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Vouching For Our Children

"The decision to leave the average family powerless regarding education, while permitting its choice of material goods, seems eccentric."

--John E. Coons and Stephen D. Sugarman in Education by Choice, 1978

Here in the United States we operate within one of the most capitalistic market systems in the world where freedom of choice is one of the most tightly held rights. However, this freedom of choice is severely limited when it comes to education. This freedom can be expanded, and one proposed way has been school vouchers. The use of these vouchers has many benefits, and may one day revolutionize primary and secondary education and become a completely private industry.

Some may ask why anything other than the current public education system is needed. One reason is that of 16 countries surveyed by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the United States was ranked last by the international standard of reading progress, despite having the highest school costs in the group, according to Herbert J. Walberg of the University of Chicago (1-2). The most alarming aspect of this figure is that "reading is arguably the best single indicator of language skills and predictor of achievement in school subjects" (Walberg 3). Walberg goes on to

demonstrate four major causes of inefficiency within the public school system.

The first of these causes is a lack of standards and accountability. Walberg says, "what is taught in classrooms, in turn, is highly variable even within the same schools" (4). With this lack of standards, how are school districts and the states to assess progress? The answer is that they really cannot. Additionally, there is no one to hold accountable within the schools. There are the school boards, but their members often serve limited terms and typically focus more on other issues besides academic results, such as personnel and ideological issues (Walberg 4-5).

A second cause is centralization. With a larger portion of school budgets coming from state and federal sources, districts are facing a greater amount of bureaucracy. There were 115,000 school districts about fifty years ago, today there are 15,000. "In such huge districts, school board members can hardly name schools let alone hold them accountable." (Walberg 6) If the case is such, how can this be truly beneficial to the individual students?

A third cause of inefficiency in public schools is federally induced programs. With the help of the federal government, special classes and services for children with special needs (i.e. poor, migrant, bilingual, racially segregated and psychology impeded) were created under an annual budget of \$175 billion. Unfortunately, "these programs had little foundation in research, and subsequent studies showed they were ineffective and, in some cases, harmful" (Walberg 8). These programs cause educators to "serve many masters in central

offices, State Houses, and Washington and to neglect their central purpose—the learning of all children” (Walberg 9).

The fourth cause of public school inefficiency is non-market related. Currently, only those who are rich or are willing to sacrifice income are able to place their children in the best schools, either suburban or private. However, those who need the better schools are the ones who can least afford them, such as the poor and those who live in cities (Walberg 9). To increase the effectiveness and efficiency of public schools, competition is required according to Walberg (9). He also states, “countries that insulate government and private domestic providers from competition deny citizens superior services and goods at lower costs that markets provide” (Walberg 10).

With these conditions in our public schools and their continued decline over the past decade, it can be seen why a new system may be needed. The question that arises is what type of system would make the best replacement. As mentioned, the voucher system is one option that has been experimented with, and that system is what will be concentrated on here. However, an explanation of the system is needed before the impact of it can be discussed.

The voucher in its most basic form is an amount of money given to a family for the purpose of education, very similar to the use of food stamps. Like food stamps, vouchers are certificates that permit a person to purchase a set amount of a good or service in place of money. This method of money dispersion is used in order to keep the money from being used for other purposes. One thing that is often

debated concerning the implementation of vouchers is the value of the voucher. There are four distinct models for this implementation.

The first model is called the Uniform Grant Model. This model has all vouchers being of equal value. This way the money is dispersed by the average cost per student, and not by what was paid by individual taxpayers (Coons and Sugarman 194).

The second model is the Needs Adjustment Model. This model gives poorer students vouchers of greater value. This is done to keep schools from discriminating against the impoverished, and actually may cause them to be more attractive candidates for schools (Coons and Sugarman 194-6).

The third model suggested is the Cost Adjustment Model. This type of voucher adjusts from between school systems. This is in order to account for factors that are beyond the control of the school. Some of these factors are the cost to build the school in the area, cost of living in the area (which affects teacher salaries), specialization for high school teachers, and the attracting of teachers (especially to unattractive locations such as some of the run down parts of cities) (Coons and Sugarman 196-7).

