Debates Over School Vouchers Essay, Research Paper

The debate over whether or not the United States government should

grant tuition vouchers to the parents of children who attend private schools has

gone on for many years, and has included many powerful arguments on both

sides of the issue. Those who support the private school vouchers believe that

they are beneficial to everyone because they promote productivity in both public

and private schools alike, and they also give low-income families the chance to

give their children a quality private school education. Those in opposition to the

vouchers say that they will drain money out of the public schools, and that they

only truly help a small population, mainly the wealthy and advantaged.

Opposers also believe that the vouchers interfere with the Separation of Church

and State, since many private schools have a religious affiliation. This issue has

truly been a controversial one, with many people fighting arduously. After

reading through the various arguments for each side, one can not help but come

to their own conclusion about private school vouchers.

There have been many school voucher programs proposed in the past,

but they all seem to share one common theme. This similarity between them is

that they all promote giving households that send their children to private schools

a tax dollar-funded voucher that would cover all or most of the cost of the

school?s tuition. Many of the proposals also include the right for parents to chose

which private school their child will attend. The vouchers allows students to use

the money that would be subsidized for them in a public school to go toward a

private school education. This system redirects the flow of educational funding,

bringing it to the individual family instead of the school district.

The idea of school vouchers first became popular after Milton Friedman,

an economist, released two publications, in 1956 and in 1962, that supported the

voucher plan. In his 1962 book, Capitalism and Freedom, when Friedman

discusses education, he turns to public education criticizes it for being

?unresponsive? because it has been free from competition (Lieberman, 120).

Vouchers would provide this much needed competition, since public schools

would now have to contend with the private schools that were receiving the same

payments they were. Friedman believes that,

?most dissatisfied parents have only two options. They can enroll their

children in private schools, in which case they have to bear the costs in

addition to paying taxes to support public schools. Or they can resort to

political action, an option Friedman regards as ineffective.? (ibid.)

After Friedman publicly showed his support for school vouchers, a debate began

in America, with fellow supporters and the opposers announcing their views on

the issue.

People on both sides of this issue have been very vocal over the years,

explaining why they think school vouchers should or should not be implemented

in American schools. In arguing about the same point in the debate, like the

decline in the quality of public schools or the separation of church and state,

each group has found a way to make it fit into their beliefs. Therefore, nothing is

ever accomplished because the groups blame each other for any problems

involved with the vouchers that may arise. Besides the two points listed above,

minority education and low-income student education have also been used as

powerful arguments both for and against private school vouchers.

The Decline in the Quality of Public School Education

-Voucher Supporters

Supporters of school vouchers feel that establishing this program in

private schools will be of great help to the dilapidated public schools. Like

Friedman said, public schools have not had any competition, and so, they have

let their performance slowly diminish. Vouchers would create a contest between

private and public schools, because of the high transfer rates, and the

corresponding loss of funds in the public schools. This would create an incentive

for both to increase their productivity. Standardized test scores, which have also

seen a large decline, will then be higher when the students? learning

environment, what and where they are learning, and who they are learning from,

is improved. Private schools have been typically known to give more attention to

the student, and thus improve his or her learning ability. Public schools can

learn from this and begin, in order to compete with their rival, to focus on the

most important people in this situation–the students.

Defenders of school vouchers strongly disagree when the programs are

accused of draining money out of the public school system. Their argument is

that a considerably smaller amount is spent on private students then on public.

In fact, in an article written in 1998, the author states that, ?On average, public

schools now spend close to $7,000 per student, per year, twice the average at

private schools.? (Coulson, Myth-Conceptions About School Choice) This allows

supporters to claim that the public school districts are not properly funding the

schools with the sufficient amounts they are receiving. Vouchers would not

affect the public schools since they would not need funding for the students

leaving the public system. This meager loss of funding should not affect the

schools at all if they are spending the subsidy they do receive properly.

