

# School Vouchers: The Wrong Choice for Public Education

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*Social Policy: Essential Primary Sources, 2006*

## Editorial

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**Source:***Anti-Defamation League*. "School Vouchers: The Wrong Choice for Public [Education](#)." October 13, 2003 <[http://www.adl.org/vouchers/vouchers\\_main.asp](http://www.adl.org/vouchers/vouchers_main.asp)> (accessed June 22, 2006).

**About the Author:** Founded in 1913 to fight discrimination and bigotry against Jews, the Anti-Defamation League today works for equal treatment of all Americans. The League maintains thirty regional offices in the [United States](#) and has additional offices in Israel and Russia.

spep\_0001\_0001\_0\_img0146.jpg Atlas 14170048 Photograph Some San Antonio parents and [teachers](#) wishing to warn Texas Legislators of what they believe are failures in the Edgewood School voucher program are outside the Capitol in Austin, Texas, April 28, 2005. They called on lawmakers to reject legislation that would create publicly-funded vouchers for [private schools](#).AP IMAGES.

## INTRODUCTION

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Education is an integral part of the American story. The earliest immigrants to North America recognized the need for widespread public education, and the first public school was begun in Boston in 1635. After moving from the schoolmaster's home to School Street, the historic school educated numerous patriots including Benjamin Franklin, John Hancock, and Samuel Adams.

Despite, or perhaps because of this fundamental commitment to public education, America's drive to teach has not been without controversy. Throughout its history, American schools have wrestled with fundamental questions about what form public education should take. Specifically Americans have debated the purpose of public education, who should receive public education (and how), and how government at the state and federal level should ensure the quality and consistency of the educational product being delivered. Numerous education initiatives and reforms throughout American history have addressed one or more of these questions.

Public education in America is funded by a combination of federal and local sources. In most communities, state income taxes or property taxes on homes provide the bulk of education funding. Under such a system, the majority of state residents fund the public education system whether they currently receive its services or not; in return, all school-age children are granted free access to public

education services, and the nation is assured a high rate of basic [literacy](#) among its populace. By the end of the twentieth century, public education served more than fifty million children.

Public education in America has not been an unqualified success. While educating many [students](#) at a low cost-per-pupil, the system has often succumbed to the inefficiencies inherent in most large bureaucracies, resulting in waste and [poor](#) learning outcomes. In response, some parents have chosen to remove their children from public education and place them in private schools. Private schools have long offered an alternative to public education; private academies predated the establishment of public education in most American cities, though they often served only affluent students.

Private schools have generally been created to address perceived shortcomings in public education. In many cases, religious organizations have started private schools in order to combine academic and religious training. As of 2005, more than 7,700 private [Catholic schools](#) enrolled 2.4 million students nationwide, or about half of all students enrolled in private schools. Catholic schools are typically supported by church funds and private tuition payments. Other religious groups also maintain their own schools with their own distinctive traits.

In a return to education's historical roots, the 1980s and 1990s witnessed an increasing number of parents choosing to educate their children in their own homes. By 2001, an estimated 1.5 to 1.9 million students were being home-schooled in America. Home-schooling parents most commonly cited [religious beliefs](#), low quality levels in public education, and a desire to maintain family closeness as primary reasons for this choice.

As alternatives to public education have expanded, private education supporters have argued that these alternative educational institutions should be entitled to receive state funding as well, because they also provide educational services. This objective, commonly referred to as [school choice](#), would allow parents to determine where and how their children are educated while still providing state funding for their chosen venue. The most common approach to this objective is the use of school vouchers. School vouchers are education coupons, paid for by the state, which parents may redeem at any public or private educational institution.

## PRIMARY SOURCE

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Most Americans believe that improving our system of education should be a top priority for government at the local, state and Federal levels. Legislators, school boards, education professionals, parent groups and community organizations are attempting to implement innovative ideas to rescue children from failing school systems, particularly in inner-city neighborhoods. Many such groups champion voucher programs. The standard program proposed in dozens of states across the country would distribute monetary vouchers (typically valued between \$2,500–\$5,000) to parents of school-age children, usually in troubled inner-city [school districts](#). Parents could then use the vouchers towards the cost of tuition at private schools—including those dedicated to religious indoctrination.

Superficially, school vouchers might seem a relatively benign way to increase the options poor parents have for educating their children. In fact, vouchers pose a serious threat to values that are vital to the health of American [democracy](#). These programs subvert the constitutional principle of separation of [church and state](#) and threaten to undermine our system of public education.

## Vouchers Are Constitutionally Suspect

Proponents of vouchers are asking Americans to do something contrary to the very ideals upon which this country was founded. Thomas Jefferson, one of the architects of religious freedom in America, said, "To compel a man to furnish contributions of money for the propagation of opinions which he disbelieves is sinful and tyrannical." Yet voucher programs would do just that; they would force citizens—Christians, Jews, Muslims and atheists—to pay for the religious indoctrination of school children at schools with narrow parochial agendas. In many areas, 80 percent of vouchers would be used in schools whose central mission is religious training. In most such schools, religion permeates the classroom, the lunchroom, even the football practice field. Channeling public money to these institutions flies in the face of the constitutional mandate of separation of church and state.

While the Supreme Court has upheld school vouchers in the *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* case, vouchers have not been given a green light by the Court beyond the narrow facts of this case. Indeed, Cleveland's voucher program was upheld in a close (5-4) ruling that required a voucher program to (among other things):

- be a part of a much wider program of multiple educational options, such as [magnet schools](#) and after-school tutorial assistance,
- offer parents a real choice between religious and non-[religious education](#) (perhaps even providing incentives for non-religious education),
- not only address private schools, but to ensure that benefits go to schools regardless of whether they are public or private, religious or not.