The fourth and final model for vouchers is the Quality Choice Model. This model allows participating schools to charge whatever tuition they wish within a stipulated range. Each family then selects, from the various priced schools, which is best for their child and then pays a portion of the tuition. The state then subsidizes the rest of the tuition based on family income. An example of this model would be a poor family being expected to pay \$200 for a

\$1,600 school, with the state paying the remaining \$1,400. However, a middle-class family might pay \$800 to send a child to a \$1,200 school. These subsidies are set so that the poor can afford any school as easily as the rich.

With a background set in the current problems in the public schools and the implementations available for vouchers, it is time to discuss whether or not the use of vouchers is the right step to take towards improving education in this country. Over the last few years there have been several hearings before subcommittees of the Committee of Education and the Workforce of the House of Representatives. In these hearings, there have been testimonies from public school officials, private school officials, and several parents with children involved with the voucher program experimentation. Hearings took place in several locations including Washington D.C. and Cleveland, OH. These hearings are key to any educational reform that may occur, and therefore must be taken into consideration here as well.

Arlene Ackerman, Deputy Superintendent and Chief Academic Officer for the District of Columbia Public Schools, came before the committee to show the changes that are being made in the D.C. public schools. The district had a terrible track record before her arrival, as she demonstrates when she says:

Even more disturbing was the fact that by 10<sup>th</sup> grade, 53 percent of our students were reading "below basic", compared to just 26 percent nationally. In math, the statistics were even worse. Fully 89 percent of our 10<sup>th</sup> graders scored "below basic" in math, compared to a national average of 61 percent (which, incidentally, is disturbing in itself). (United States 105-80 114)

Clearly this district is in need of some improvements. Ackerman outlines the plan of the district to help create some of these improvements. These changes include raising the performance standards, regular standardized testing, school-by-school report cards (allowing the community to see data on student achievement, etc.), summer schooling programs, improvements in facilities and reduction in the central office of the school. (United States 105-80 115)

These changes are definitely a step in the right direction, but there is still much to be done. Only one of the four causes of inefficiency that Walberg presented is fixed: the lack of standards and accountability. No changes are made about the federal-element or the non-market factors, and very little is done for the centralization issue. Even though the central office for the district is downsized, there are still several other local, state and federal agencies to which schools and the district as a whole must report. However, this is still a big step in the right direction for the district.

One other interesting point that Ackerman brought up was the ending of "social promotion", or the practice of keeping a student with a class the same age though they may not have the necessary skills to pass a grade (United States 105-80 114). This concept may be that of the future school. It has never made sense that, especially in elementary school, students are advanced to levels of education that they are not prepared for simply to keep them from feeling socially excluded. In fact, this process often leaves students feeling inferior to their classmates because they cannot think at the same level. Additionally, when a student is advanced in

this manner, the student is often denied the remedial work necessary for the student to "catch up" with their peers. The elimination of social promotion would also define standards more strictly, and possibly eliminate the class, or grade, as it is known today. Students could achieve these standards at their own pace, either faster or slower than the average as needed. It is this concept that may be the future of the educational style. First, though, we must continue to find an encompassing system, either public or private, to place that style in.

A second testimony from Lawrence Callahan, Superintendent of Catholic Schools in the Archdiocese of Washington D.C. was presented to the committee in order to see the effects of the private system in the same area. Callahan points out several interesting statistics about the school district. One of the most unexpected is that "in the District alone, 79 percent of our students were minority and 54 percent were non-Catholic" (United States 105-80 47). These figures help to disperse some of the myths about private schools, such as having to be of a certain religion to be able to attend a school. Most private schools, such as this Catholic school district, are welcome to anyone who wants to receive the best education possible.

Callahan also points out several of the principles that the district tries to uphold. First, the schools believe that "all children can succeed and the teachers work with them so they can" do just that (United States 105-80 47). Also, standards are set high so the schools can produce the best students possible. Finally, because of the private nature of the school, a disciplined environment is

upheld, even though corporal punishment is forbidden. This last point is important in the sense that public schools often lack the power to enforce punishment upon students because they cannot deny a student an education, and additionally because of the prevalence of lawsuits in society today.

