

Education vouchers!!! or Education vouchers???  
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**Introduction**

During our Comparative Education Seminar, one suggestion that consistently surfaced in conversations was that of an education voucher system in the United States. In class, it seemed to be the 'end all, be all' to the issues in the public education system. Vouchers would fix everything. Though I cannot lie; I do see the benefit of education vouchers. However, in this paper, I will show that in order to be successful, implementation of education vouchers leaves many questions that need to be answered.

**Overview of the voucher system**

Tax financed certificates, or vouchers, were first proposed in 1955 by Nobel Prize winner Milton Friedman. Joseph L. Bast and David Harmer, [The Libertarian Case for Voucher and Some Observations on the Anti-Voucher Separationists, Policy Analysis: Vouchers and Educational Freedom: A Debate, Cato Policy Analysis No. 269.](#) [www.cato.org/pubs/pas/pa-269.html](http://www.cato.org/pubs/pas/pa-269.html). Virgil C. Blum, Catholic priest and academic agreed. His writing notes that education should be completely separated from government control: "[E]ven if government tells the citizen what brand of food he must eat and what fashion of clothes he must wear. But freedom cannot long survive when government tells him what thoughts he must think." Id.

Another important component to education vouchers is that parents are able to divert their portion of tax that usually funds public education to an institution that

Education vouchers!!! or Education vouchers???

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performs better than state funded institutions. History and Debate of School Vouchers.

Debate.org.

The bottom line on both sides of the debate is money. Public education is currently funded by a combination of federal and state funds and local property taxes. According to voucher proponent David Salisbury of the Cato Institute, public education accounts for the largest line item in state budgets. He argues that a voucher system would save states money because the private school system spends less per pupil than the public school system. School Voucher Debate, American Education, March 26, 2004. [www.pbs.org/now/society/voucherdebate.html](http://www.pbs.org/now/society/voucherdebate.html).

### **Relevant law**

Many arguments for and against education vouchers center around Constitutional law. The First Amendment lay at the crux of these arguments. Both proponents and critics quote the separation of the church and the state to support their arguments. The Establishment Clause and the Free Exercise Clause of the the First Amendment have been roped into the school voucher debate. The Establishment Clause, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion..." and the Free Exercise Clause, "...or prohibiting the free exercise thereof[,]" both speak to religious education. U.S. Constitution. These clauses first became embroiled in education discussions during the 1960's with debates surrounding prayer in schools. See *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962) and *Abington Township v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963). This argument has now entered the arena in the school voucher debate.

A landmark case which allowed school vouchers is *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*. 536 U.S. 639. After the public schools in Cleveland, Ohio's poorer communities were

Education vouchers!!! or Education vouchers???

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deemed failures, the Ohio legislature enacted the Pilot Project Scholarship Program. *Id.*

at 644. The Program offered a limited number of tuition vouchers for affected students

to attend participating public and private schools in the city and neighboring suburbs. *Id.*

at 645. The Program also allowed for tutorial aid for those that remained in the “failing”

schools. *Id.* The vouchers gave this option to children in grades kindergarten through

third grade. *Id.* Vouchers were disbursed by via a lottery method. *Id.* at 646. When state

taxpayers brought suit, the U.S. Supreme Court decided that the Program did not

violate the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment as it passed a five-part test

the Court developed. That test, the Private Choice Test, requires voucher programs to:

(1) have a valid secular purpose; (2) go to parents and not schools; (3) cover a broad

class of beneficiaries; (4) be neutral with respect to religion; and (5) be adequate

nonreligious options. *Id.* at 668.

### **Community views**

In order to help gain perspective on this topic, I spoke with a Catholic school principal, a public school teacher, and a parent of Chicago Public school students. Each had primary concerns. Dr. James Quaid, principal of Gordon Tech College Prep in Chicago discussed the regulatory impact of school vouchers. His concerns were the practical implications on admissions, discipline, and restrictions on religious educations. He also discussed concerns with enrollment decisions: “Would we be able to control who attends schools?” Dr. Quaid says that if implemented, the keys to success would be whether schools would have independent decision-making power and communications with oversight authorities.

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Tai Sellers, a high school teacher in Chicago noted that “the biggest effect will be on educational standards. If the standards are affected, all minority groups will be at further risk. And that will then affect teachers. Our measurements will change and we may be more easily blamed and put on the chopping block, which will make all of us extremely nervous. The bottom line is that the focus will not be on the kids; it will always be on the politics.”

Andrea Gordon, parent of two Chicago Public Schools students, would jump at the opportunity to get an education voucher. Chiefly among her reasons are the safety of her children and the quality of education that teachers provide. Additionally, she is concerned about classroom size, which usually means that students are can be largely ignored because teachers have to deal with more disciplinary issues.

### **Current implementation examples**

Many education voucher programs exist overseas. Programs in Chile, Sweden and Hong Kong have been operating for some time. In the United States, the Ohio Department of Education offers the Educational Choice Scholarship Program (“EdChoice”). The program was created to provide students in failing schools the opportunity to attend a private school that has elected to participate in the program. Ohio Department of Education website, [education.ohio.gov/Topics/Other-Resources/Scholarships/EdChoice-Scholarship-Program](http://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Other-Resources/Scholarships/EdChoice-Scholarship-Program). The program offers up to 60,000 scholarships, with up to 2,000 scholarship extended to kindergartners whose family income is at or below 200% of the federal poverty guidelines.

Another well-established voucher program for low and middle-income families exists in Wisconsin. The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program was established in 1990

Education vouchers!!! or Education vouchers???

