



A Union of Professionals

## SCHOOL VOUCHERS: MYTHS AND FACTS

***Myth: Middle-class families have always had a choice in schools, public or private; vouchers are a way to give low-income families similar educational options.***

**Fact:** Vouchers don't result in "school choice" for low-income parents. Don't expect private school choice:

- IF your child has a disability, or any condition that makes him or her difficult and costly to educate. In Milwaukee, for instance, 42 percent of voucher schools report offering absolutely no programs or services for students with special needs.<sup>1</sup>
- IF you cannot afford to pay for the child's education and, with a voucher, could cover tuition at only a handful of schools, most of which promote a religion that may be other than your own. In Washington, D.C., for example, the maximum \$7,500 voucher covers the tuition costs at just three private high schools, only one of which is not a Catholic school.<sup>2</sup> There are also "hidden costs" to families, such as uniform costs, transportation and extra fees.
- IF the private school you want your child to attend does not accept vouchers. A 1998 Department of Education survey of inner-city private schools showed that between 70 percent and 85 percent of schools would "definitely or probably" *not* want to participate in a voucher program if they were required to accept "students with special needs, such as learning disabilities, limited English proficiency, or low achievement."<sup>3</sup> More recently, the *Washington Post* reported that some of D.C.'s most elite private schools were reluctant to participate in a voucher program if they would be required to admit students based on a lottery, rather than through a selection process.<sup>4</sup> Some elite schools such as St. Albans have already announced that they will not participate in the program.<sup>5</sup> Others, such as Sidwell Friends High School admitted only one voucher student, and that student had attended on a scholarship the preceding year.<sup>6</sup>

The truth is that vouchers won't create a level playing field for low income families in the world of private schools. Instead of diverting resources to private schools, we

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<sup>1</sup> 2003-2004 Directory of Milwaukee Parental Choice Schools. Public Policy Forum, January 2003. Available online at <http://www.publicpolicyforum.org/josh/Poster%202003-04%20v2.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> David F. Salisbury, "What Does a Voucher Buy? A Closer Look at the Cost of Private Schools." The Cato Institute's *Policy Analysis*, August, 2003. Available at <http://www.cato.org/pubs/pas/pa-486es.html>

<sup>3</sup> "Barriers, Benefits and Costs of Using Private Schools to Alleviate Overcrowding in Public Schools," Department of Education, 1998

<sup>4</sup> Valerie Strauss, *The Washington Post*: "Private Schools Leery of Voucher Trade-Offs." September 28, 2003

<sup>5</sup> Justin Blum, *The Washington Post*: "Slow start seen for voucher program." March 25, 2004

<sup>6</sup> Need post article and public comment by Program Evaluator Patrick Wolf, etc.

should focus on reforms that strengthen public schools and benefit the 90 percent of students who attend them.

**Myth: It's not the school's or the district's money; it's the public's money. Why should government-run schools have a monopoly on educating children?**

Fact: As a society, the money we spend for public education is an investment we make to develop an education citizenry and a productive future workforce. Voucher proponent Milton Friedman has said that in moving to a market-based system will require more seats to be available in existing private schools, and many new private schools to be established for vouchers to work. This can be fertile breeding ground for “fly-by-night” schools run by uncredentialed entrepreneurs; experience shows that this opens the door for proprietors with criminal records – or worse. A short survey of some of the shady characters associated with voucher schools is enough to demonstrate this:

- In Florida, investigative journalists found that \$350,000 of corporate voucher money was going to the Islamic Academy of Tampa, funded by Sami Al-Arian, the former University of South Florida professor alleged to have been the financial manager for the Islamic Jihad, a terrorist organization.
- A man convicted of brutal rape, burglary and tax fraud headed a Milwaukee school that accepts vouchers, Alex's Academics of Excellence. One former school official also reported seeing staff members using and carrying illicit drugs at the school. Despite all this, the state was unable to shut the school down or withhold voucher payments for **xx** years...
- In Florida, approximately \$168,000 in corporate voucher money given to the Silver Archer Foundation may never have been used to send children to school and is unaccounted for by the owner. Owner James K. Isenhour, who has a history of criminal charges, failing to pay payroll taxes and bankruptcy, was never subjected to a background check before being approved to administer state funds.

Evidence of fraud and misuse of public funding is also mounting among voucher schools in Florida, Milwaukee and Cleveland. With vouchers, there is no way of knowing whether public funds will actually be spent effectively – or even legally – toward the education of tomorrow's citizens.

**Myth: Accountability is built into the system of vouchers – voucher schools are accountable to the parents who choose whether or not to enroll their children.**

Fact: While many private schools administer standardized tests to their students, they are not required to do so, and they are not required by NCLB to give the same tests as the public schools do or to report their scores to parents or the general public. With the exception of the Florida A+ voucher program, neither of the state's two larger voucher programs requires students receiving vouchers to take the tests their public school counterparts take. This means that voucher schools are accountable to *no one*, and are free to use – or misuse – public dollars as they please.

