

Parent choice, Vouchers, and Public Education

The public school system in America is based on ideology dating back to the founders of our country; that all men are created equal, a democratic society must prevail, and that the only way to accomplish these altruistic ideals is through an educational system designed to promote these fundamental concepts. Due to the current state of crisis in our public school system, (i.e., failing schools, falling test scores, urban reformation needs, under-funding, high needs students, overwhelmed teachers, and etc.), the issue of school vouchers is once again being examined.

Education and Democracy

The American government, and the society in which we live, are both based upon the concept of democracy. A strong democracy should be pervasive within all aspects of society and social life. John Dewey and Jane Addams were instrumental in shaping our current educational system. Their methods included a process of 'unbewildering the public through social knowledge' by way of public education (MacPherson, 1977). Initially, our 'universal, publicly-funded education' system became the foundation in creating and sustaining our burgeoning democratic nation (Cortez, 1999). Our public school system, helped to 'foster the democratic skills and virtues for collaboration with other citizens socially, politically, and economically,' (Smith, 2005). However, in recent years, public education has been attacked. Schools are being called 'monopolies,' which are forcing children to be confined to schools nearest their homes. The public school system is accused of forcing children to attend inferior schools and preventing equal opportunity for low-income parents (West, 1997). "As schools and communities declare war on the conditions of distress and underdevelopment found in these 'marginalized urban spaces,' and they start down the road of radically reconstructing them, a new story will emerge, and once again the masses will fill the streets of hope," (Taylor, 2002).

School Vouchers

The debate regarding vouchers and parental choice arose under the auspices of restructuring the means of how public education is organized and financially supported throughout the country, and allowing parents the right to "shop" for the education they wanted for their children (Cortez, 1999). The educational voucher system allows the government to make payments to families in order that they may have the choice of allowing their children to attend public schools or private schools (West, 1997). The principles and practices involved in parental choice and publicly funded vouchers are currently a hotly contested debate. Some believe that through these new programs and supports; we are approaching an 'extraordinary era in education,' (Shore, 1997). Proponents espouse the ideal in which the voucher plans enable parents of low-income households to be provided greater educational choice and involvement for their children (Fischer, Schimmel, & Stellman, 2003). Others believe that voucher systems would fundamentally threaten the autonomy of independent schools (West, 1997), violate the principles of the separation of church and state (School Vouchers: The Wrong Choice for Public Education, 2006), promote segregation in schools (Tucker & Lauber, 1995), and threaten the very system of public education that our country cherishes as the 'foundation of our democratic society,' (Smith, 2005). The president and citizens of our country are in agreement that we must revamp the educational system to meet the needs of the twenty-first-century of prosperity and high technology. Without appropriate reform and educational supports, students will not arrive at school with a "zest to learn," (Schorr, 1997) nor the social capital required to be successful (Rury & Murel, 2004). American Policy makers are focusing on education as an impetus to promote the concept of equal opportunity for citizens today (Howell & Peterson, 2002), as historically, the public education system's 'contribution to equal opportunity has been ambiguous at best,' (Howell & Peterson, 2002). Almost anyone who visits in the schools of East St. Louis, even for a short time, comes away profoundly shaken. These are innocent children, after all. They have done nothing wrong. They have committed no crime. They are too young to have offended us in any way at all. One searches for some way to understand why a society as rich and, frequently, as generous as ours would leave these children in their penury and squalor for so long-and with so little public indignation. Is this just a strange mistake of history? Is it unusual? Is it an American anomaly? Even if the destitution and the racial segregation and the toxic dangers of the air and soil cannot be immediately addressed, why is it that we can't at least pour vast amounts of money, ingenuity and talent into public education for these children? (Kozol, 1991).

The Origin of the School Voucher

The debate for school vouchers and school choice began, not with educators, but with economists. Milton Friedman, an economist in the 1950's, stated that, "every family (should) be given a voucher of equal worth for each child attending school." Milton believed that voucher system would provide more parental choice. In the 1970's, the voucher debate resurfaced with John E. Coons and Stephan D. Sugarman. Coons and Sugarman, both economists, argued for the public allocation of money to families for educational alternatives. In the 1990's, John Chubb and Terry Mow, both economists, reintroduced the concept of vouchers. They published *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools*. Conservatives embraced the notion that they were "losing their long-standing control over school operations," (Cortez, 1999, p. 2). Proponents of School Vouchers

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Proponents of school choice and school vouchers believe that the purpose is to increase parent choice, involvement, and satisfaction in their children's education. Promoting school competition through vouchers, and allowing low-income families access to private school systems is purported to be an additional benefit of the voucher system. The goal of voucher plans is "to provide families with maximum choice within a decentralized and competitive system of schools," (West, 1997, p. 84). Public funding is used to provide 'vouchers' or 'certificates' to parents (Fischer et al, 2003). The principles include: consumer choice (parents choose); personal advancement (selection of educational services); promotion of competition (private schools can challenge and compete with public school systems); and equal opportunity (low income families provided with better access opportunities), (West, 1997).

