

Education Vouchers: America Can't Afford To Wait (IP-13-1991)

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Issue Paper

By [Tom Tancredo](#)

Executive Summary

- The shortcomings of government schools in America resemble those of collectivism in the former Soviet Union.
- Vouchers could improve the U.S education system, offering better opportunities for the poor and removing racial barriers.
- Vouchers would make all educators, public and private, play by the same consumer-imposed rules of high standards in academics and discipline.
- Vouchers would help the schools preserve a shared national culture by letting parents opt out of the radical multiculturalism now taking over government classrooms.
- Vouchers would offer an option for parents who want their children to have the 3 Rs, and instruction in knowing right from wrong, instead of the mushy "affective" material that occupies nearly half the public school curriculum in some places.
- By letting families vote with their dollars we can steer schools away from low-content, no-fault learning and back to the knowledge and values that make for effective citizenship; our nation's very future is in the balance.

What Are They So Afraid Of?

Introduction by the Editors

A voucher system would convert state and local education dollars from huge lump sums controlled by district bureaucrats into individual scholarship certificates for parents to spend at any school of their choosing.

When the idea was petitioning for a place on the Colorado ballot in 1990, those same bureaucrats warned of its dangers, and a governor who had paid to send his own seven children through private school argued against giving such a choice to parents of lesser means.

When legislators tried again to place vouchers on the ballot in 1991, they were out-muscled by lobby groups and unions representing employees on the government education payroll.

The doubly cautious 1991 proposal would merely have let statewide voters approve a local option for district voters (or their elected school boards) to say yes or no on the individual scholarship certificates in their own communities. But this was still too threatening to the NEA monopolists, who brandished their electoral and financial power to peel away nearly half the House Republican majority in a decisive floor vote after the bill had prevailed in committee.

Vouchers are already the subject of experiments in Wisconsin, Indiana, and New Hampshire. They have the support of President Bush and of Education Secretary Lamar Alexander. Yet scare propaganda continues to mislead many Coloradans and other Americans about their likely benefits.

What is really at stake in the controversy over education vouchers? How would the reform benefit students, their families, and our democratic capitalist system? Why do teacher unions and the public education priesthood resist it so bitterly? What about the seemingly plausible objections to vouchers?

Independence Institute asked Tom Tancredo, a leading expert on school performance and school reform options in the Western states, to prepare this primer on the issue.

Symptoms Of Monopoly

Tom Tancredo

Since education is the topic here, we will start by taking a test. Read the following quotes and guess the subject to which they pertain. Hint: they describe something about which we are hearing or reading every day. Here they are:

- "The system was too bureaucratic and unresponsive to public demands."
- "It just got to the point where nothing worked. The infrastructure began to crumble, and all the while apologists claimed everything was rosy."
- "People respond to carrots and sticks. If there are no rewards for hard work or penalties for sloth, you'll get sloth."
- "Giving them more money now, before true structural reform takes place, would be like giving methadone to the heroin addict. It will temporarily ease the pain, but the addict will never break the habit."

You were correct if you recognized that all of these statements refer to the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union. They, could however, easily describe another huge, unmanageable, unresponsive, dictatorial, and collectivist government monopoly.

This monopoly in our own midst is one that abhors initiative and rewards mediocrity. Its enormously wasteful, top-heavy, and bureaucratic. Many aspects of it are destructive to the family and have a decidedly anti-religious bias.

While all around the world similar structures are crumbling, this one is as powerful as ever. It operates here in the United States and is the only option for most consumers. It is, of course, our government school leviathan.

The power and influence of the public education establishment are as great as ever, even though it has been discredited by every standard used to gauge its output. The system remains undisturbed by a miserable performance record and almost daily revelations of its inadequacies and excesses.

Many government schools, as an enterprise, failed long ago; but because the resources flowing into them are not influenced by the degree to which they are unsuccessful, they cannot go out of business.

We need to change the system. We can do it with choice, the kind of choice that allows parents and students to pick from the widest possible variety of educational opportunities, both public and private. The best way of providing that choice is with education vouchers.

Many Americans are increasingly turning to reforms based on parental choice of schools as the best solution to America's education crisis. Republicans and Democrats, liberals and conservatives, minorities and whites support choice. The liberal Brookings Institution and the conservative Heritage Foundation have identified it as the most important aspect of reform.

One good way to make a case for vouchers is to deal with the typical arguments made against them. Here are five of the most frequently heard objections.

(1) The fallacy of creaming: The first and most commonly heard criticism of vouchers is that they will siphon off the best and the brightest, so that the inner city public schools will be left with only the poor and otherwise educationally disadvantaged children.

