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## **Is it Time for Educational Vouchers**

by James W. Skillen

If we begin public vouchers, we might just as well abandon public schools," said Rep. Diana Degette, a Colorado Democrat, during a recent congressional debate over proposed funding for a small voucher experiment in Washington, D.C.

Virginia Rep. James Moran, one of the few Democrats to support the proposal, countered that while he fully supports public schooling he sees nothing wrong with giving a few poor parents the means to choose from among several public and independent schools for their children.

What are these vouchers that seem to be at the center of this storm on Capitol Hill? They are certificates given to eligible parents to use to defray tuition costs for their children up to the amount indicated on the voucher's face. A school eligible to receive the voucher can turn it in to the government in exchange for the cash amount.

The recent congressional debate was triggered because the public school system in Washington is broken. Fights over how to improve or reform it have raged for years. The nation's capital is not alone. New York, Cleveland, Chicago, and perhaps the city where you live may be facing the same problem.

But what is the problem? Is it simply not enough money to attract and keep good teachers? Is it bureaucratic drag? Is it racial discrimination?

Many congressional Republicans say the problem is too much government bureaucracy. They promote more parental choice and market competition. Most Democrats say that vouchers and a free market in education would kill public schooling and lead to more discrimination against the poor and ethnic minorities. Their answer is to pour more federal dollars into public schools. That's why many Democrats opposed the Washington, D.C., voucher bill and President Clinton promised to veto it.

Must we choose between these positions, or is there a better way to improve education for all? I believe the answer lies in a more diversified, pluralistic system that would treat all schools--both government-run and independent--equally. Only with a different system of school governance and funding will it be possible to do justice to the poor, to ethnic minorities, and to the diverse range of convictions and expectations that parents hold in the United States. A voucher system, in my view, is the best way to initiate such a new, pluralistic system.

### **THE ROOTS OF THE PROBLEM**

Today's public school system was built on several assumptions from the early 19th century. Back then, nonsectarian meant Protestant, and parochial meant Catholic. The idea that all children should enjoy a free (tax-supported) education was pushed by those who believed that education was the public's responsibility and that all children--especially Catholic immigrants--should be taught how to become good Americans.

Since then, significant changes have taken place. For example, most Protestants and Catholics have come to the conviction that nonsectarian should mean secular or non-religious, not Protestant, and that all religious schooling is parochial or sectarian. In addition, national and state teachers' unions have become powerful, non-government schooling alternatives have mushroomed, and the moral and religious diversification of American society has increased debate over what is truly common and nonsectarian in so-called secular education.

These major changes and the mounting crisis of confidence in public schooling mean that the older assumptions about public education must be reconsidered.

Let's start with the ambiguous use of the word public. The publicly approved means of schooling in most states today does not correspond to what almost everyone thinks of when speaking about public education. Public (government-run) schools monopolize almost all tax dollars earmarked for education. Yet most states also recognize private schools, parochial schools, and home schools as legitimate means through which parents may obtain publicly approved education for their children. Why, then, should tax dollars from all the public go to serve only those children who attend government-run schools?

The rapid growth of charter schools is another challenge to the old assumptions. These schools are individual, state-approved and state-funded schools, organized and governed independent of the established public-school governing structure. Yet if the state can charter and fund these schools, why should other independent schools not receive public funding?

The bottom line is this: Why maintain the present system of financial discrimination, which confines many poor and minority children to inferior schools and denies equitable support to parents who, for religious or other reasons, want to use non-government schools approved and licensed by the states?

The fact is that without support from public vouchers many parents with sufficient income already choose independent schools for their children. And a growing number of families are taking the home-schooling route. It does not appear that those who attend independent schools turn out to be any less American or any more parochially confined than students who attend public schools. If the present public school system cannot satisfy the needs or maintain the confidence of all citizens, then simply trying to keep poorer families from having any choice will not guarantee the solvency of the system. The challenge we should accept is to find away to offer every child a free, fair, and quality education. Our present system does not do that.

## **CHALLENGING THE OLD ASSUMPTIONS**

To address both the crisis of the present system and the possibility of a voucher program, we must challenge the old assumptions about public education head on. For example, instead of using the word public to refer only to government-run schools, we should use it to refer to all publicly approved schools, including religious schools and home schools. Then it will be easier to see why taxes collected for the purpose of supporting the free education of all citizens really ought to support the education of all children.

It is clear from this point of view, however, that most proposals for voucher experiments, such as the one Congress proposed for Washington, D.C., are inadequate. To propose funding for a small voucher of \$1,000 to \$3,000 for only a small percentage of poor people is doubly unjust. It would mean giving some poor people an advantage that others do not receive, and it would leave some who are eligible for vouchers in a position of being unable to use them because they could not afford the additional tuition. What we need is not a few crumbs from the public table sprinkled unfairly to a few parents who can afford to opt out of public schools. Rather, a new system is needed that provides full and equal funding of all children in all the schools their parents choose, whether those be charter schools, government-run schools, church-run schools, or independent religious or non-religious schools.

