

School Voucher Programs: Are They The Answer?

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore the question concerning the benefits of school voucher programs and whether or not they can help to reverse the educational deterioration that has taken place in the public school system. Several authors and studies were referenced to permit an even exchange of both sides of the issue. The result was a compelling argument made by each side underlined by the fact that failure to come to the correct conclusion could further erode and do irreversible damage to our public school systems. Results will support the fact that a school voucher system, which has already had success in several areas of the country and with many different economic situations, would in all likelihood, be the best course of action in our effort to restore the public school system's credibility in the fastest and most effective manner possible. Because of the dire consequences of a wrong decision, this argument will require further discussion and careful implementation of pilot programs that will permit an unbiased opportunity to decide whether or not school voucher programs will be as effective as many think they will be.

Introduction

Many families who are not satisfied with the educational quality their children receive in public schools are looking for alternative options. These parents are beginning to view school voucher programs as one of the more viable alternatives to correct this problem. The decision to make school voucher programs available to more than just low income families is one of the most controversial topics in education today. People from all parts of the country consider our

educational system to be in crisis and they are no longer willing to have their children be victims of a failed educational system. The lack of a good education can affect many aspects of their individual lives and ultimately, the quality and quantity of goods and services provided by the workers in this country. This would obviously have an adverse effect on our ability, as a nation, to be competitive in a global market.

What are school vouchers?

The school voucher program, which was first introduced by economist Milton Friedman in the mid 1950's, (People for the American Way, N.D.) is a program that redirects education funding provided by the federal government directly to families instead of the school districts in which those families reside. The funds that families receive either resemble a scholarship that can be used towards tuition and books, or they may result in a tax credit. Families, who feel that their children are not getting a proper education when substantiated by overall low performance scores at the school that their children go to, are then able to take the financial assistance they receive, relocate their children to a private school, and use the funds to cover tuition expenses at the school of their choice (Coulson, 1998).

The voucher system was first implemented in the south in the early 1960's in an effort to reduce the disparity caused by segregation. Today, most voucher programs are only available to low income families, but many would like to expand this program to include all families. Several states throughout the U.S. currently have voucher programs with success results that have been varied and subject to interpretation.

The arguments against school vouchers

There have been numerous arguments against making a school voucher system available to everyone in the U.S. Opponents state that a voucher system is actually the privatization of

education that will not include everyone, especially low income and special needs students. Public school proponents are very concerned about the negative affect that an expanded voucher program could have on public education. If funding is reduced, there is fear that public schools would have to resort to using older textbooks, computers and equipment, be forced to have larger class sizes and have fewer funds available to pay teachers. There is also concern that if all students were given vouchers; the 11% that were already enrolled in private schools would, in essence, allow private schools to receive an automatic increase of 11% in funding (Coulson, 1998).

Public school proponents are not only worried about the reduced financial resources that may be available for public education, but also about the possible violation of the First Amendment provision prohibiting government sponsorship of religion. Eighty five percent of current private schools are religious (National Educational Association, (NEA), 2008). Proponents point out that government may find itself inadvertently funding religious schools if Catholic schools or other religious educational institutions become the schools of choice by families seeking to relocate their children (Coulson, 1998). There is also concern that public funds could be used to subsidize schools run by extremist groups like the Nation of Islam or the Ku Klux Klan (Anti Defamation League, 2001).

There is also an argument that vouchers do not always offer the level of educational choice indicated, since the final decision to accept a student would now rest with the private schools. Public schools are required to accept all students and the voucher system could eventually create a two tier system of education in this country (Coulson, 1998). The final concern is that those students who are culturally, socially, and educationally disadvantaged will be disenfranchised.