Opponents of School Vouchers

Opponents of school vouchers believe that vouchers replace the focus on the need for increasing funds and resources for public schools; and instead, focus on spending public funds for, "private purposes with no accountability to

the taxpayer and no mandate – and in some cases no desire – to educate all children,” (Cortez, 1999, p. 3). Opponents also fear the disproportionate applications to enroll in ‘popular’ schools, leaving ‘unpopular’ schools faced with costs of under-capacity enrollment issues (West, 1997). They believed that there was not enough planning regarding ‘equity or student accessibility issues.’ In that, if schools accepting vouchers require parents to pay money above the voucher-funded levels, what would happen to those students who couldn’t afford the additional fee? In essence, the opponents to the voucher system said that those students unable to afford to pay for those extra costs would be forced into ‘cheaper, lower quality systems,’ (School Vouchers: The Wrong Choice, 2006). Accordingly, they state that publicly funded vouchers are in fact taxation without representation. “School choice” is choice for schools. It provides no choice for parents, particularly not for poor parents, their children or their communities. Public funding should focus on improving public education instead of using public money on private school businesses. America needs all of its children to be educated, not just a select few. (Cortez, 1999, p. 4) Policy Implications Due to the federally mandated provision in the No Child Left Behind Act requiring school choice in failing schools, school vouchers may no longer be a possibility, but an actual reality for all educators, parents, and students in the very near future. Although the current language does not dictate the option of private school choice options, President Bush’s original proposal did contain the option for private school and voucher options to parents. Currently, a bipartisan commission has been formed to study the problems of NCLB before the legislation comes up for renewal. The goal of educators should now be the study of school vouchers to correct the deficits and create a viable, economic, and educationally beneficial process for all students, rather than to debate the systemic downfall to public education predicted by opponents. Choosing where and how your child will be educated should be similar in America to having the choice of where to live, attend church, or go to work (Hagelin, 2006). The NCLB Act of 2002, was intended as a means of ‘equalizing the playing field’ between those parents with the financial wherewithal to make those choices, and those parents constrained by monetary concerns that were forced to endure substandard education for their children. President Bush said it best when he coined the phrase, “correcting the soft bigotry of low expectations,” (Noe, 2004). NCLB demands academic achievement for all students no matter their income status, public school setting, nor disability. Accountability through testing to regularly measure progress, as well as to monitor effective teaching practices, is an integral part of the Act. Teacher’s unions were (and are) in an uproar regarding the consequences of ‘failing’ or ‘leaving a child behind.’

There is, of course, more to a ‘good education law’ than just evaluation and accountability. Most Americans would probably agree that parents of all income levels should have the right to choice as to where their child receives his or her education. Research has been sketchy as to the efficacy of school choices; however, researchers at Harvard University conducted a study, which indicated that choice in education appears to equal ‘improved education.’ The three-year study of the correlation between voucher-like scholarships offered by the School Choice Scholarships Foundation and low-income student achievement in New York City revealed: Standardized reading and math test scores for black students who used the vouchers to attend private schools for three years were 9.2 percentile points higher than those of comparable black students who did not attend a private school. Overall test scores for black voucher recipients who attended a private school for at least one of the three years were, on average, 7.6 percentile points higher than those of black students who had never attended a private school. Parental satisfaction with their child’s school was higher among parents of students who attended a school of choice. When asked to assign a grade to their children’s school, 42 percent of voucher parents gave their school an ‘A,’ while only 10 percent of the parents of the control group public-school students did likewise. (Hagelin, 2006). School Vouchers Position Statement

The highly bureaucratized capitalistic society immersed in globalization comparison and competition, which we call home, may very well implode before fundamental change is established in our public school system. The children of our country deserve the best education possible. The most effective way to achieve that goal, and the goals of the founding fathers in perpetuating democracy through the advancement of quality education, is to empower parents in choosing how their children will be educated. Most people will agree that there is a problem with the educational system today. However, it is important to note how well public education has done considering the lack of appropriate funding and the diverse population of students and student needs. Those who decry the falling test scores in a global comparison must realize that we are the only country, which tests all children, not just our star achievers. Challengers of public school vouchers claim that those who support school choice and vouchers are against the whole idea of public schooling. In the naysayers opinion, NCLB and vouchers are a subversive plot to dismantle the entire public school system. Supporters to school choice and vouchers are painted as extreme conservatives who believe anyone who is against them, lacks vision or the courage to effect meaningful change. Public schools can enrich the lives of children, encourage and nurture their curiosity, and introduce them to a world of formulating questions and investigating solutions. It is time for educators and politicians to work together to find a way to support public education while allowing parents and students the opportunity to choose an appropriate educational setting and the financial supports to do so. Morally, this democratic system of investigation and enlightenment should focus on utilitarian needs rather than the political supporters with the deepest pockets. Without learning from the past, we are doomed to perpetuate failure on an even grader scale.

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About the Author

Michelle Fattig-Smith, Ed.S., author of the Annie Books Series: Experience Asperger's and Attention Deficits Through the Eyes of a Child, is a school psychologist, medical technologist, and parent advocate, who provides professional development in the areas of IDEA, ILCD, RTI, and Living and Parenting with Disabilities. Michelle is a Doctoral Candidate in Education Leadership.

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