-Voucher Opposers

Those who are against school vouchers believe that they would reduce

public school funding if implemented. This is because students who are already

paying tuition to attend the private schools will receive the vouchers, thus taking

money away from the public schools. Even though there will not be a loss due to

students leaving the public school system because of vouchers, there is still a

loss because the public schools will now have to share funds with the private

schools. The public schools claim that they need this money more because it

goes to a broader range of services required to serve their more diverse mix of

students, especially those from low-income families. Since many of the students

that attend public schools, particularly inner city school students, come from low

income families, and are the needy people in the community, this loss of money

affects them the most. Thus, the vouchers will only cause more harm then good

according to those opposed to them.

In response to the supporters? argument that vouchers should be

implemented because of a decline in performance in public schools, and a high

level of performance in private schools, opponents argue that this is because

most students that attend private schools come from wealthy and advantaged

families. The parents of these families are usually very well educated

themselves, and put more of a focus on their child?s education. This, therefore,

helps to instill a desire to learn into the children and actually helps them achieve

better grades. Many of the students that attend the public schools come from

backgrounds where education was not looked at with extreme importance, and

they do not receive much support at home. This then, often makes them not

eager to learn, and makes achieving low test grades not a significant problem.

Separation of Church and State

- Voucher Supporters

The Separation of Church and State says that religion, and any

institutions related to it, can not interfere with government, nor can government

interfere with it. This is a popular argument that voucher supporters face, since

many private schools have religious affiliations. The response to it is that all

private schools don?t have religious affiliations. Most of them, in fact, are merely

small, privately owned, exclusive institutions that pride themselves on giving

more attention to each student individually. Though religious schools are

included and considered private institutions, this is no reason to say that

vouchers should not be used since the majority of private schools are not

religiously affiliated.

In defense of the religious schools, voucher supporters turned to the

Supreme Court. Though it has not come up with a final verdict on the issue yet,

the Court has been using a three-part test used to determine the constitutionality

of aid to religious organizations. These three criterion for are:

1) All government funding must have a secular purpose.

2) Its primary effect must not be the advancement of religion.

3) It must not entangle the state excessively in church affairs. (Browne…,

Vouchers: An Initiative for School Reform?)

Defenders of the vouchers say that this test makes vouchers in religious schools

constitutional because 1) the vouchers are for all private schools and also affect

public schools, therefore they have a secular purpose; 2) The ?primary effect? of

the vouchers is to improve the quality of education and give everyone a chance

to attend a private school; 3) By approving vouchers, the state is not entangled

?excessively in Church affairs.? Therefore, voucher proponents argue that the

Separation of Church and State should not affect the establishment of the

programs.

-Voucher Opposers

Those against vouchers in the school system feel that the Separation of

Church and State is a leading reason why they should not be allowed. After all,

it does say in the first amendment of the Constitution of the U. S. that,

?Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion?

(USConstitution.com). This establishment clause explains that the government

can not make any laws that affect a religious institution. Though this clause has

been reinterpreted in the past, voucher opposers feel that it should be abided by

strictly in this case. This is because if government issues the vouchers, they will

also have to overlook the handling of them, even if voucher advocators do not

want them there. That, to opposers, is a total violation of the first amendment.

The Constitution is the basis for all of the laws that Americans abide by, and this

one should be no different.

Opposers to private school vouchers often use the 1967 court case of

Poindexter vs. Louisiana. In this case, the Supreme Court ruled against a

voucher program in Louisiana which was designed to prevent public school

segregation. The Court explicitly declared that “The United States Constitution

does not permit the State to perform acts indirectly through private persons

which it is forbidden to do directly.” (about.com) That, of course, is exactly what

vouchers do. Just as the government cannot subsidize churches by funneling

money through private citizens, it cannot subsidize church schools by funneling

money through those same people.

Affect of Vouchers on Low- Income and Minority Students

-Voucher Supporters

Proponents of school vouchers feel that the use of them by low-income

and minority families will be of great help to the groups, who are more likely to

get stuck in an unsatisfactory public school. Because low-income families often

can not afford to attend private schools or move away to areas that provide

quality public education, they have no other option but to stay and receive a less

than mediocre education. Supporters of vouchers feel that if these students

were allowed to attend a private school with the help of vouchers, it would

?increase the range of educational choices open to low-income families and

reduce the education gap.? (Coulson, MythConceptions About School Choice)

Low-income families would be able to provide their children with a good

education, which give them a better chance to move on, and be successful in the

future.