**Myth: Vouchers are more democratic than the public school system because they allow parents to choose freely among schools in an educational marketplace.**

Fact: Vouchers are not more “democratic” than public schools:

- Voucher systems in other parts of the world have been shown to stratify students by socioeconomic status and create a dual market for education – one for those who can afford to pay more than the voucher amount, and one for those who cannot. So the democratic “choice” really isn’t much of a choice at all.
- Under voucher systems already in place, voucher schools are not required to educate students with special needs.
- In the District of Columbia, members of Congress have imposed vouchers on a city that has voted against them.<sup>7</sup> D.C. does not have full voting representation in Congress, so members of Congress representing other constituencies and interest groups, who support vouchers, can impose their will on the citizens of D.C.

**Myth: Vouchers will improve public education.**

Fact: Some voucher advocates claim that in addition to improving the education of those who leave failing schools to attend private schools, vouchers will also improve the education of those who stay behind, because the threat of competition will force their school to improve. Despite claims to the contrary, there is no credible evidence to prove that this actually works.

Researcher and voucher advocate Jay P. Greene released a report in 2001 that claimed that Florida’s A-Plus voucher program led to improved achievement in public schools.<sup>8</sup> This study and a follow-up released in 2003 have been roundly criticized, and their findings discounted, by the research community.<sup>9</sup> Replications of Greene’s study in North Carolina and Texas, which have high-stakes accountability systems *without* vouchers, reveal that it is not necessarily the vouchers that are causing the gains Greene observed in Florida.

Research has shown what works in improving public education: lower class size, high academic and disciplinary standards, and proven, researched-based academic programs. Risky and costly measures like vouchers simply don’t make the grade.

**Myth: Vouchers will save taxpayers’ money because the private sector can run schools more efficiently than the public sector can.**

Fact: Contrary to the belief that vouchers would save money because private schools educate children more cheaply than public schools, voucher programs actually cost taxpayers more. Many private schools charge low tuition rates because their costs are subsidized by other sources. Among voucher schools, in-depth studies of voucher programs point to reckless spending.

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<sup>7</sup> “District of Columbia Voters Strongly Oppose Vouchers – NSBA/Zogby Poll Shows.” National School Boards Association Press Release, December 10, 2002. Available at <http://www.nsba.org/site/doc.asp?TRACKID=&CID=421&DID=8579>

<sup>8</sup> Jay P. Greene, "An Evaluation of the Florida A-Plus Accountability and School Choice Program," New York: Manhattan Institute, February 2001

<sup>9</sup> See Gregory Camilli and Katrina Bulkley, "Critique of 'An Evaluation of the Florida A-Plus Accountability and School Choice Program,'" Education Policy Analysis Archives, v. 9, no. 7, March 4, 2001; Amanda Brownson, "A replication of Jay Greene’s voucher effect study using Texas performance data," in Martin Carnoy, Do school vouchers improve student performance? Washington, D.C: Economic Policy Institute, 2001

Columbia University's Dr. Henry Levin found that, when factoring out the cost of transportation and special education, voucher schools in Milwaukee actually cost almost \$1,000 more per pupil than the Milwaukee Public Schools.<sup>10</sup> And a 1999 audit of the Cleveland voucher program's first year found almost \$2 million in questionable expenses, including transportation for students who were not even attending the schools. The real cost of vouchers comes not in the form of tuition payments but in the form of "hidden costs" billed to taxpayers and to needy families, such as transportation and uniform and book fees.

In Florida, taxpayers spend \$3,500 per pupil on corporate vouchers, and up to \$20,000 on vouchers for students with disabilities. No credible research has yet shown vouchers to be an effective way to raise achievement or help children. However, for a fraction of those costs, programs with a proven track record of success could be offered to students in all public schools in Florida. For example, the state could reduce class sizes – a measure proven to raise achievement – for only \$870 per child. Extended-year kindergarten would cost just \$1,900 per child. And for the price of a corporate voucher, about nine children could participate in a research-based reading program, proven to increase literacy dramatically, for just \$400 per child.

**Myth: Vouchers are popular among minority populations.**

Fact: Pro-voucher groups like the Black Alliance for Educational Options and Hispanic Council for Reform and Educational Options have emerged in the past couple of years claiming to be the voice of minority populations in support of school choice. These groups are receiving hundreds of thousands of dollars from the Bush administration to advertise the provision in the No Child Left Behind Act that allows parents of children in failing schools to exercise public school choice. They also receive hefty donations from right-wing, pro-voucher and pro-privatization organizations including the Walton Family Foundation and the Milton and Rose D. Friedman Foundation.

Despite this, surveys and exit polling data show that support for vouchers, especially within minority populations, is not as strong as advocates claim, and that in some areas, support for vouchers is dropping. According to the 2004 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll, xx percent of the public opposes vouchers.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, voters in eight recent statewide referenda have voted down vouchers, including in Michigan and in California, where in both states over two thirds of African American voters opposed vouchers. A Zogby poll released in December 2002 showed that 76 percent of D.C. voters, including 85 percent of black voters, opposed vouchers.<sup>12</sup> And the National Urban League's "State of Black America Survey for 2001" found that 58 percent of black adults felt that "educational tax dollars should only be spent on public schools."

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<sup>10</sup> Henry Levin, "Educational Vouchers: Effectiveness, Choice, and Costs." *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, vol. 17. 1998

<sup>11</sup> Lowell C. Rose and Alec M. Gallup. The 35<sup>th</sup> Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitude Toward the Public Schools. August, 2003. Available online at <http://www.pdkintl.org/kappan/k0309pol.htm#5>

<sup>12</sup> National School Boards Association, 2002.