These principles do, however, produce results. Of the students that graduated from the district in 1996, a remarkable 98 percent of graduates were headed to college. Pointed out, in particular, is Archbishop Carroll High School, which has 700 students, almost all of which belong to minorities and where 60 percent are non-Catholic. Nonetheless they maintained the same graduation rates as the rest of the district. (United States 105-80 48)

Financially, the district awards approximately \$1.8 million in tuition assistance in order to make education possible for those who have limited means. That number is even more staggering when it is noted that the average tuition cost is less than \$2500. Also, the district has taken measures to make the schools more inclusive of those with learning disabilities.

When examined, it can be seen that this private school system comes much closer to fixing the causes of inefficiency presented by Walberg. This system already has specific standards for its students, and is held accountable by economic nature. Simply put, if the school does a sub-par job in educating students then the student will likely be pulled out of that school and placed into a better school. This causes the schools to be accountable for themselves in order to attract business.

This private system is also less centralized, though not completely decentralized. The schools still have to report to the heads of the district, but there is no state or federal level to report to. Each district is its own entity that allows for the head of the district to keep track of information about the district more closely. Additionally, the federally induced element of inefficiency is not a factor in the private district because those programs are left up to the individual districts to experiment with.

The non-market causes of inefficiency are also eliminated in the private system. Schools and districts need to provide the best education and service possible due to the element of competition. The school and district is held accountable financially, and this finally creates an efficient school system. Though the private system does not completely eliminate inefficiency from the education, it comes much closer to doing so than does the public school system when the testimony of each district head is taken into account. However, it remains to be seen if this view is maintained for those who have (or have had) children in each system.

Virginia Walden is a single mother who raised three children on her own. In her testimony in the hearing in Washington D.C. she tells the story of one son and his experience in both schools.

One of my sons, displayed at a very early age, a real joy in learning, but was having a real difficult time in school, many times not wanting to attend at all. .... not only was he bored and frustrated in overcrowded classes with overworked teachers, but was often teased by other students for WANTING to learn. He was unhappy at this school and, of course, looked to me to provide a solution and I COULD NOT HELP HIM! (United States 105-80 64)

Mrs. Walden then goes on to describe how a neighbor helped raise money to send her son to a private school. Since then "the changes in him have been extraordinary. He is for the first time in his educational experience enjoying school and succeeding academically and socially" (United States 105-80 65).

One issue that Mrs. Walden addresses briefly in her statement is the level of parental control when she states "WE know our kids and we KNOW what will work best for them" (United States 105-80 65). She points out that it makes sense that parents should be able to choose the style of education for their children. Parents know their children best. The state will never be able to know a child better than a parent does.

A second case comes from Sharen E. Johnson of Cleveland, OH. She comes before another subcommittee of the Committee on Education and the Workforce during the hearing in Cleveland. At this time Cleveland had started offering what was called the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program that allowed students to attend private schools instead of the public schools. Johnson voices her approval of the program because she feels that her children can get a better education in the private school than would have been possible in the public schools of Cleveland.

Johnson points out that the problem she has with the Cleveland public schools is strongly oriented towards safety and discipline. "Young children have brought weapons to school. Teachers are disregarded as authorities and chaos breaks out in classrooms" (United States 105-57 184). She also points out that in the private schools

she can send her children to school without fear, which is very important to most every parent.

After looking at the testimony of several parents, it seems that they are in agreement with the observations of both Ackerman and Callahan. Currently, the education offered by the private schools in the country is better than that which is offered by public schools.

Another point to examine deals with the other alternatives currently offered. There is still the current system where only those who have money are paying for private schools and everyone else must continue in educationally lacking public schools. Another option is home schooling, which is currently offered. The problem with this solution is that there usually is not a parent in the family who has the necessary time every day to school the child. Beyond these options, we are left with few and far between.

Does this mean that the government should pull out of the education field? Possibly so, and the voucher system is a step towards that. Under the voucher system, if private schools are truly superior to public schools, then more private schools will be created to account for demand. Free competition would then keep private schools efficient and constantly striving to get better. Vouchers have been experimented with many times across the nation, and new programs start up every year. It seems that the question may not be IF the voucher system is the next step for education, but WHEN will that step occur.

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