

**Leaving School Vouchers Behind:
A Plan to Promote Educational Equity**

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The Bush administration responded to the Katrina educational crisis by implementing a voucher program that would provide each New Orleans student with \$7,500 to attend a public or private school anywhere in the United States (Weaver). Legislators rushed to support Bush's voucher plan. After all, who would question a program that would help hurricane Katrina victims? The problem, however, is that no one is questioning the fact that a natural disaster is being used to further a strategy that is having a disastrous effect on America's public educational system.

Public Education is Left Behind

Voucher proponents argue that vouchers will close the achievement gap by providing minorities and students from low-economic backgrounds with an equal opportunity to attend high-quality private schools. The problem is that vouchers have proved ineffective in closing the achievement gap, because there's no clear evidence that they work, they're not equally accessible to all minorities and students from low socio-economic backgrounds, and they weaken public schools by drawing away resources. A more effective way to close the achievement gap is to eliminate vouchers in favor of a comprehensive plan that promotes educational equity.

Left behind: Important principles

In addition to the issue of effectiveness, vouchers are also problematic in that they violate the Separation of Church and State by enabling students to use public money to attend private religious schools. For example, of the 9,200 students participating in Milwaukee's voucher program in 2000, 6,000 were enrolled in religious schools (Kolbert,

p. 5-8). A variety of lawsuits have been filed against school voucher programs on this account with varying degrees of success. In 2000, the Wisconsin Supreme Court ruled that the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program was constitutional. A US District Court in 1999 ruled that the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Grant Program violated the Establishment Clause. In 2000, the 6th District US Court of Appeals affirmed this ruling. A State Circuit judge in 2000 also ruled that Florida's Opportunity Scholarship violates the state constitution. This decision was overturned by the Florida District Court of Appeals 1st circuit (Kolbert, p. 5-8). While voucher programs such as Milwaukee state that private schools can't require students to participate in religious activities, students need parental approval to opt out.

Another disadvantage of school vouchers programs is that students miss out on one of the primary assets of public schools the opportunity to learn from other students that differ from themselves in respect to experience, social position, race, religion, and political affiliation. Diversity is a crucial component of the American Democracy. In Federalist X, James Madison argued that in a large society such as the United States, diverse interests prevent the majority from becoming too powerful. Parker also remarks that diversity unites Americans, because the differences that exist require "a political framework that protects differences and, thereby, encourages them" (Parker, p. 97).

Left behind: The most disadvantaged child

Voucher proponents believe that private school vouchers will promote educational equity by providing low-income students with the opportunity to attend private schools. This argument is problematic several respects. First, vouchers are not

available to every student. Since parents must request vouchers for their children, voucher programs tend to favor students with involved parents. For example, in Milwaukee the average parent of a voucher recipient had higher level of educational achievement and higher educational expectations for their child than the average Milwaukee Public School parent. In order to qualify for the Parental Choice Program, a student's family income must be less than 1.75 percent of the federal poverty level (Brighthouse, p. 177). Students whose parents don't care about their education, or are too busy working to support their families, do not have an equal opportunity to use a voucher to attend a private school. In addition, not all qualified students have the chance to participate in voucher programs. At oversubscribed private schools in Milwaukee, lotteries are held to determine which voucher recipients can attend. Students that aren't selected return to the Milwaukee public schools.

Voucher programs are also problematic in that the vouchers don't cover additional costs required by private schools. A families' income must be less than 1.75% of the federal poverty level to qualify for Milwaukee's Parental Choice Program (Kolbert, p. 5-8). To these families, fees for extra-curricular activities and school uniforms may be prohibitive (Brighthouse, p. 175).

Another problem with voucher programs is that parents can only enroll their children in participating private schools. School voucher programs in Milwaukee, Florida, and other existing programs require participating schools to accept the voucher as full tuition. Elite private schools costing \$10,000 or more are often not willing to accept \$2,000 to \$5,000 vouchers. Participating private schools are also required to adhere to governmental anti-discrimination, health, and safety policies, can't administer

admissions tests. Therefore, vouchers only make private schools accessible to families that are able to afford these extra costs.

