School Vouchers: The Wrong Cho Essay, Research Paper

School Vouchers: The Wrong Choice

Susie is a young girl who lives in Florida. Since kindergarten, she has attended a nearby private school. Her parents willingly pay her tuition, even though doing so forces them to cut other corners. They do not mind these sacrifices, since they know that their daughter is getting the best education they can give her.

Jesse lives downtown, in the inner city. She attends the local public school and struggles through her classes. Her mother would like to send her to a private school, where there is less violence and a calmer atmosphere, but cannot afford it.

Then, Jesse s mother learns that a voucher system has put into place for the entire state of Florida. Jesse s inner city, spray-painted elementary school received a failing status, so she can receive a voucher to attend the school of her choice. With the money she receives from the voucher, Jesse s mother is able to send her daughter to the same private school that Susie attends.

Is it fair that Susie s parents pinch pennies while Jesse s mother send her on the bus for free? While meaning well, does the voucher system inadvertently discriminate against children like Susie whose parents must work extra hours to put their children through private school? Is the voucher system really the answer to the problems with American education today, or a way to transfer them somewhere else?

American public schools have always had their flaws. In the nineteenth century, colleges complained of under-prepared freshmen; students who could not write an essay or even spell. A main controversy was bilingual education for newly naturalized immigrants. As America entered the early 1900s, the debate turned to the use of entertainment in the classroom. Teachers felt that they must put on a show in order to keep the attention of their pupils. The abandonment of phonics in the 1920s and 30s was believed to be the reason why the job market consisted of those with inadequate educational preparation. Social promotion and the replacement of the three R s with emotional stability and attitude courses were the causes of concern in the 1940s. The 1950s brought an awareness of low standards. It was found that American children were lagging behind the average standards of the rest of the world. Safety in schools also became an issue; incoming teachers were warned of the physical courage necessary to teach. Illiteracy became the main focus on the 1960s and 70s. Phonics (or the lack thereof) was once again to blame (Rothstein 2).

Now, at the beginning of a new century, what problems have been fixed? Illiteracy is still high, American standards are still low, and graduates are still unprepared. Each generation feels that schools are worse than the generation before. America has been attempting to solve the problems with its education system for 200 years, but nothing has changed. According to Rothstein:

Schools are not up to the task of readying young people for the challenges of the next century. An apparently watered down curriculum ensures that all students, regardless of whether they have mastered necessary skills, can graduate. Social promotion without requirements to master grade-appropriate skills is now commonplace, so even elite colleges must run remedial courses for freshmen in basic math and literacy, and business executives complain that high school graduates are ill-prepared for even relatively unskilled jobs (2).

Are these complaints not the same ones that appeared a century ago? Improvement is desperately needed, but where should it start? Cleveland, Milwaukee, and the state of Florida have suggested an answer: a school voucher system. Voucher proponents believe that the system which they support is a starting place. Voucher proponents across the nation believe that through this program, which places the burden of improvement upon schools, progress can be made.

The voucher system recently implemented in Florida is built around competition. The public schools have standards which they must uphold. Each year the state gives each school a letter grade which rates that school s ability to keep the given standards. If the school receives an F, it stands to lose a great deal of its student body because of vouchers. This failing grade qualifies the children enrolled in the school to participate in the voucher program, giving each student between $3000 and $4000 to attend a private school (Kaczor 1).

In theory, the system appears to be a well-planned step in the right direction. By penalizing failing schools and providing for their students, it seems progress could be made. Voucher proponents believe that by giving schools grades, each one will strive to be the best, receive an A, and gain a higher enrollment. However, will it really make a large impact upon the innumerable problems which exist in today s education system? This year, only two of Florida s 2500 public schools received a failing grade. And, in these two schools, only 52 students chose to participate in the state s voucher system (Kaczor 1). While 52 children may be having a better school year, what about the hundreds of others across the state suffering from a poor education? Certainly, those 52 students are not the only ones in the state of Florida who were receiving a less than adequate education. Yet, the state granted approximately $200,000 to support the voucher system. If that money had been given to the schools, they could improve themselves, so that they were no longer considered failing. Instead, they were penalized by a drop in enrollment. How then can a failing school be expected to improve? As soon as it receives such a stigma, its students leave and funding is terminated. Ralph Neas, president of People for the American Way, told the press, The voucher program is costing millions of dollars that would be better spent on improving education for the majority of Milwaukee s schoolchildren (Whitmire 1). The voucher system implements a great amount of tax dollars to aid a relatively small number of students. While seeming to neutralize problems in American education, it simply creates more by denying failing schools the chance to improve.

There is another major loophole in the voucher system: there is no way to calculate if any improvement has been made in the academic performance of students using vouchers. A comparison between public and private school students achievements is prevented because each uses different tests. In Cleveland, where an inner-city voucher system, is in place, researchers have reached no clear conclusions about the program s effectiveness (Whitmire 1). Without this information, there is no way to determine if giving children a voucher brings scholastic improvement.

There are definite problems with the American education system; problems the nation has battled for more than a century. Reform is needed, but the school voucher system is not the answer. If the plan would go nation-wide, 50 million children would be dropped at the doorsteps of private schools. Currently, only 10 percent of families send their children to private schools (Tyack 2). This small number of elite schools could not possibly accommodate the boom in enrollment caused by student with vouchers. What then? It is very likely that private schools would spring up overnight in response to the sudden number of children seeking to use government money at private schools. Who can guarantee that these schools will be of a better quality than the public schools which came before them (Roberts, Glenn 22)?

If the voucher system were implemented, public school, as they are currently known, would cease to exist. The tax dollars necessary to fund public school improvements and the voucher system simultaneously do not exist.

Our public schools need immediate attention to the condition of their physical plants, the training of their teachers (many of whom teach in areas which they have no special expertise), the size of their classes and the equipment and supplies they need, and the quality of their hopes for the children entrusted to them. They need the money that vouchers would bleed away (Roberts, Glenn 23).

Instead of taking this money away form the nation s failing schools, it should be pumped into them and put to work. Education tax dollars should be put to work solving the problems in American schools. The voucher system is an escape out the back door. It simply transfers all of the issues out of the public schools, placing them in the hands of the private community.

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