

Vouchers: What Is at Stake?

Public education is the foundation of our democracy. NEA is committed to the concept that great public schools are the civil right of every child. Vouchers will never provide every child with access to a great school. They do not improve the achievement of students who take them, and they do nothing to improve public schools. Instead, vouchers leave most children behind, especially those with special needs, and they create a need for additional bureaucracy to administer and monitor such programs. NEA supports real school improvement within the existing public school system that will address the individual needs of ALL children. The future of this great nation depends on it.

—NEA President Dennis Van Roekel

School vouchers are any form of public payment to help parents send their children to private schools, including religious schools. They may take the form of direct payments to parents, tax credits, or “scholarships” from organizations designated as beneficiaries for tax credit contributions. Voucher supporters prefer these alternative terms because they know that the very word “voucher” costs them public support. So they are careful to use terms with marketing appeal such as “opportunity scholarships” and “parental choice.”

Voucher proposals may differ in eligibility, funding levels, and regulation, but ultimately each paves the way to a two-tiered school system funded by public tax dollars but lacking public oversight.

NEA opposes vouchers and tuition tax credits

A great public school is the basic right of every child. It is at the heart of our nation’s promise of democracy and equality for all. Vouchers do nothing to insure that all children are granted this most fundamental right. Not only do they divert public tax dollars to private schools that are not held accountable to the public, but they also do nothing to improve the education of the few children who receive a voucher. And they also do nothing for the majority of students who remain in public schools that are harmed by the budget cuts required to fund the vouchers.

The National Education Association has consistently and unequivocally opposed voucher plans, tuition tax credits, and other such funding arrangements that pay for students to attend private schools in order to obtain educational services that are available to them in public schools to which they have reasonable access.¹ The Association further opposes any privatization arrangement that would weaken the wall of separation between church and state, support segregation, or otherwise undermine public education.²

What does the research say about vouchers?

The most credible scientific research has indicated no differences in the academic achievement of voucher students compared to public school students, despite the fact that private schools get to choose which students will attend their schools.³ Pro-voucher research⁴ has been discredited as methodologically flawed.⁵

Furthermore, vouchers do not improve public schools by creating competition.⁶ Public and private schools operate on very different playing fields so true competition between the two is impossible.

Why are vouchers bad public policy?

Vouchers are the *wrong* choice for public school reform. Our neighborhood public schools need programs that will improve the conditions of teaching and learning for all our children, not offer false hope to a

few. Not every child gets a voucher; not every child who gets a voucher will be admitted to the private school of their choice; and private schools are not necessarily better than public schools.

Vouchers leave children behind. Voucher proponents like to use the word “choice” because they know it has great appeal, but when using a voucher, a parent’s choice begins—and ends—with choosing the schools to which their children will apply. Private schools are not required to participate in voucher programs, and those that do participate may limit their enrollment. Some voucher programs even allow schools to maintain exclusive admissions policies and discriminate on the basis of religion, gender, English proficiency, and special needs. Most private schools do not provide programs for special needs students, and in many areas of the country, there are no private schools at all.

Programs that allow private schools to charge tuition and fees in excess of the sum provided by the voucher further limit parents’ “choices.” Finally, private schools are not required to keep voucher students who do not meet their standards, and they are not required to provide students with due process before asking them to leave.

Vouchers do not improve student achievement. Given the limited resources available for education reform, only proven programs should be funded. There is no scientifically valid research indicating that vouchers improve the academic achievement of students who receive them. Voucher supporters like to claim that vouchers will force public schools to compete for students, thereby forcing them to improve, but there is no valid scientific evidence to support this claim either. Indeed, competition would require a level playing field, and private and/or religious schools play by entirely different sets of rules than public schools. Unlike public schools, private schools can—and do:

- Limit their enrollments and class sizes;
- Discriminate in their admissions on the basis of

race, gender, religion, family background, academic achievement, test scores, disciplinary history, athletic ability, and special needs;

- Expel students at any time and without due process;
- Refuse to administer state tests and report on the results;
- Refuse admission to special needs students;
- Refuse to comply with open meeting and open records laws and refuse to share information on how they are spending public money and how their students are doing;
- Refuse to require that their teachers are certified or qualified.

In fact, when test scores are weighted to reflect socioeconomic level, race, and disability, public school students have actually been found to outperform private school students.⁷

At a time when public schools are being held to ever higher standards of accountability, it is unconscionable and indefensible to provide public funds to private schools that are not required to meet any of those same standards.

Voucher programs lack accountability. Americans take for granted that any program funded with taxpayer dollars will be accountable to the public. Private schools that accept vouchers, however, are not held to the same standards as public schools. They are not required to hire certified teachers, adopt state curriculum standards, administer state tests, or publicly report student achievement. Nor are they required to comply with open meetings and records laws. As a result, most voucher programs have not only failed to improve student achievement but also report problems with fraud, waste, and abuse.