Of course, the fact is that today the only group which is not able to escape a rotten school is the poor. Wealthier parents can already exercise choice by moving to a better neighborhood, or by paying tuition at private schools.

(2) Misplaced racial fears: Some suggest that vouchers will once again create segregated school systems. The fact is, in most urban areas, parochial schools, which comprise 80% of all private alternatives to public education, are more highly integrated than their public school counterparts.

Unfortunately, though, racism does play an unadmitted role in the other side of the debate over vouchers. Many suburban schools fear the "invasion" of minority youngsters fleeing the violence and academic bankruptcy of their urban educational environments.

Yet the fact is that in a true free market of educational services, there would be no need for anyone to flee their neighborhoods. Entrepreneurs go to where their market exists. If, however, after having been given the economic key to the door, some minority parents did choose to use it, who in good conscience could deny them?

(3) Regulatory disadvantage: Another criticism of vouchers is that public schools would be at a competitive disadvantage to non-public schools because the latter are not forced to "play by the same rules."

The implication here is that it is impossible to have high-quality education occurring in any classroom regulated by the state. The fact is, there are some great public schools and some lousy private schools. Without the benefits of free-market competition, however, there is little if any incentive to expand the number of the former or eliminate the latter.

The rules that actually produce a successful school are the same for everyone everywhere. A school succeeds because it (a) maintains high academic standards, (b) maintains a disciplined environment, and (c) presents a challenging curriculum. There is no reason that public schools can't "play by these rules." To do so, however, requires a tremendous amount of effort and commitment by everyone involved. The present system offers educators no incentive to maintain this effort over a long period of time.

(4) Violating the Constitution's "establishment of religion" clause?

Some contend that providing state-funded vouchers for use at schools having a religious affiliation would breach the separation of church and state. Certainly such vouchers would have to meet the Supreme Court's Lemon test, which requires that any government action serve a secular purpose, have a "primary effect" that will neither advance nor inhibit religion, and foster no "excessive entanglement" with religion. But a well-crafted choice plan could in fact meet that test, as Heritage Foundation research has shown.

Provided that voucher legislation avoids discriminating in favor of any religiously affiliated school, and that the voucher is placed in parents' hands to be used against tuition charges as they see fit, I believe the establishment-clause challenge can be withstood. In addition, it is highly likely that the Supreme Court as now constituted will review and relax the Lemon test.

(5) Endangering a shared culture? Choice opponents assert that parents and students' rights should be subjugated to society's greater goal of preserving a common consensus in support of our fundamental political, social, and economic institutions -- and that allowing parents the freedom to seek out schools which reflect their own religious or social preferences could destroy this democratic ethos.

I suggest, on the contrary, that the greatest threat to this democratic ethos is the radical multicultural curriculum we now see working its way into the public schools. This is an ethnocentric curriculum, politicized in the extreme. For the multiculturalists, race and ethnicity have become the one and only lens through which all historical events are examined.

As the distinguished education historian and now U.S. Assistant Secretary of Education for Educational Research and Improvement, Diane Ravitch, has argued, Afrocentrism and other such curricular changes throw into question the very idea of American public education. When public schools cease to transmit common values and a shared culture -- and they are now dangerously close to doing just that -- the main argument in support of their exclusive claim to taxpayers' money will have lost its force.

Vessel to Impart a Moral Standard

While we are on the subject of values, we should look closer at the area that is too seldom discussed in the debate over education choice. I'm referring to the controversial role played by our schools as

they act as a vessel to impart a moral standard for society.

Judge Robert Donnelly, a former justice of the Missouri Supreme Court, recently published a provocative article in which he portrays our 1990s America as a nation where civility has succumbed to hatred and fear; a society where the criminal justice system has failed; and one devastated by drug use, imposed obscenity, sexual perversion, and broken families.

Donnelly points an accusing finger at the public school system for having failed in its task of transmitting basic morality. He cites two U.S. Supreme Court cases as landmark decisions along the road to decadence. In 1962 and 63 in the Engel and Abington cases, the court held that the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment precludes the states from requiring recitation of prayers or reading of Bible verses in public schools. These decisions, according to the judge, gave unwarranted power to those who wanted schools cleansed of any aspect of religiosity.

Donnelly suggests that the opinions of the court may have been misinterpreted and misapplied in the ensuing three decades; but the perception continues to be that basic morality cannot be taught in our public schools. Instead, the nation has opted for "values-neutral" curricula.

Those curricula have had an immense, and immensely harmful, effect. Harvard professor Richard Hunt reports that over half his students in one survey felt that the Nazis were not to blame for their atrocities. The students believed that Hitler's rise was "inevitable," that it was impossible for Britain and France to have resisted German imperialism, and that no one was really responsible for what happened in the end. "No-fault history" was the term Hunt used to describe his students' refusal to ascribe moral responsibility to historical actions.

