

Senseless School Vouchers

U.S. citizens pay property taxes each year. These funds finance activities such as fire protection services and community infrastructure builds. They also support the government in paying for children to attend their local public schools. If parents want their child's school tuition fully paid for by the government, they must send their child to a public school that falls within his or her geographic tax boundaries. Parents often find these allotted public school choices to be less than desirable though, and begin to wish that their tax dollars could be spent in helping send their child to a more attractive private school within their area instead. In his 1955 essay "The Role of Government," Milton Friedman addressed this thought of using tax dollars to fund private school education tuition (Buckingham 49). His writings spawned the proposal of school vouchers, which are governmentally funded tuition-certificates that eligible parents and their children use towards paying for a private school education of their own choosing (Wolf 417). While the freedom of school choice through school vouchers sounds like a good idea, it will actually cause the demise of the U.S. school system. Lack of funding will send public schools spiraling into poor conditions, intolerance for diversity will rise, and the nation will find itself in an unstable separation between church and state with some families using their governmentally funded vouchers towards a religious private school education (Buckingham 52; Jost 137; Boyd). The implementation of school vouchers will simply be a death sentence for American education.

Throughout his essay, Friedman promoted the idea that "education, like all other goods and services, would be improved by a competitive market" and many voucher advocates still cling to this thought (Buckingham 49). Paul E. Peterson, Editor-in-Chief of *Education Next* and the Director of the Program on Education Policy at Harvard University, argues that "public

schools, confronted by the possibility that they could lose substantial numbers of students to competing schools within the community, might well pull up their socks and reach out more effectively to those they are serving.” Voucher advocates with the same mindset as Peterson fail to realize that it will be extremely difficult for public schools to better their facilities amid voucher programs. Enrollment numbers determine public school funding, and as their numbers drop, so will their ability to provide for the remaining students. These students left behind in the struggling public schools will then be subjected to subpar school programs and facilities, thus generating disadvantages for a mass of students, while a handful from the population enjoy their better-equipped voucher school selections (Jost 137). The nation is heading into such a direction according to the Center on Education Policy, which has stated that “84 percent of all public school districts [were] expected to cut essential services in 2011–12, paring back classes, eliminating language offerings, laying off teachers, and slashing summer school and extended-day programs” (qtd. in Harvey 49). Instead of the government hurrying to aid the public schools in such dire economic times, they explain that much of its funds have now started filtering into voucher programs (Harvey 49).

Some school voucher supporters argue that school voucher programs will help close the achievement gap between white students and minority groups. These individuals think that a school voucher will provide the student with a more inspirational atmosphere by moving a student from a failing public school environment, predominately filled with racial minorities, to a private school setting filled with mostly white peers that are motivated and successful (Wolf 433). They suggest that with such a change in surroundings, a child will be more likely to succeed, for they would be pushed to lofty standards by teachers and eventually come to share in

the same high-reaching goals as their new classmates. These advocates overlook the side effects of such a setup. Although Friedman first proposed school vouchers, he also asserted that public schools have played a vital role in “fostering the assimilation of newcomers into our society, preventing fragmentation and divisiveness, and enabling people from different cultural and religious backgrounds to live together in harmony” (qtd. in Harvey 50). Students who leave public institutions and apply their school vouchers towards an education within a private school, which predominately educate a fairly homogeneous student body, will not have the opportunity to socialize among a diverse population of students. The students’ inability to appreciate diversity will disrupt their openness to other cultures and lifestyles. This rise in close-mindedness will create divisions in what should be the “United” States.

The inclusion of a religious school as a school voucher choice is the central flaw of school voucher programs, for it will clearly breach the Constitution’s separation of church and state. Religious schools will “pose a dilemma because their values and teachings could run counter to the civic values that universal general education is intended to engender” (Buckingham 52). Non-religious taxpayers will begin to begrudge the fact that they have to support religious institutions, especially when the results are detrimental to their society (Finkleman 555). Not only will school voucher programs frustrate the nation’s non-religious citizens, but also the religious citizens as well, for their schools will begin to suffer rather than strengthen. Increased governmental regulation occurs when any private school begins to accept vouchers, and this will prove to be disastrous for religious private schools. The channeling of governmental money into religious private schools will lead the nation’s school system into a grey area in which boundaries between religious customs and governmental policies become

distorted (Boyd). Once private religious schools begin to anticipate the government's funding when creating their budgets each year, they will become dependent on it. When conflicts arise between government regulations and religious values, a religious school's dependency on governmental support will lead to the compromising of its beliefs in order to ensure that it will obtain its needed funds (Finkleman 550). Students within those religious schools will then be left to stifle facets of their religious customs or ideologies, weakening the future of those religions involved.

School voucher advocacy reports on the efficacy of school voucher programs are misleading United States citizens. Over a dozen school voucher programs have been established within the U.S., spanning from the first voucher program constructed by Milwaukee in 1990 to Washington D.C.'s renewed voucher agenda in 2011 (Wolf 418). One would think that with such a variety of programs, there would be enough analyses made to allow for a sound judgment to be provided concerning the value of school vouchers. Patrick Wolf, a Chairman in School Choice in the Department of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas College of Education, claims that voucher supporters have used the "golden standard," a randomized research method, when conducting studies on the effectiveness of school voucher programs. This "golden standard," however, neglects to account for certain elements that effect voucher students' achievements, such as the presence of enthusiastic parental support which can promote a student's scores significantly (Lubienski 476). The negligence of such factors leads to voucher advocates misinterpreting data collected, causing them to publish reports that unfortunately contain false information, such as highly exaggerated statistics. US citizens and voucher advocates need to grasp the idea that, yes, private schools do often outscore public schools on standardized tests.

However, “this indicates virtually nothing about school effectiveness, since private schools serve, on average, more affluent student populations with fewer risk factors associated with academic failure” (Lubienski 454). This brings to light that the fostering of private schools isn’t the answer to increasing student achievement within the United States, but rather more intimate aspects of a public school student’s life need to be looked into aiding.

The United States’ implementation of school vouchers is senseless. The nation’s students, its future leaders, will be kept from obtaining a sound, well-rounded education that would benefit them in the globalizing world. The nation’s citizens will begin to resent their taxes even more, creating unrest among the states. The nation’s democratic stances, primarily the freedom to practice religion, will lose their footing. No one will gain a thing. The reports that try to prove this otherwise contain faulty information. There is no reason for the U.S. government to spend any more time or money towards creating school voucher programs. Is the U.S. school system perfect? No. There are things that need to be addressed and improved, but school vouchers are not the answer. Instead of spending the citizens’ hard-earned tax dollars towards school voucher programs, the US government should look into helping public school students on a more personal level. For example, the U.S. government can help its students receive better parental support through developing governmentally funded programs that teach parents how to help their public school student with his or her homework. The U.S. government needs to stop throwing money and time at its educational problems through school voucher programs, and start using those resources towards developing programs that will help alleviate core problems that deter public school students from reaching their full academic potential.

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