



## The Value of Vouchers

by Thomas Reeves

The voucher system is still fighting its way through state legislatures and the courts. The concept of giving school money directly to parents and letting them choose schools for their children breaks the well established precedent in this country of sending almost all children to public schools, where they were given courses in traditional subject matter and taught patriotic and moral values common to most American citizens. Indeed, there is a case against vouchers.

In the first place, there is often no guarantee that the academic standards of the new schools will be equal to or better than the public schools. New schools emerged along with vouchers, and not all have been led by those with high professional qualifications and scrupulous business standards. Moreover, current vouchers are going almost exclusively to the poor (the Washington D.C. program serves only about 1,630 children from very poor families), and the parents of these children, often minorities and often single mothers, may be unable to assess the quality of the new schools.

In Milwaukee, voucher schools must be accredited, part of a recent deal that allows the number of students going to private schools to increase from 15,000 to 22,500. More than 125 such schools are expected to be offering courses next month. Some will no doubt fail to receive the necessary academic approval. A few seem to be resisting the requirement.

Secondly, many of the new schools have strong religious content. Ninety five percent of vouchers have been used to enter religious schools. This breaks with a tradition in this country, going back to the 1840s, of keeping religion officially separate from the curriculum in public schools. Muslim schools, for example, may teach faith and behavior that tax dollars should not be supporting, at least in the opinion of the vast majority of Americans. And many Protestant evangelicals resent the expenditure of their taxes on Catholic religious instruction, however indirectly it is presented.

Thirdly, the voucher system may drain funds from the traditional public schools. While there is no direct correlation between expenditures and test scores, it is reasonable to want first class facilities for students and respectable salaries for teachers. Many public schools need more money, and vouchers may prevent them from obtaining it.

In the fourth place, there is no strong evidence that vouchers appreciably assist learning. The most recent example of this fact came from a report released on July 14, 2006 by the U.S. Department of Education. When test scores are adjusted for race, socioeconomics, and other factors, the study noted, students in public schools perform as well as their private school peers. The study has its critics, including Harvard University professor Paul Peterson, who contends that some of the study's adjustment for student characteristics were invalid. The study did not alter the support of the Bush administration for vouchers. U.S. Education Secretary Margaret Spellings called for a federally financed, \$100 million voucher system for low-income students.

Moreover, the public schools have created all sorts of charter schools, specialized institutions designed to respond to the problem of failing schools.

The case for vouchers focuses on the failure of many schools to educate low-income Americans, in particular urban minorities. In Milwaukee public schools, about 40% of ninth-graders fail to graduate from high school. The composite score for Milwaukee students taking the ACT in 2004-05 was 17.5, the lowest in the last nine school years and well below the statewide average of 22.2%. The National Assessment of Educational Progress, "the nation's report card," reports that only 25% of black 17 year olds read as well as the average white 17 year old. The average black high school graduate has the academic proficiency of the average white 8<sup>th</sup> grader. Dramatic, even drastic changes have to be made to end this tragedy, critics contend, and the innovations necessary can only come from new institutions with new ideas.

Then too, there is the belief that government should not dictate the content of the education of all those unable to afford private school, especially at a time when the public schools have often become physically dangerous and a great many teachers have abandoned traditional religious and moral standards.

All in all, it seems sensible to encourage the experiment of voucher schools. In 2002, then U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige issued a statement during the historic Supreme Court case that later accepted vouchers in Cleveland: "Throughout America, far too many children are trapped in failing schools. These children need and deserve access to a quality education, and their parents should be empowered to help them achieve their dreams....As a nation, we must focus squarely on the needs of children and parents, not on perpetuating the status quo, especially in those areas where the system has failed to adequately serve its students. If I have to choose between protecting the system and educating the children, I'll choose the children every time. We must help those children who need it most, especially in our competitive global economy."