Supporters of vouchers also believe that the implementation of the

program would promote integration among different races. With all children, no

matter what race or economic standing, being able to receive a quality private

education, there are better possibilities for the classrooms to be integrated. With

more minorities receiving better educations, the vouchers will also help to lessen

the racial gaps that exist. Overall, supporters argue that vouchers will be good

for everyone, because they will include everyone.

-Voucher Opposers

Opposers of private school vouchers argue that the program will only help

a select few, most of which will be those who do not need the help. As stated

earlier, children who are already attending private schools will receive the

vouchers to pay for their education. While some low-income and minority

students may benefit from them, many of them will not because of tough

acceptance practices. Since their educations have been less than average in

the past, many will not have the ability to get into the private schools. For those

that do get in, they face the challenge of being in classrooms with more

advanced students and also not being able to handle the pace of the class work.

Those against vouchers also argue that many low-income families and

minorities will not even take advantage of the vouchers. The programs ?will

assist only the ?motivated poor?, and leave the dysfunctional majority in schools

that have even fewer resources and funds.? (Knowles, Speakout.com) These

?motivated poor? are the low-income families who have the time and desire to

find importance in a good education. Even they sometimes can not afford to

take advantage of the vouchers, due to the fact that they may not cover the

whole tuition expense. Beside tuition, there are also uniforms, books, and

various other expenses that go along with a private school education. Opposers

of school vouchers strongly believe that establishing these programs will only

turn out to hurt low-income and minority students, and further widen the

economic and racial gaps that exist.

My Opinion

After carefully looking over and reading about the arguments that both the

opposers and the supporters of private school vouchers have so arduously set

forth, I have come to support the implementation of these programs. Before I

began researching this topic, I did not know much about it except for the

recollection of it being discussed in school, when I attended a Catholic private

elementary school. I have come this conclusion because I feel that the vouchers

will truly help both the private and the public schools, and all of the students that

attend both.

If voucher programs are established, particularly in inner-city areas, it will

give a boost to both the private and the public schools. Private schools will have

higher attendance rates, and be able to put the funding that comes along with it

toward the benefit of the children. Public schools will have a chance to give

themselves much needed improvements, so that they can retain the students in

the schools, and return to the great institutions that they once were. It will

hopefully be a large wake-up call to the public school system to reexamine just

where all of the money they are receiving is going. It is certainly not going into a

better education for the students–the ones that should be benefiting from it.

Children in both public and private schools will, in my opinion, benefit

immensely if vouchers are used. Public school students will have the chance to

leave these institutions and enter in to smaller, more education-oriented, private

schools. Every student will have the chance to receive a good education that will

give them more attention, which is something that many of them need. Students

who decide to stay in the public schools will hopefully experience a better

education because the schools will have to change in order to compete with the

private schools. Also, the normally large class sizes in the public schools will

now be smaller due to the students leaving. Private school students will benefit

because they will have the advantage of having classmates of various races and

backgrounds in their class. This is good because this is how the real world is.

When students are in classes all their lives with children that are just like them,

they never get to interact with others who are different, until it may be too late to

prevent prejudice and ignorance. I truly feel the school vouchers are a great way

to help both the schools and the children that attend them. Making a change like

this, in my opinion, will truly help brighten the future for everyone.

As the above information has shown, the debate over whether or not

government should give vouchers to parents to send their children to private

school has been one with many powerful arguments for each side. Supporters

of the vouchers believe that they are constitutional and that they will help both

public schools and private schools, as well as low-income and minority students.

Opposers, on the other hand, feel that the vouchers are unconstitutional

because they violate the Separation of Church and State clause, that they will

only drain money from the already needy public schools, and finally that they will

hurt the low-income and minority students attending the public schools. After

researching this issue, I too have come to my own conclusion–that school

vouchers should be offered to all students. Surely, though, this issue will

continue to be debated over for a long time to come, until some sort of

compromise can be made. Hopefully, by then it will not be too late to help those

that truly need it–the students.