This decision also does not disturb the bedrock constitutional idea that no government program may be designed to advance religious institutions over non-religious institutions.

Finally, and of critical importance, many state constitutions provide for a higher wall of separation between church and state—and thus voucher programs will likely have a hard time surviving litigation in state courts.

Thus, other states will likely have a very hard time reproducing the very narrow set of circumstances found in the Cleveland program.

## VOUCHERS UNDERMINE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Implementation of voucher programs sends a clear message that we are giving up on public education. Undoubtedly, vouchers would help some students. But the glory of the American system of public education is that it is for all children, regardless of their religion, their academic talents or their ability to pay a fee. This policy of inclusiveness has made [public schools](#) the backbone of American democracy.

Private schools are allowed to discriminate on a variety of grounds. These institutions regularly reject

applicants because of low achievement, discipline problems, and sometimes for no reason at all. Further, some private schools promote agendas antithetical to the American ideal. Under a system of vouchers, it may be difficult to prevent schools run by extremist groups like the Nation of Islam or the Ku Klux Klan from receiving public funds to subsidize their racist and anti-Semitic agendas. Indeed, the proud legacy of *Brown v. Board of Education* may be tossed away as tax dollars are siphoned off to deliberately segregated schools.

Proponents of vouchers argue that these programs would allow poor students to attend good schools previously only available to the middle class. The facts tell a different story. A \$2,500 voucher supplement may make the difference for some families, giving them just enough to cover the tuition at a private school (with some schools charging over \$10,000 per year, they would still have to pay several thousand dollars). But voucher programs offer nothing of value to families who cannot come up with the rest of the money to cover tuition costs.

In many cases, voucher programs will offer students the choice between attending their current public school or attending a school run by the local church. Not all students benefit from a religious school atmosphere—even when the religion being taught is their own. For these students, voucher programs offer only one option: to remain in a public school that is likely to deteriorate even further.

As our country becomes increasingly diverse, the public school system stands out as an institution that unifies Americans. Under voucher programs, our educational system—and our country—would become even more Balkanized than it already is. With the help of taxpayers' dollars, private schools would be filled with well-to-do and middle-class students and a handful of the best, most motivated students from inner cities. Some public schools would be left with fewer dollars to teach the poorest of the poor and other students who, for one reason or another, were not private school material. Such a scenario can hardly benefit public education.

Finally, as an empirical matter, reports on the effectiveness of voucher programs have been mixed. Initial reports on Cleveland's voucher program, published by the American Federation of Teachers, suggest that it has been less effective than proponents argue. Milwaukee's program has resulted in a huge budget shortfall, leaving the public schools scrambling for funds. While some studies suggest that vouchers are good for public schools, there is, as yet, little evidence that they ultimately improve the quality of public education for those who need it most.

## **Vouchers Are Not Universally Popular**

When offered the opportunity to vote on voucher-like programs, the public has consistently rejected them; voters in 19 states have rejected such proposals in referendum ballots. In the November 1998 election, for example, Colorado voters rejected a proposed constitutional amendment that would have allowed [parochial schools](#) to receive public funds through a complicated tuition tax-credit scheme. Indeed, voters have rejected all but one of the tuition voucher proposals put to the ballot since the first such vote over 30 years ago.

Voucher proposals have also made little progress in legislatures across the country. While 20 states have introduced voucher bills, only two have been put into law. Congress has considered several voucher plans for the District of Columbia, but none has been enacted.

A recent poll conducted by the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies demonstrates that support for vouchers has declined over the last year. Published in October 1998, the Poll revealed that support for school vouchers declined from 57.3 percent to 48.1 percent among Blacks, and from 47 to 41.3 percent among whites. Overall, 50.2 percent of Americans now oppose voucher programs; only 42 percent support them.

## Conclusion

School voucher programs undermine two great American traditions: universal public education and the separation of church and state. Instead of embracing vouchers, communities across the country should dedicate themselves to finding solutions that will be available to every American schoolchild and that take into account the important legacy of the First Amendment.

## SIGNIFICANCE

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As early as the 1700s, economists argued for a primitive school voucher system, noting that [competition](#) should help raise the overall quality of education in America. Under such a system, parents would generally choose to send their children to higher-performing schools, rewarding better schools with higher enrollment and better funding and simultaneously punishing poorly performing schools. By letting consumers choose among educational options in the same way they choose an automobile or a shirt, economists advocated harnessing free market forces to improve education.

Critics of school vouchers make three primary arguments. First, they worry that vouchers will expend public funds on religious education, because the majority of private schools are religiously based. Second, they argue that redistributing public education funds with vouchers would further undermine already underfunded public school systems, leading to a further exodus of students and funds. Finally, they contend that public schools provide a common experience for rich and poor alike, while private schools are overwhelmingly filled with affluent students; they claim that vouchers will allow more affluent students to leave public schools, further reducing the average income level in the public system and further segregating America.

Voucher systems have produced mixed results when tried and in some cases have been struck down by federal courts. Supporters continue to push vouchers as a needed education reform, though several communities given the opportunity to vote for vouchers have instead rejected them.

## FURTHER RESOURCES

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### Books

Altidor, Jonas N. *School Vouchers and Parents in Cleveland, Milwaukee, and Los Angeles*. Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Dorrance Publishing, 2005.

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## Web sites

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National Home Education Research Council. "Home Education Research Fact Sheet 1c." 2006 <<http://www.nheri.org/content/view/177/54/>> (accessed June 22, 2006).

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