One key argument opposing this kind of reform is that only public schools are open to everyone on a nonsectarian basis. Only public schools can offer a common civic education capable of holding the republic together.

There are several problems with this argument. One is that non-government schools are as capable as government-run schools of training children to become good citizens. Nothing about my proposal would

prohibit local, state, or federal governments from mandating that every child learn civics, English, mathematics, and anything else deemed essential for citizenship. The public doesn't have to own and run the schools to ensure that they do what is essential. But there is also no reason why schools should not be allowed to teach the essentials from their own philosophical or religious vantage point and to offer courses that go well beyond the fundamentals of citizenship.

Furthermore, the argument that public schools alone can be nonsectarian and nonexclusive is mistaken on two counts. First, no school can be neutral and nonsectarian. The simple decision, for example, to exclude religion from education reveals a non-neutral worldview. In that sense, a Catholic or Jewish school is no more sectarian than any of today's public schools. Second, government's responsibility to assure that no child is excluded from a fair and equal education, regardless of race, sex, or religion, should not be confused with the idea that a single, government-run school system can provide such an education to all children. To the contrary; precisely because education is a decidedly moral, cultural, mind-shaping enterprise, the only way government can remain properly neutral and unbiased is to support as diverse a range of schools as parents want to choose. For government to place all its financial weight on the side of one school system violates its own neutrality and nonexclusive obligation to all citizens.

Some people charge that public funding of diverse schools would violate the separation of church and state because some schools are religious. The answer is simple: if public education means government support of the free education of every child, then public funding ought to be distributed in ways that respect the different educational philosophies families have, since it is parents who have the right to choose schools for their children. For a family to choose an explicitly religious school in no way involves government in the establishment of religion. Government would simply be funding parent-chosen education and upholding the First Amendment right of its citizens to exercise their religious freedom.

American education is in trouble today for many reasons. One of them is its unjust governance and funding system. Changing that system to be fully pluralistic by using public vouchers will help overcome many injustices now borne by those especially the poor-whose preferred choice of schooling is thwarted. A radical change in governance and funding will not solve every educational problem. Nor will it necessarily renew our culture or guarantee excellent education. But it would go a long way toward releasing the innovative energies of parents and educators and restoring public confidence in government's ability to uphold justice for all.

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## **Funding for Christian Education in Canada**

by Peter Buisman

For several years now Christian schools in Canada have been lobbying their provincial governments to start funding or increase funding for their schools. Three provinces--British Columbia, Alberta, and Manitoba--have been successful. In Alberta, for example, the government provides about \$1,900 per student in Protestant and Catholic schools; the amount given per student in these schools in British Columbia is \$2,700. Overall Christian schools in Canada have been more successful than their American counterparts in acquiring public funds.

What is it about the Canadian milieu that allows the provincial governments to even consider providing funds for Christian schools? Since Canada confederated in 1867 almost all of her provinces have provided funding to Catholic schools. Since French-speaking Canadians were primarily Roman Catholic at the time of

confederation, Catholic schools were promised funding as an incentive for inclusion into the confederation. As more provinces joined Canada, funding for Catholic schools was written into provincial constitutions. Thus the historical precedent was set. Now independent Christian schools claim that they should receive government funding as well, since they teach the provincial curriculum and have hiring and student acceptance policies that are similar to Catholic schools.

Since the historical privilege has been established, the argument that gets the greatest response for Christian schools is that of personal choice. Individual choice is a powerful part of Canadian culture. In today's individualistic society it is difficult for governments to force parents to send their children to a public school. That is why the option of providing a choice is gaining popularity. Public school systems are starting to include as their "schools of choice" schools for girls, ballet schools, sports schools, and even schools with distinct Christian programs.

Provincial governments are also realizing how much Christian schools contribute to the common good. They reason that if these schools offer the provincial curriculums, hire provincially certified teachers, and are parent-controlled, perhaps they should be funded. Christian schools are not viewed so much as private schools but as alternatives, providing choices for parents and meeting the needs of specific students. Religious relativism is a friend of the faith when it comes to Christian school funding.

Yet some provinces, such as Ontario, continue to withhold funding from Christian schools. The primary issue is not separation of church and state but, rather, a question of money and power. The powerful teachers' unions and the school-board associations worry that independent schools will take students and jobs away from the public schools. Despite the gains, Christian schools in Canada continue to face real challenges in achieving acceptance and enjoying equality with the public school system.

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