The arguments for school vouchers

Those who favor the voucher system see things quite differently from those who are opposed. They see the public education system as having a monopoly on education with few attractive options available to those who are not financially well off. Monopolies stifle competition and it is competition that improves the product. There is also little incentive for public schools to improve for one simple reason; there is nowhere else to go. Students are assigned school districts by location and many are already overcrowded so the desire to attract more students is diminished (Separation of Church and State, N.D.). Private schools have accountability. If they do not educate to the standards and expectations of their students (and their parents) they will not have any students. Because of this accountability factor, private schools also have a better history of getting results and teaching information than public schools do (Messerli, 2006).

When the Milwaukee voucher program was first initiated in 1990, teachers unions and those who did not want any change in educational practices strongly opposed it. They claimed that vouchers would serve only the rich wouldn't provide better education for children and would ruin the public schools by draining their budgets. Not only did the Milwaukee program silence the critics, they removed the fear of implementing those programs enough that currently, 21 school-voucher programs for K-12 students exist in 13 states and provide taxpayer-funded scholarships to attend a private school (Enlow 2008).

In response to the critics that have expressed concerns that voucher programs would decimate the public school system and leave them with inadequate budgets, the fact of the matter is that no empirical study anywhere in the United States has ever found that public schools had

worse outcomes when exposed to vouchers, and there is a large body of high-quality empirical evidence showing that vouchers make public schools better, not worse. In fact, a study on Florida public schools done by Jay P. Greene and Marcus A. Winters concluded that “findings on the Stanford-9 and FCAT math tests suggests that the gains being made by schools facing voucher competition are the result of real learning and not simply manipulations of the state’s high-stakes testing system” (Greene, Winters, 2004). Fears that public schools would be harmed by vouchers have failed to materialize. Research performed by the Friedman Foundation has consistently found that when students can use school choice to attend any school, public or private, the public schools make bigger academic improvements. Not only that; these programs actually saved money both for state budgets and for local public school districts, even after the fixed costs of public schools are taken into account (Forster, 2008).

Another program that has been studied closely is the John M. McKay Scholarship Program for Students with Disabilities in Florida. The Friedman Foundation also conducted a study of that school. Highlights of the study include; public school students with relatively mild disabilities made statistically significant test score improvements in both math and reading as more nearby private schools began participation in the McKay program. Contrary to the hypothesis that school choice harms students who remain in public schools, this study found that students eligible for vouchers who remained in the public schools made greater academic improvements as their school choices increased (Greene, Winters, 2008).

The argument that students have not achieved higher academic excellence with voucher programs than public schools has also been answered by pointing out that because voucher programs have been used for less than twenty years, research results showing the difference in educational quality is difficult to come by. Ohio has a voucher program called EdChoice that is

available to students who attend school in the Cleveland area. Although the program has not been in existence for very long, initial studies by the Friedman Foundation indicate that a positive effect was identified in some grades, and no negative effects were identified in other grades (Forster, 2008).

Part of the reason it has been so difficult to get accurate data on any progress made is charter schools and voucher programs have been in such high demand; these schools have not had the ability to manage the growth. In the case of the Washington D.C. voucher program, the Department of Education selected the Washington Scholarship Fund (WSF) to operate the District of Columbia Opportunity Scholarship Program. The WSF expanded its operations from \$150,000 in federal and foundation grants in fiscal year 2004 to \$12.9 million in 2006. Such a rapid expansion did not permit them to develop sufficient accountability mechanisms to govern the use of the funds and they had little time to design and implement the needed systems, procedures, and internal controls for managing such a major increase in its operations. WSF's accountability was also weakened by high staff turnover, a lack of detailed fiscal policies, and nonintegrated accounting functions (General Accountability Office, 2007). Such high demand for alternative school choices has left administrators little time to implement effective measurement programs that are capable of accurately ascertaining educational progress in such a short period of time. It goes without saying that if a public school experienced a similar same growth rate, the results would not be significantly different.

