case of a complete separation of school and state, vouchers would be a viable alternative for the funding of education, and perhaps very much so. The problem with vouchers is their funding.

The main objection to government vouchers is that they are paid for by the taxpayers — the same taxpayers who already fund the public school system. So not only are vouchers an income-transfer program, they amount to a double tax: the taxpayer foots the bill for both public and private schools. Vouchers are “fresh money.” Tax money spent on educational vouchers does not come out of tax money spent for traditional schooling. No

current voucher proposal even hints at a reduction in funding for public schools to pay for vouchers. To argue that parents who receive vouchers to fund their children's education would merely be getting back some of their own tax dollars is to ignore the fact that most of the parents eligible for vouchers will pay little or no taxes to begin with.

But even aside from the funding issue, there are still a number of problems with government educational vouchers.

First of all, the state does not give without taking something in return: it always controls what it subsidizes. After accepting public money, private schools will no longer be responsible to parents but to government. Therefore, vouchers will ultimately destroy private schools and the identity of sectarian schools.

Second, vouchers will make private schools inefficient. Without vouchers, private schools must compete for business in the free market. If every private school is on the government dole, the incentive to keep costs down will be greatly diminished. The universal availability of vouchers will distort the marketplace by establishing a floor below which tuition would not sink.

Third, vouchers will put some private schools out of business. This will happen in two ways. Schools that refuse to accept vouchers will most likely find fewer paying customers. Schools forced to accept vouchers (can a restaurant refuse to serve anyone?) might well choose to close their doors rather than fall under government control.

Fourth, the correct solution to a problem is never increased government intervention. Government is the problem, not the solution. Increasing government intervention and forcing someone to pay for the education of someone else's children are about as far afield from libertarianism as one can get.

Fifth, to imply that vouchers are what enable parents to have "school choice" is to perpetuate the myth that parents don't already have a choice about their own children's education. All parents have "school choice" right now — just as they have food choice, clothes choice, and car choice. What voucher supporters really mean by "school choice" is that parents don't have a choice of where to spend other people's money for the education of their children.

Sixth, voucher proponents don't advocate food stamps or government-subsidized housing and medical-care programs. So why do they compromise on the issue of education? What is so magical about education? Vouchers are nothing but food stamps for education, and even worse, since they would generally pay the entire cost of a child's education.

Seventh, in spite of the language of the free market that is often used by libertarians when they make the case for vouchers, there is nothing about using the coercive power of the state to raise and dispense education funds that is akin to supply and demand, the price system, consumer sovereignty, or competition. Real competition in education can be achieved only when there is a complete separation of school and state.

And finally, vouchers would foster increased dependency on the government. Parents would look to the state as the provider of educational funds for their children just as many parents now receive subsidies from the state for their food, medical care, and housing. There is, however, one redeeming thing about vouchers: they are an admission by government that its public schools are a failure.

A threat to independence

But even without these problems, vouchers are a great fraud to begin with. Under a state-funded voucher system, there are many groups that will still have no “school choice” because they will never receive a voucher in the first place.

Those who would send their children to a nontraditional private school would quickly find out that they were not eligible to receive vouchers. A school that admitted only a certain class, sex, or race would not be approved to receive vouchers. For a school to be acceptable, it would have to meet academic, curriculum, and textbook standards set up by the state. And not only the school, the teachers would also have to be recognized by the state. Those not certified as having the proper degrees from state-recognized colleges would be denied employment if the school wanted to be on the government-approved list of schools. And naturally, once a voucher program was established, there would be a greater chance that state control would grow tighter with each passing school year.

Those who homeschool their children will certainly not be eligible for vouchers. Most parents who homeschool do not have a degree from a state-recognized college or university, are not certified teachers, and do not have the money for all the recommended textbooks to establish an elaborate curriculum. So in addition to paying taxes for the support of public schools, parents who homeschool would have to purchase books, videos, software, and supplies without a voucher to pay for them.

Those who would enroll their children in a religious school will find out that vouchers will be off-limits to them as well, since most religious schools, by their very nature, are highly discriminatory. Many religious schools hire only teachers and admit only students who are adherents to their own particular faith. Any religious school that refused to compromise would be denied vouchers. The temptation would be great to give in to government demands — meager at first, like all government regulations, but then highly intrusive.

The most overlooked group that will have no “school choice” under a voucher system is the taxpayers who would pay for the privilege of “school choice” that others would have. Educational vouchers given to parents for each school-age child to spend at the school of their choice comes from only one source: the taxpayers. Couples with no children who spend thousands of dollars to educate the children of others will now have to cough up even more money. Local communities are not taxed to feed and clothe all of the children living in them, but they are taxed to educate them. If it would be unthinkable to directly

tax the citizens of a community to feed and clothe all of the children in the community, then why is it acceptable to tax the citizens at large to educate the children of some?

Ultimately, the real issue is not vouchers but the role of the state in education. The theory behind the government education monopoly is that government, rather than father, knows best. But the paeon of “school choice” should be seen just for what it is: one government program to fix another failed government program. In spite of much conservative and libertarian support that vouchers have, they are merely another transfer payment from the “rich” to the poor — an income redistribution scheme just like food stamps, Medicaid, AFDC, and yes, the funding of public education. So when it comes to the education of your children — just say no to vouchers.

Laurence M. Vance teaches at Pensacola Bible Institute in Pensacola, Florida. Send him email at vancepub@juno.com.

This article originally appeared in the December 2004 issue of Freedom Daily, published by The Future of Freedom Foundation (www.fff.org). Used with permission.