We should not be surprised at this outcome. After all, the public schools epitomize a no-fault mindset. When was the last time you heard a public school administrator or teacher union leader accept even partial responsibility for the abysmal state of American education?

How does this fit into a case for vouchers? I believe that there is a basic difference between what consumers want from their schools and what public providers are offering. Most parents believe they are sending their kids to school for cognitive development, the 3 Rs. Yet government schools increasingly stress affective education; such material now occupies 40% of the time in many schools.

How Parents Can Get What They Want

The average parent, recognizing economic realities in today's competitive world, would obviously prefer a system that teaches children how to read, write and compute over one in which children spend nearly half their time "getting in touch with their feelings." But it's not hard to understand why the system has opted for the latter method. Which one of these two education philosophies is more difficult, if not impossible, to grade? Which philosophy makes accountability almost meaningless? Which one would suffer grievously in a free-market atmosphere?

The shift to a fuzzy, unmeasurable curriculum, while no doubt sincere at one level, can be read at a deeper level as a classic blame-avoidance maneuver.

Most parents want schools to share the responsibility for transmitting the values of honesty, rewards for hard work, and appreciation of our republican system. Some of these parents remember how they were positively influenced by the study of the great works of Western literature, or remember hearing their parents reminisce about the moral admonitions in their McGuffey readers. These parents remember developing an appreciation for the rule of law and the inviolability of the individual as they read the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. And in their hearts, these folks know that it is not just social continuity or personal happiness -- it is the very future of our political system, our republic, and our freedom -- which requires that we be alert to moral values, and pass them on to our children. It is apparent that this can now only be done when schools are free to respond to majority sentiment, to consumers voting not just with ballots but with attendance decisions and dollars. Of course, moving to this free-market approach to education would in itself send an important message. It would say that we recognize the merits of individualism over the collective, that risk takers are valued, and that monopolies, whether they are private or government,

have the effect of destroying initiative.

Abandoning or Upholding the Trust?

If we are to cure Americas ailing public school system, we must establish competitive markets and parental choice. As the Brookings Institution researchers John Chubb and Terry Moe concluded, the organizational structure of school systems is the biggest factor contributing to the poor quality of public education in this country.

Asserting in their book Politics, Markets, and Americas Schools that the "key to quality education is principals who give greater autonomy to teachers," Chubb and Moe urge a sweeping changeover to markets and choice in order to create a "highly competitive school system in which competent principals are rewarded by growing enrollments, while incompetent principals are punished by falling enrollments."

The greatest challenge of our age is to create a literate society that recaptures a value system in which nuclear families are encouraged and a moral code actually guides the actions of its members.

It is one that places an enormous responsibility on each of us who hopes for the preservation of liberty in a land characterized by material and spiritual abundance.

We have, in the past, trusted our public and private schools to share this responsibility. Those educators that abandon their side of this trust should in turn be abandoned, in favor of educators who will uphold the trust and do right by the next generation.

The reason America so urgently needs education vouchers is that they would give millions of parents the economic ability to make that kind of decisive change on their childrens behalf.

Dueling in Print: Administrator and Reformer Square Off

Private School Choice: Not the Answer

For Excellence, Desocialize Schools

By Lew Finch, Superintendent. Jefferson County Schools

by John Andrews President, Independence Institute

There continues to be a concerted effort to take tax dollars from public schools and direct it to private education in the form of vouchers. This represents an all-out effort to destroy public education, where all students are welcome. Several myths are perpetuated by those espousing private. school choice.

The first myth is that private school choice simply means the ability to select a private school at public expense.

In all reality, the client does not select a private school; instead, the school selects the client. Simply giving families tax dollars to choose a private school for the child places no obligation on the private school to choose the child. Our public schools are required to take everyone. Private schools are not. And all too often they wont, unless the child is of the "right" socioeconomic class or ethnic group or religion or has the "right" behavior or "right" combination of intellectual, athletic

It is disappointing, but not surprising, to see Jefferson County school Superintendent Lewis Finch warn that we should not seek educational excellence by organizing the schools around markets and choice instead of around bureaucracy and politics. The recent Time cover story on that idea, along with voucher experiments in Wisconsin and New Hampshire and voucher bills in our own legislature, has frightened many government educators into a shrill defense of their classroom monopoly.

Oddly missing in Dr. Finchs article is any plan for how we should seek educational excellence. If the debacle of test scores and dropouts and costs is not to be remedied by desocializing the learning industry -- never mind that whole nations are desocializing in half the world -- what does he propose instead? As role models for our kids, those running the schools have an obligation to be

and creative abilities or otherwise fits into the "market" niche the private school has established.

