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PERSPECTIVE ON EDUCATION

It's Not a Good Choice for Our Poor Families

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The Draper initiative--Proposition 38 on the November ballot in California--would create a largely unregulated school voucher scheme. It would provide families with vouchers worth about half of what is spent on children in public schools. Families could use these vouchers (initially worth \$4,000 per child) toward the payment of tuition in participating private schools. Those schools could set their tuition at whatever level they wish, and they could choose among applicants as they wish (so long as they didn't discriminate on the basis of race, national origin and the like).

This scheme is largely a repeat of Proposition 174, which was defeated by California voters seven years ago. It reflects the Milton Friedman/extreme free market approach to education that has been rejected by much of the school-choice movement and in six elections across the country.

A far better school voucher plan would focus on children from low-income families. That is what the experimental voucher plans adopted in Milwaukee, Cleveland and Florida do, as do the more than 75 privately funded school voucher plans that have been put in place across the nation.

The practical outcomes of the free-wheeling Draper initiative, if adopted, are clear. To begin, nearly all families that would in any case have sent their children to private schools at their own expense would (after a three-year phase-in) have some or all of that schooling paid for by the state.

In addition, many reasonably well-off parents who would otherwise have used public schools

would start sending their children to private schools, paying for them in most cases through a combination of the state voucher and their own money. New schools will spring up to serve these families. They will charge roughly what the public schools spend, costing parents only half that sum out of their own pockets.

A very small number of low-income parents would be able to send their children to relatively high-cost private schools that would accept the state voucher from them as full (or nearly full) payment of the school's tuition, treating the shortfall as a "scholarship" to the family.

Most low-income parents, however, would be priced out of private schools that cost anywhere near (or more than) what public schools spend. It is possible that this price barrier might be broken for some low-income families if wealthy donors emerge to offer supplemental scholarships, but that is not assured and in any event would cover only a small share of low-income parents.

Other low-income parents would in principle be able, with their vouchers, to send their children to low-spending private schools. But few good schools would be created because it would be so difficult to offer quality education for half of what is spent in public schools. Granted, some religious schools now offer academically strong programs and charge low tuition. There is no reason, however, to think that new schools would be able to replicate that pattern. Unlike existing religious schools, they cannot count on facilities that were paid for long ago.

Some new, low-cost "storefront" schools may emerge that actually are better than the neighborhood public schools now available to many low-income parents. Yet they are likely to be considerably worse than the new, higher-cost private schools that children of well-off families would attend with their vouchers. In short, Draper's voucher plan seems bound to create a two-tier educational system analogous to our two-tier health care system--Medi-Cal for the poor and private health insurance or Medicare for the better off.

This approach is morally wrong, and it attacks public school failure at the wrong end. The main beneficiaries of the Draper plan would be those now enrolled in private schools and new recruits drawn largely from the ranks of wealthier families. But those who really need good school choices are low-income families now stuck with poor public schools, typically in inner cities or rural areas. Well-off families already have lots of choices, including access to reasonably good public schools in the suburbs.

School vouchers worth 85% to 90% of what is spent in public schools and targeted at working-class and poor families would cost the state less money and, more important, they would be aimed in the right direction.

Choice for the poor is needed. But if school vouchers are to be offered to all California families, the plan must be designed to help and to protect the poor. The Draper initiative does neither.

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