Left behind: Public schools

Another problem with vouchers is that they draw resources away from the public schools. The most obvious resource, of course, is funding. But they also siphon off very important human resources: high achieving, motivated students and involved parents who have high expectations and are willing and able to advocate for school improvement.

Costs such as maintaining building infrastructure, heating, and electricity in public schools exist regardless of the number of students attending private schools. Urban schools are already struggling financially, and can't afford the loss of additional funding. The cost of educating an urban student is three to four times the average per-student cost across the educational system. That's because urban schools have higher proportion of special-needs students — English Language Learners, special education students, and students receiving free and reduced lunch in urban schools. Recent budget cuts have resulted in higher dependence on local property taxes to fund public schools. Property-poor districts need to tax at a higher rate than property rich districts in order to provide comparable funding (Hoschschild and Scovronick). Students left in public schools deserve an equal opportunity to receive a high quality education.

Losing motivated, high-achieving students and involved parents to private schools as a result of school choice is also very costly to public schools. In Chicago, the 12 least-popular high schools lost 62 percent to 77 percent of the students within their district boundaries to other schools. The loss of motivated students and involved parents resulted

in decreased demand for advanced placement and honors courses, and lower test scores (Kolbert, p. 26).

Not left behind: The achievement gap

While there have been a number of studies looking at whether school voucher programs result in increased academic achievement, the results have been inconclusive at best. There has certainly not been a preponderance of data that voucher programs close the achievement gap.

A five-year study on Milwaukee's Parental Choice Program by John F. Witte found that academic performance among voucher recipients was no higher than that of students that remained in the public schools. Jay Greene and Paul Peterson re-analyzed this data, and found that after three to four years in a private school, voucher recipients outperformed their peers in public schools (Kolbert, p. 5-8). Clearly, the conclusions of these two studies are at odds. There remains considerable uncertainty as to whether voucher programs improve the academic performance of participating students. What is certain is that voucher programs are diverting money away from public schools that could be used to improve the academic achievement of the most disadvantaged students, the ones that remain in public schools.

The achievement gap between white and Asian middle-upper class students and Hispanic, African American, and Native American students of low socio-economic status is the most critical problems facing America's public education system. This achievement gap is evident in the large disparity in high school and college graduation rates between white and Asian students and Hispanic, African American, and Native American

students, Ninety-one percent of white and 94 percent of Asian students graduate from high school, and thirty percent of white and 49 percent of Asian students are college graduates. In contrast, 87 percent of African-Americans, 62 percent of Hispanics, and 58 percent of Native-Americans graduate from high school. Only 16 percent of African Americans, 6 percent of Hispanics, and 7 percent of Native-Americans graduate from college (Oregon Department of Education). The achievement gap is also apparent in that reading achievement levels among black eleventh-graders is equivalent to that of white seventh-graders (Bingham, p. 5).

Society pays a price for this achievement gap. Lack of quality education leads to a variety of social problems as children turn into adults. For example, a Virginia penitentiary uses the number of second graders in public schools reading below grade level to accurately predict the number of prison cells needed in the future (Janice).

The primary argument against school vouchers is that they are least accessible to the students they are intended to help — the most disadvantaged students. Vouchers are drawing vital funding, programs and human resources away from the public school system, and there's no clear evidence that they've been effective in eliminating the achievement gap. Therefore, it makes sense to eliminate voucher programs and direct those resources toward developing a comprehensive plan to promote educational equity.

A Plan to Close the Achievement Gap

School voucher programs are a self-fulfilling prophecy. Voucher programs are based on the belief that public education is failing, and therefore money is better spent on private school. In fact, diverting scarce funding greatly increases the likelihood that public

education will fail. A better strategy is to develop a plan to strategically apply public money towards programs proven to improve the academic achievement of disadvantaged students.

