GRAND ILLUSIONS
Vouchers' Dismal Performance to Date

BY Ralph G. Neas
People for the American Way Foundation (www.pfaw.org)

THERE IS A STRONG CONSENSUS AMONG THE AMERICAN PEOPLE THAT THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS NEED HELP. THROUGHOUT THE COUNTRY, A GREAT MANY PROMISING REFORMS ARE BEING PURSUED, BUT NO PROPOSAL HAS GARNERED THE NATIONWIDE ATTENTION ENJOYED BY VOUCHERS, A PROGRAM THAT DIVERTS PUBLIC MONIES FROM PUBLIC EDUCATION TO ENABLE INDIVIDUAL CHILDREN TO ATTEND PRIVATE AND PAROCHIAL SCHOOLS.

In the last few years pilot voucher programs have been established in Milwaukee and Cleveland, making it possible to compare ambitious claims with actual outcomes. So let's look at the real-world experience with vouchers in Milwaukee and Cleveland. The chief finding is that vouchers are a grand illusion.

VOUCHERS FAIL TO IMPROVE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The central argument made in support of vouchers is that they will trigger market competition — and public school improvements — as parents seek out the best schools and leave substandard schools. Let's examine the reality.

Vouchers drain resources from public schools. Overall, the amount of money diverted from the public schools in Milwaukee and Cleveland has been substantial — $22 million in Milwaukee for the 6,000 voucher students, a sum that could triple, barring a change in the funding formula, if the program reaches its maximum capacity of 15,000 students. In Cleveland, more than $5.25 million has been diverted to voucher schools, a sum due to increase to as much as $25.4 million within the next three years.

Supporters of vouchers have presented no evidence to date explaining how voucher monies in Milwaukee and Cleveland have actually improved the public schools or student achievement. In fact, as noted below, student achievement results are mixed at best.

Voucher programs siphon the best students from public schools, resulting in an overall decline in the quality of public school achievement. In an attempt to target the neediest students, the Milwaukee voucher program is restricted to disadvantaged students only. Yet as one researcher writes, "Even when participation was restricted to families with incomes no higher than 1.75 times the poverty level, parents of choice applicants in the Milwaukee voucher experiment had considerably more education and parental involvement than the average parent of children in the Milwaukee public schools."

How then will voucher schools help students whose parents are less engaged, less educated?

A large proportion of voucher funds subsidize existing private school students. Vouchers cannot be considered "opportunity scholarships" when much of the money is simply subsidizing the parents of students already enrolled in private schools. In Milwaukee, more than one-third of voucher students attended private schools the year before receiving a voucher. In Cleveland, nearly one-quarter of the program's cost in the first year went to pay for students enrolled in private schools the previous year.

Former U.S. Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley estimated that a national voucher program would cost approximately $15 billion before even the first child left a public school.

THE POOR ACCOUNTABILITY, DUBIOUS EFFECTIVENESS AND "CREAM-SKIMMING" OF VOUCHER SCHOOLS

It's not even clear that voucher students get a better education than they would if they stayed in their public schools. Let's look at the Milwaukee and Cleveland experiences.

Voucher schools lack basic standards of public accountability for their funds and management. They are not required to comply with open meetings and records laws; they do not have to open their books for public inspection; and they do not have to release test score and attendance data. The diversion of public monies to such inherently unaccountable institutions is a prescription for waste, fraud and mismanagement. In Milwaukee, three voucher schools closed in the middle of the 1995-96 school year amidst controversies over fraud and mismanagement.

Milwaukee has seen other abuses of public standards. Instead of assuring that voucher schools would choose students randomly, as many as 40% of the religious schools in the program failed to demonstrate that they were living up to the random-selection requirement. Some religious schools explicitly exempted their parishioners from random selection. In Wisconsin, a number of religious schools balked at having to comply with the state's Pupil Nondiscrimination Act, which prohibits public schools from discriminating against students on the basis of sex, race, religion, sexual orientation or physical, mental, emotional or learning disability. Facing political pressure, the state Department of Public Instruction withdrew the requirement that religious schools pledge to follow the rule.

Voucher plans have no mechanisms to allow parents to make informed comparisons of schools, as any free-market model requires. Since advocates tout vouchers as a market-based reform, it would be reasonable to expect that they would seek to create mechanisms to help consumers make reliable, informed comparisons of both public and private schools. In fact, the laws now on the books in Ohio and Wisconsin do nothing of the sort. And proposals in many state legislatures go to some lengths to shield voucher schools from scrutiny by their potential customers.