Vouchers are expensive. Vouchers aren’t good economics either. They essentially force taxpayers to support two school systems—one public, the other private. Voucher supporters like to claim that vouchers will save school districts money by

reducing the number of students they enroll. But that's not the case in Milwaukee, where taxpayers must come up with an additional \$1,000 per voucher student over and above what they spend on each public school student. Voucher supporters also don't mention the fact that fixed costs—things such as salaries and benefits for staff, maintenance, utilities, and supplies—are not reduced when a few students spread across different grade levels leave a public school for a voucher school. Instead, those students take their entire per pupil expenditure with them, leaving the school to fund its programs and staff with fewer public dollars. Finally, as voucher programs become entrenched, they tend to enroll a higher proportion of students who would have gone to private school anyway, and who thus represent an entirely new cost to the education system. In Cleveland, two-thirds of voucher users attended private school the year before they received the voucher,⁸ while in Washington, D.C., 200 of the 1,300 vouchers issued the first year of that city's program went to students already attending private school.

Public education is under attack

Public education is a cornerstone of democracy. Our public schools are where the American dream takes root, where children acquire the knowledge, skills, and habits that allow them to achieve their goals and become participating citizens in our society. While voucher proponents claim vouchers will allow poor children to escape failing schools and motivate public schools to improve, the reality is that vouchers are designed to destroy public schools and end education as a public institution committed to serving all of the nation's children.

To the extent that public schools fall short of that goal—and they do in too many of America's disadvantaged communities—we should be doing everything in our power as a nation to provide those schools and their communities with the support, resources, and educational leadership they need to offer students a quality public education. Vouchers aren't a strategy for improving the public schools;

they are a strategy of abandonment that would leave America's children behind. The battle over vouchers diverts time, energy, and resources from real school improvement.

References

- ¹ Resolution A-24. Voucher Plans and Tuition Tax Credits.
- ² Resolution A-23 Privatization and Subcontracting Programs.
- ³ *Fifth Year Report: Milwaukee Parental Choice Program*, John F. Witte, Troy D. Sterr and Christopher A. Thorn, Department of Political Science and The Robert M. La Follette Institute of Public Affairs, University of Wisconsin-Madison, December 1995, http://dpls.dacc.wisc.edu/choice/choice_rep95.html.

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Private School Vouchers and Student Achievement: An Evaluation of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, Cecilia Elena Rouse, Princeton University, December 1996, www.irs.princeton.edu/pubs/pdfs/371.pdf.
- ⁴ *An Evaluation of the Cleveland Voucher Program after Two Years*, Paul Peterson, William Howell, Jay Greene, Harvard University, June 1999, www.schoolchoiceinfo.org/data/research/pepgCle.pdf. See also, *School Choice in New York City after Two Years: An Evaluation of the School Choice Scholarships Program*, Paul Peterson, et al. Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., August 2000, www.mathematica-mpr.com/PDFs/school2.pdf; "Results of a School Voucher Experiment: The Case of Washington, D.C. after Two Years," Patrick J. Wolf, Paul E. Peterson, and Martin R. West, Harvard University Program on Education Policy and Governance Research Paper, August 2001; "School Choice in Dayton, Ohio after Two Years: An Evaluation of the Parents Advancing Choice in Education Scholarship Program," Martin R. West, Paul E. Peterson, and David E. Campbell, Harvard University Program on Education Policy and Governance Research Paper, August 2001.
- ⁵ Reply to Greene, Peterson and Du: The Effectiveness of School Choice in Milwaukee: A Secondary Analysis of Data from the Program's Evaluation, John F. Witte, Department of Political Science and The Robert La Follette Institute of Public Affairs,

University of Wisconsin-Madison, August 1996. See also, *Another Look at the New York City School Voucher Experiment*, Alan B. Krueger and Pei Zhu, Princeton University, April 2003, www.ers.princeton.edu/workingpapers/1_ers.pdf.

⁶ *Rhetoric Versus Reality*, Brian P. Gill et al., Rand Education, CA, 2001.

⁷ *Charter, Private and Public Schools and Academic Achievement: New Evidence from NAEP Mathematics Data*, Lubienski and Lubi-

enski, National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education, 2006, www.ncspe.org/publications_files/OP111.pdf.

⁸ *Evaluation of the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program, Technical Report 1998-2004*, Plucker, J. & P. Muller, Center for Evaluation and Education Policy, Indiana, February 9, 2006, http://ceep.indiana.edu/projects/PDF/200602_Clev_Tech_Final.pdf.

Resources

Keep Public Education Public: Why Vouchers are a Bad Idea. This 2003 publication by the National School Boards Association compiles information on existing voucher and tuition tax credit programs. www.nsba.org/site/page.asp?TRACKID=&CID=1490&DID=33735

Private School Voucher Fact Sheets. People For the American Way published a series of fact sheets on various aspects of vouchers, including cost, accountability, equity, religious liberty, and academic impact. www.pfaw.org/pfaw/general/default.aspx?oid=5557