

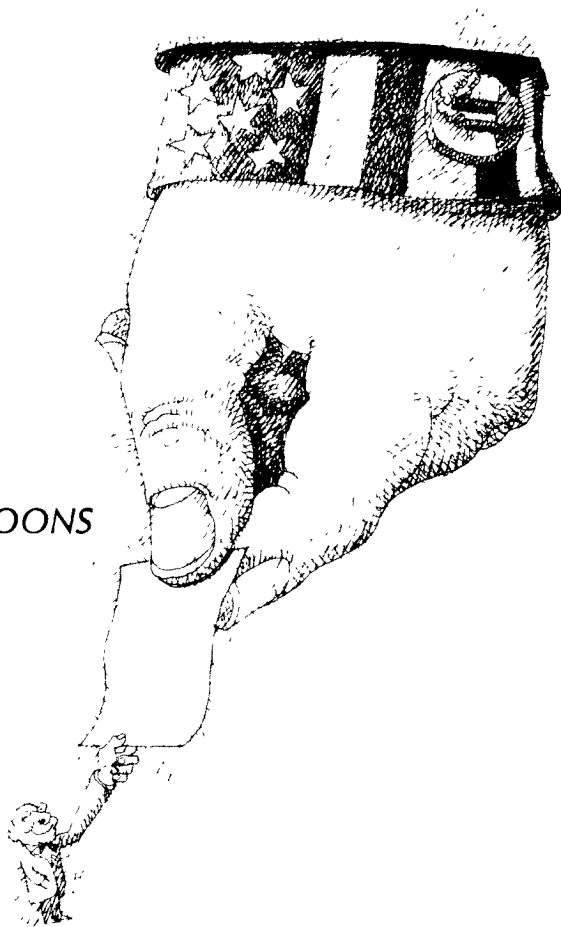
A novel scheme can help us reach an ancient goal:
family control over our children's educations.

How to End the Public School Monopoly

by *STEPHEN D. SUGARMAN* and *JOHN E. COONS*

EDUCATIONAL VOUCHER PLANS sound new and unorthodox, but they are based on some very old and respectable notions. The basic premise of the educational voucher idea is that while it is right for government to assume financial responsibility for the cost of education, it is wrong for government to be virtually the exclusive provider of schools. And that idea goes back a long way—for example, to the writings of Thomas Paine and John Stuart Mill, both of whom strongly emphasized the role and responsibility of families rather than the state in the education of their children. For 100 years, however, starting in the mid 1800s, this premise was virtually ignored. A counterpremise conquered the field: The government should give financial aid only to schools that it owned, thereby assuring that public school attendance would be the decided norm. Indeed, for a time after World War I it looked as though all American youths might be coerced into attending public schools. Although the Supreme Court put a stop to that movement in 1925, it wasn't until the early 1960s that any serious public discussion occurred about the pos-

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sibility of a changed government role—one that would call for substantial public financing of private education.

The writings of economist Milton Friedman were mainly responsible. Friedman argued, in effect, for dividing up the funds now spent on public education and giving them to families in the form of a voucher to be used in the school of their choice. In the 1960s the liberals who were manning the War on Poverty flirted with the idea for a while; some saw it as a possible way to improve the schooling of the poor. But teacher union and other opposition created second thoughts, and little happened. Then suddenly this past year, first in California and slowly elsewhere, the voucher debate found its way back into the daily paper and became the topic of discussion at hundreds of educational meetings.

Before looking at the political prospects of the proposal, let us consider some of the arguments for it.

1. *Family choice.* Who should decide what sort of formal education a child receives? For most children today this power is held by a combination of professional educators, administrators, unions, school boards, and computers. There are exceptions that give some families a measure of choice. A few are rich enough to buy private schooling or lucky enough to find subsidized education at private schools they prefer. Others even move in hopes of finding better education for their children. But for most ordinary families, certainly for the working class and the poor, there is little choice.

"I did have a public schooling; but I never let it interfere with my education."

—Mark Twain

For most other aspects of the child's life, the situation is quite different. The ordinary family holds substantial authority and responsibility. Parents decide whether to have children and how to rear them during the crucial, early years—all with the blessing of society. Families decide what their children eat, what TV programs they watch, whether they attend church, and with whom they play. This is the natural and traditional American way. Society does not regard the mass of ordinary families as incompetent; rather it intervenes only very selectively, through child neglect and similar laws, against the few offenders. Public education is the major exception to the rule that families are to be trusted.

Hence the first and most important argument for increasing family choice in education is one that rests on a familiar principle: In education, as elsewhere, society ought to invest primary power and responsibility for children in those who care the most about the child, know the child best, listen most carefully to the child's own voice, and will be affected most if the child fails. In short, the best decider for most children is the family. Families may not be educational experts, but given adequate information they can make informed choices. Families are not medical

experts either, but would that justify a decree assigning children by compulsion to a government pediatrician of whom the parents disapprove?

In the last twenty years we have learned this lesson in other areas of American life. Consider our experience in the food, housing, and medical care fields. In the past, government experts set about providing things *in kind* for low-income families, on the theory that government provision is best. But what a disaster commodities distribution, public housing, and the public charity hospital turned out to be. Despite these government interventions, the poor and their children were still malnourished, ill-housed, and unhealthy. Recently, we have changed substantially the way that the poor obtain these basic necessities. Food stamps, medicaid, and leased housing and housing allowance programs (despite their shortcomings) are surely substantial improvements. What is common to these innovations is that in each case recipient families are finally given some real choice—over what they and their children will eat, over where they and their children will live, and over how they and their children will receive health care. Why can't we learn this lesson in public education as well?