Full disclosure about voucher schools would reveal many significant deficiencies in services. Perhaps one reason that full information disclosure is resisted has to do with the lack of services and resources in many voucher schools. For example, many private

schools refuse to hire teachers with advanced training, serve children with special needs or provide other important services that the public schools generally provide. According to government statistics:

- Less than one-quarter of the nation's private schools have facilities or programs for children with physical disabilities. (About 90 percent of public schools do.)
- Fewer than 25 percent of private schools have programs to provide government-subsidized, reduced-price lunches for children. (More than 95% of public schools do.)
- Less than one-third of private schools provide medical services such as a school nurse. (Nearly three-fifths of public schools do.)
- Just over 45% of private schools provide no remedial academic support services for students who are lagging behind. (Some 83% of public schools do offer such services.)

The very best private schools won't participate in voucher programs. According to survey research conducted by the U.S. Department of Education, some 86% of religious schools would not participate in a voucher program if they were required to permit exemptions from religious instruction or activities; and one-third to one-half would not participate if they had to accept randomly assigned transfer students from the public schools. Only 15% to 31% would participate if they were required to accept students. Most voucher schools are far more eager to accept public funds than to shoulder public responsibilities or accountability.

Student performance results in Milwaukee and Cleveland are mixed at best. The study commissioned by the state found that there was no academic advantage for students attending voucher schools, while another found mixed results. A third study, funded by pro-voucher foundations, found that voucher students outperform public school counterparts, but experts have discredited this research — commonly known as the "Peterson study" — because of shoddy analysis.

They note, for example, that the Peterson study of the Milwaukee program omitted voucher school dropouts from their statistical sample. One critic scoffed: "Would we believe a scientist who claimed that smoking has no harmful health effects based on a study that simply tracked smokers who were alive?" Unlike the other studies of the Milwaukee voucher program, the Peterson team never submitted its work for peer review but instead released their findings directly to the media — in one instance, to the op-ed pages of the Wall Street Journal.

The Peterson team's study of the Cleveland voucher program has also been challenged on methodological grounds. The State of Ohio's official evaluation of the program, conducted by an independent review team from the Indiana Center for Evaluation, came to quite different conclusions; Ohio found that:

- While voucher students performed modestly better than their public school classmates in language, there were no significant differences in reading, science, mathematics or social studies.
- Students attending two newly established private schools performed significantly less well in all tested areas than scholarship students attending established private schools or than their public school peers.

In short, the first evidence emerging from the Milwaukee and Cleveland experiments offers scant hope that voucher programs will truly provide a better education, even in the less complicated environment of a private or parochial school.

THE CONSTITUTIONAL PROBLEMS WITH VOUCHERS

Directing tax dollars to the support of religious instruction — as vouchers do — runs roughshod over the well-respected principles of separation of church and state. No citizen should be compelled to support another person's faith or religious institutions through his or her tax dollars. The Supreme Court has so far refused to hear any of the cases brought in response to the new wave of voucher laws. Backers of the Milwaukee voucher program mischaracterize the Court's silence as an affirmative approval of the plan.

Eventually, the Court will surely hear a voucher case. When it does, it will need look no further than its own ruling in Committee for Public Education v. Nyquist (1973), 413 U.S. 756. In that case, the New York legislature had adopted a program of tuition reimbursement payments to the parents of students from low-income families attending private schools. Approximately 85% of the schools were sectarian. The Court held that the program was unconstitutional because a "primary effect" was to advance religion.

The overwhelming majority of private schools in America are sectarian, and their avowed mission is to propagate the faith.

- Some 55% of Catholic school principals describe "religious development" as their school's top educational goal — more important than academic excellence.
- 59% of Christian schools rank "religious development" as their top priority.
- In the Cleveland voucher program, 80% of the vouchers are being used in private religious schools.

Religious training cannot be isolated in sectarian schools because it is integrated into the curriculum. Schools created to spread the faith generally do just that and do not compartmentalize the "religious" from the "educational." Thus biology classes might teach the religious doctrine of the Creation as scientific fact while ignoring or denigrating evolution. Sex education classes might tailor instruction on birth control and disease prevention to their own religious doctrine or omit it altogether. Classwork that touches on homosexuality or the study of other religions will likely be affected as well.

Students, it is true, can choose not to participate in voucher programs. But the fact remains that taxpayers will be funding religious instruction — and in some cases, religious intrusion.

CONCLUSION

The force that has propelled vouchers to its current preeminence is the Religious Right political movement, specifically the Christian Coalition, the Family Research Council, and Focus on the Family. The energy, dollars and ground troops provided by these organizations and others have helped make vouchers the Republican Party's central proposal for education reform.

Our primary concern must be to maintain one of America's greatest gifts to every past generation and to those that follow — the public school. Yes, we must acknowledge that problems in public education do exist. But the voucher program simply has not worked in its present experimental state, and won't work were it to expand nationwide, at an astronomical cost.