Small class sizes

The first component of the recommended plan to close the achievement gap is reducing class sizes in kindergarten, first-, second- and third-grade classrooms. Tennessee's Student/Teacher Achievement Ratio study (STAR) analyzed this relationship between class size and academic achievement (Bingham). In the study, kindergarteners were randomly assigned to classes with 15 students, a teacher, and teacher-aid; classes with 25 students, a teacher, and a teacher-aide; or classes with 25 students and a teacher. Seventeen inner-city, 16 suburban, 8 urban, and 39 rural schools participated in the STAR. The results found that while all students in smaller classes scored higher on the Stanford Achievement Test and Basic Skills First Test, increases were highest among students in small inner-city classrooms.

Early childhood education

Another part of the plan to close the achievement gap is to provide minority students and students from low socio-economic backgrounds with high-quality early-childhood programs. While upper-class and middle-class parents can afford to send their children to high-quality preschool programs, the cost can be prohibitive for lower class families. Thus, the majority of low-income students enter kindergarten behind their classmates. Once a student falls behind, it's extremely difficult for the student to catch up with his or her peers. High-quality preschool programs have proven effective in

increasing high-school graduation rates, test scores, and academic achievement of low socio-economic-status students (Schweinhart). It's essential that we make early childhood education accessible to all students, particularly those of low socio-economic status, to ensure that every student has an equal opportunity to succeed.

Increase state educational financing

Increasing state educational financing is the third tier of the plan to promote educational equity. Ninety percent of educational funding is provided by state and local governments, which results in a large disparity among and within states (Hochschild and Scovronick, p. 52-76). Recent state budget cuts have increased the dependency upon local property taxes to fund schools. The problem is that urban schools have disproportionately high numbers of English Language Learners, special education, and students receiving free or reduced-cost lunch. As a result, it costs three to four times as much to educate the average urban student. In order to provide comparable educational quality to students, property poor districts and districts with high proportions of special needs students must tax at a higher rate than property-rich districts and districts with fewer special-needs students. The problem of funding inequity could be addressed by increasing state taxes to provide more state-based funding, and creating an equalization formula that ensures that more state aid is allocated to property-poor districts and districts with high proportions of special-needs students.

After-school programs

Providing minority students and students of low socio-economic status with the opportunity to attend high-quality educational after-school programs is another way to reduce the achievement gap. Students from upper-class and middle-class families benefit from parents that are involved in their education. These students have a safe place to study outside of school, and receive parental assistance on homework. Parents of students receiving free and reduced cost lunch may be too busy working to provide their family with the basic essentials, and may not have time to assist their child with homework. After-school programs promote educational equity by provide low-income students with a safe environment to study, and mentors to assist students. After-school programs can be based inside or outside of a school setting. Money should also be invested in providing struggling urban schools with high quality art, music, and science programs. These programs would not only benefit disadvantages students, but would also attract and retain motivated, high achieving students that might otherwise seek such programs elsewhere.

Invest in public schools

President Bush's No Child Left Behind Act is intended to close the achievement gap by providing all students with an equal opportunity to obtain a high-quality education. The problem with No Child Left Behind is that it punishes failing urban schools by withdrawing funding, when it should be investing more money into these schools. Urban schools should provide incentives such as higher pay to discourage high-quality teachers from abandoning urban teaching positions in favor of positions in charter or private schools with better benefits. Schools should also provide more support and training for new teachers, which would result in lower teacher-turnover rates.

Leaving voucher programs behind

In order to close the achievement gap, schools must abandon voucher programs in favor of a comprehensive plan of proven techniques to promote educational equity. There is no clear research indicating that giving selected minority students and students from low socio-economic backgrounds vouchers to attend private schools decreases the achievement gap. However, there is clear evidence that vouchers draw resources away from public schools, and are not equally accessible to all students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds. The most effective way to eliminate the achievement gap is to implement a plan to promote educational equity that includes investing in public schools, early childhood education, after-school programs, and increasing state educational financing.

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