The final criticism of the voucher program; that 90% of the private schools that may be chosen by voucher students are religious based and therefore may be a violation of the First Amendment, has been answered by parents themselves. Parents argue that public schools are currently exposing their children to a set of values that they do not agree with or want their

children exposed to. Public educators have also begun to recognize the need to teach values and ethics education to children in school. The dilemma has always been “whose values and ethical standards?” Families with a higher rate of church attendance, regardless of religious tradition, are more likely to be dissatisfied with the values education provided in a public school, and are thus expected to have a higher rate of voucher usage than families with a lower rate of attendance at religious services (Campbell, West, Peterson, 2004). The supporters of voucher programs vocalize that since the government is already in fact sponsoring a value system, albeit one that many do not agree with, how would providing an opportunity for students to go to a school that teaches a value system they do agree with be any different? It could also resolve some of the dilemma concerning the values education that everyone agrees needs to be taught.

Conclusion

The arguments on both sides of this issue are quite compelling, and obviously, because the stakes are so high, a wrong decision could put our country and all students involved, at risk of suffering the serious consequences of those wrong decisions for generations to come. Democracy is advanced citizenship and good public education is absolutely necessary in order for our democracy to function with a high degree of efficiency. Our electorate must be informed and able to see through superficial promises of politicians in order to elect responsible public officials who will make the best decisions for our country. A dysfunctional public education system threatens the electorate’s ability to reason and make informed decisions. It must be determined which path is the most likely to give the citizen’s of this country the best education.

After reflecting on all of the arguments made by both sides, it should be determined that school voucher programs would be the best solution to our problem. There are several reasons why this is the best solution.

The first is that our economic and political system holds the core belief that competition benefits everybody. Competition forces us constantly to improve our products and services for one simple reason; if we don't, our competition will, and the consumers will do business with them instead. Consumers ultimately benefit from this because they are assured that the best value for the lowest price is always available to them. The foundation of our democracy is based on the capitalistic free enterprise economic system. To say competition is undesirable would be to go against the very principles that made our country the greatest country in the world; one that has provided more opportunities for people than any other period in mankind's history. The only time that competition does not benefit everyone is when competition results in a monopoly.

In viewing our public educational system today, we cannot deny that we have created another monopoly, only this time it is a government sponsored monopoly. Those who cannot afford to opt out of the public school system and pay additionally to either send their children to private schools or stay at home and homeschool them, have few other options available other than to send them to public schools, and the public school officials know it. Many of the negative aspects that were present with the monopolies of the late 1800's and early 1900's are present today in public education. This could change rather quickly if competition was allowed to enter this marketplace.

The lack of competition has made school administrations fat and lazy. Public school systems have been given a tremendous amount of financial resources to accomplish their goals, yet studies repeatedly show that this money is not producing a better educational product. The federal budget for education in 2008 was \$9,992 per student (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2008) yet researchers ranked the United States No. 18 out of 24 nations in terms of the relative effectiveness of its educational system (Wu, 2005). It is also not paying faculty very well either.

In the 1940's, there were only 3.6% of the non-teaching professions that were paid higher than male teachers; in 2000 that number rose to more than 60.6%. This has reduced the ability of public schools to get the most qualified teachers (National Education Association, 2008). It also negates the argument that voucher programs will undermine the ability to pay teachers competitively since they are already unable to. When looking at the accountability perspective, public schools have little accountability for the results they produce; private schools have a high accountability level. Private schools have their own acceptance standards, set their own agendas, which are driven by the demands of the market, and have a greater ability to adhere to them. In an effort to stay competitive, they also must keep up with the latest technology, hire the best teachers who utilize the best teaching methods and maintain their facilities better.

Public education officials have become so concerned with political correctness, promoting a liberal agenda and the educational requirements of a small minority of special needs students; that a majority of the students in public schools do not get the education they come for. Depending on which statistic is accepted, we currently spend between \$5,000 and \$10,000 per student per year on the public education of our children. Many do not feel the students in public schools are getting anything close to a proper education for the amount of money spent.

Making a school voucher system available to everyone would permit those who are not satisfied with the current product to investigate other, potentially better options. A reduction in the public school enrollment would also provide public school administrators and teachers with the opportunity to offer a better, more competitive product, and spend more time with those special needs students without alienating the other students.

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