A second myth is that tax dollars to support private schools would promote competition between public and private schools, and competition is healthy. And public educators are said to be "afraid" of competition from private schools.

True, competition is healthy when everyone plays by the same rules. However, this is not so with private and public schools. Public schools take all children; private schools can carefully select their clientele. Public schools must comply with due-process and public disclosure regulations when they suspend or expel students; private schools are under no such obligation. Public schools comply with a myriad of federal, state, and local regulations pertaining to health and safety, civil rights, special education, curriculum and instructional materials, staff credentials, background checks of applicants, and financial and instructional accountability. Private schools are either wholly or largely exempt from such regulations. Public schools are democratically controlled and must conduct their business, in public. Private schools are controlled by the owners and board of trustees, are not subject to public scrutiny, and need not involve anyone in their governance.

When asked recently if, in the name of fair competition and quality education, private schools are willing to accept the rigorous regulations to which public schools are subjected, a private school choice advocate stated "not a chance." Now, we must ask, who is really frightened by competition?

The third myth is that private schools outperform public schools, and the reason is market control. As previously stated, private schools select their students. Recent surveys show that across the nation, students in private schools, generally come from parents with higher levels of education. These schools often screen applicants in order to limit their "risks" and they are free to expel their mistakes. Under these conditions, you'd expect private schools to substantially outperform public schools. The surprise is, they don't; private school students score only modestly better than public school students. Moreover, this private school advantage disappears when researchers take into

solution oriented.

Clearly, higher spending is not an option. Jeffco voters have repeatedly said no to school bond issues and mill levies, signaling their belief that budgets are big enough already. Busing demonstrators down to the state Legislature, in hope of taxing Lamar and Craig for teacher raises in Lakewood, has not worked either.

But in marking the superintendents article, as in grading a student paper, it is only fair to start with the plus points. Dr. Finch does admit four important truths: (1) There is an education crisis. (2) Students are not performing as well as they should. (3) Competition is healthy. And (4) "the people who are footing the bill have a right to set the expectations.

These observations alone would almost earn the writer a passing grade, except that, in his defensiveness and fear of change, he fails to draw the obvious conclusions from them. The first two statements tell why today's schools must change. The last two suggest how tomorrow's schools will, differ. Instead of polarizing the debate and hugging the status quo, Dr. Finch, how about joining hands with all of us troubled parents and taxpayers and working together on the education revolution that has to come?

We who believe that parents should be able to shop freely among a wide range of educational services to meet the individual needs of their child and that schools should be spurred to improve by knowing they will make or lose money based on customer satisfaction want no part of what Dr. Finch calls an "all-out effort to destroy public education." We want a new dawn of pride and achievement for learning in America in partnership with dedicated public education professionals like him and his colleagues.

Together, let's get busy imagining those "New American Schools" that President Bush and Secretary Alexander have called for. What will they look like? My vision goes this way: Selectivity of participation -- both by parents as to where their children enroll and by educators as to which children can benefit from a (gives) program -- will help those future schools educate all children better. Diversity of management with some schools run by government and some by enterprise, since there are plenty of good guys in both sectors will equip them for the innovation and productivity that a world economy demands. Then the competition that Dr. Finch endorses can occur, and the regulations that burden

account the demographic differences between students served in private and public schools.

It must be noted that neither private or public school students are performing as well as they should. But if every public school student could immediately enroll in private, schools, wed still, have an education crisis.

And that leads to myth number four: Private schools accepting public funds will not have to comply with federal, state or local regulations. Anyone naive enough to believe that regulation will not follow funding doesnt understand how government works. In an open, democratic society the people who are footing the bill have a right to set the expectations.

The overriding question remains: Should public dollars be used to support the selection and sorting of our children according to private criteria?

Life At Ken Caryl, Wednesday, October 23, 1991

nism can be lightened, and there can still be a safety net of reasonable government provision and supervision for equitable treatment of every child. Whats to be afraid of in that picture?

Knowing the world like the top-flight education CEO he is, Lewis Finch certainly knows the lesson of the revolution of 1989-91: bureaucracies that ignore input and squander resources are liable to get swept away. America, Colorado and Jefferson County are not exempt from that rule. K-12 education as we know it, public and private alike, has too much good in it to deserve such a fate. But it also has too many shortcomings to get by with the sort of complacency reflected in the superintendents article. Rebirth of the whole system is needed, and constructive participation by all sides is the only way to achieve it. So on with the process, full speed ahead!

Golden Transcript, Thursday October 24,1991

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