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Loyola University Chicago of Law

and is the largest such program in the United States. The Milwaukee School Voucher

Program, [www.schoolchoice.net/prop38/milwaukee.html](http://www.schoolchoice.net/prop38/milwaukee.html). The Wisconsin legislature

recently issues a favorable review of the program, which appears to be working well to

encourage public schools to reform based upon competition. *Id.*

### **Questions left unanswered**

#### *Free market competition*

According to Nobel Prize-winning economist Milton Friedman, one of the most beneficial side effects of a school voucher system is that a free-market competition

would improve school quality. The School Voucher Debate, Hannah Boyd,

education.com, July 9, 2013. Mr. Friedman argues that students would “flock” to “good”

schools and abandon “bad” ones. *Id.*

Critics of the free market system believe that allowing people to opt out of the public school system undermines the entire public education system and puts funding at critical risk. History and Debate of School Vouchers, Debate.org.

<http://www.debate.org/school-vouchers/>. On the other hand, proponents of the system

think that a free market will not only encourage healthy competition amongst public and

religious-based private schools, it will also support private non-religious schools to be

introduced into the market. Bast & Harmer. The effect is a higher level of freedom for

parents to choose education providers for their children. *Id.*

Of note is to consider how schools would market students. With the competition field level, public and private schools would be vying for the same pool of students. With full knowledge that parents would now have vouchers providing them the opportunity for choice, how would public schools then woo parents (and their dollars) to choose them?

Education vouchers!!! or Education vouchers???

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Loyola University Chicago of Law

And if marketing tools are necessary, who would pay for them? This topic alone is another concern for allowing a voucher system to be implemented.

*Possibility for discrimination*

One of the major drawbacks to a school voucher system is the possibility of cream skimming. Cream skimming is providing a service to only the high-value or low-cost customers of that service. When it comes to school vouchers, one possibility exists that the vouchers could be used by parents of students with above average grades with no disciplinary issues. Perhaps one possibility is that if all schools were allowed to pick the cream of the crop, a fair chance would be given in a free market competition. However, that is not the case. Private schools have the ability to discriminate in their admission process as they are not held to the same civil rights standards as public schools. This fact alone makes it still places public schools at somewhat a disadvantage as they have to accept any student that comes to their door with a voucher in hand.

Cream skimming would not be the only type of discrimination that could be prevalent with the implementation of a voucher system. Howard Fuller, Ph.D, Director of the Institute for the Transformation of Learning at Marquette University believes that “voucher systems should focus on poor and working class families who do not have the resources to move if they live in communities where schools do not work, nor do they have the resources to put their children in private schools.” Boyd. Though valiant for the perspective that these families need assistance in obtaining appropriate access to education, this opinion seems to equate to reverse discrimination. There is no argument that upper class families usually live in areas that have ‘acceptable’ public education systems. Current funding is dependent upon local property taxes and the more property

Education vouchers!!! or Education vouchers???

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Loyola University Chicago of Law

tax paid, the more resources schools have and offer to the students of its communities.

If vouchers are only given to certain demographics of people, is it really beneficial for all? Another unanswered question.

One of the topics that has largely been ignored in the debate are special education students. As a parent of a special needs child, there is already a stigma that comes with the cost and manpower necessary to service these children. Therapists, assistants, specially trained teachers, and transportation can often increase the cost per educating a special education pupil increase significantly. If an education voucher system is implemented, how will this affect these students? I have watched how the opening of charter schools in the Chicagoland area have been allowed to discriminate against these students. I shudder to think what would happen if all schools would be able to do so. Perhaps the response would be to implement more schools specifically to address the needs of special education students. If that were the case, would their parents be afforded a higher amount in their voucher?

### **Accountability**

Currently, accountability for private schools is different from that of public schools. While public schools must meet standardized test scores and are monitored diligently to ensure that they do, private schools are not held to those standards. This is another example of how government funding matters tremendously in the education system. Because public schools receive such a vast amount of their funding from the federal government and local taxpayers, they are accountable to those systems. That accountability is measured by standardized test scores. However, private schools do not receive funding; they are tuition-based. Thus, they are not required to be

Education vouchers!!! or Education vouchers???

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Loyola University Chicago of Law

standardized. One question that would have to be answered is if a nationwide voucher system is implemented, would *all* schools, both public and private, have standardized accountability measures implemented? If not, how would accountability then be measured? Again, more questions left than answers given.

Finn and Diane Ravitch of the Brookings Institution called for “clear and high standards of performance [that] need not be national, they need not be highly detailed, they should not prescribe pedagogy or resource use, and they need not cover the entire curriculum.” Bast & Harmer, The Libertarian Case for Vouchers and Some Observations on the Anti-Voucher Separationists. What is not being mentioned, however, is who would provide oversight of newly emancipated schools? One option is to implement an independent oversight board. Another option is to change the look of local school councils. Perhaps they can now decide on what is ‘successful’ and what is not.

### **The Effects on Early Childhood Education**

What then does all of this say about early childhood education? If an educational voucher system is implemented for elementary and high school systems, it would be near impossible to ignore early childhood education offerings. Would early childhood education vouchers also then be available? How would that look? At what age would children be able to start their educational career? Is it possible to split the system: can early childhood be left strictly public or strictly private and have a voucher system as well? More unanswered questions.

### **Summary**

In sum, my personal opinion is that I would like for a nation-wide education voucher system. This is especially true as I am a life-long resident of Chicago, where

Education vouchers!!! or Education vouchers???

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Loyola University Chicago of Law

the quality of public education is often a hotbed issue. I truly believe that an education voucher system would allow for free market and stimulate excellence in the public and private school system. However, the transition to a voucher school system would have to happen all at once and there are far too many questions that need to be answered before that change occurs.