2. *Choice as social engineering.* There is another major justification for choice in education. Choice is a device for public school revitalization, for educational accountability. The competition it will create is the vehicle for creating increased productivity. For over the past twenty years productivity in public education has fallen substantially. There has been a large increase in real dollars spent for elementary and secondary schooling; but what do we have to show for it? We seem literally to have produced less with more.

Allegedly to combat this problem, an "accountability" movement in education has developed, but it has come to very little. Part of it detoured

BUSINESS AND SOCIETY REVIEW
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"Like a larger umbrella that stretches out to shelter a number of people, Ashland Oil is made up of a number of smaller companies."

—from an Ashland publication
distributed in Kentucky schools

into the world of program, planning, and budgeting and may well have resulted simply in increased administrative costs. Another part of the movement, rather than leading to the development of merit pay for better teachers, has made it even harder for school districts to dismiss incompetents. Where are the productivity clauses in teacher collective bargaining contracts that the movement once talked about? Instead we hear now about insuring quality through teacher competency exams; not only is this strategy unproven, but it also risks excluding from the profession would-be teachers who would perform quite well. The latest vogue is student competency schemes, which threaten to deny students both promotion and diplomas if they do not learn. Enacted in response to declining achievement, this approach may well become a self-fulfilling prophesy: in the face of mounting political pressure demanding that nearly all students pass, school authorities may set lower and lower standards, with the result that concern over declining test scores leads to even worse scores.

Choice, by contrast, promises real competition and true accountability by breaking up the public education monopoly. For the first time, ordinary families, particularly families in poor neighborhoods (those who are especially powerless in the public school system today), will be able to go to their local public schools and make a credible threat: Serve our children better or we will take our business elsewhere; indeed, we will form our own school if need be.

IMPLEMENTING CHOICE

The simplest way to give all families choice is to give them educational purchasing power through some sort of "voucher" plan. It would work something like this: Families that are dissatisfied with what the public schools in their district offer would have the right to obtain a voucher from the state to be used to pay for their child's education in a private school. What of those who might not want to send their child to a private school and yet are deeply dissatisfied with the existing public alternatives? Under a voucher plan, the power of the purse held by families would also force the creation of a new kind of public school organized as a separate, individually managed unit and open to all. Indeed, voucher legislation should include the provision that if the public sector does not provide enough options, families should have the right

to band together and to split off independent public schools from the current public sector, each making its own way by its capacity to attract families to the school.

Some argue that giving freedom to families would destroy the public schools because the more perceptive families would leave at the first opportunity. This is a sad defense of the status quo. It assumes that only the hope for public education lies in forever incarcerating the child who can't afford to leave. This position is perhaps understandable when taken by teachers' union leaders and senior public educators. For family choice would end the captive audience which sustains their monopoly and would force each public school to perform or perish. One cannot

"When a subject becomes totally obsolete we make it a required course."

—Peter Drucker

expect them to encourage competition. But the rest of society need not accept the self-interest of the monopolist as the highest value. The goal should not be to fill the public schools but to increase their quality. Moreover, choice will not destroy public schools; it will revitalize them.

At the same time, voucher plans must contain certain safeguards if low-income families are to have equal opportunity in the private sector. If private schools, for example, could exclude anyone they choose, the schools and not the family would be in the saddle. If these schools were also permitted to charge all families tuition on top of the voucher amount, low-income children would too often end up isolated in schools that accept the voucher as full payment. Various approaches can be used to protect the family's autonomy against such risks. One is simply to insist that schools accepting voucher pupils may not charge additional fees and that they must accept all pupils who apply (up to the school's capacity). Another is to require that participating schools while they may charge tuition, must also reserve perhaps a quarter of their places for low-income families whose fees are fully satisfied by the voucher. Still another approach is to provide vouchers that increase in value as family income declines.

In recent years the federal government has intervened in the financing of education of people beyond high school and prior to kindergarten in ways that emphasize choice. In higher education, the Basic Educational Opportunity Grant program provides a need-based cash benefit to be used by the child toward the payment of educational expenses at the school of his or her

“Why should we subsidize intellectual curiosity?”

—Ronald Reagan

choice. At the pre-kindergarten level, the federal income tax credit now on the books reimburses families for a portion of the expenditures they make in the day-care program of their choice. There are various reasons that the details of these programs should not be carried over to elementary and secondary education. But the perspective they express is an important one: Rather than give to people an education that someone else says is best for them and their children, let them decide for themselves.

The sad fact is that public confidence in public school is fast evaporating. In many places, public schools are essentially custodial institutions. Many children are very badly served. Ironically, the good public schools cannot easily distinguish themselves from the bad apples and get unjustly condemned because there is no way for the bad school to die for lack of customers. Not only is achievement on the skids, but also violence, truancy, and hostility are rising. Racial integration is increasingly failing as central city school districts become dominated by minority group children. Rich families of all races are bailing out to private education not generally open to the poor. Voucher plans may not be the only way to try to improve things. But if not, let us have some other good ideas from the educators. Alas, educators too often act like managers in other declining industries, fighting to hold on to what jobs and power they have and not looking forward to a brighter future.

If the voucher plan were adopted, who might start new schools? Teacher cooperatives formed by now out-of-work young teachers would be common. Central city black religious congrega-

tions, frequently too poor to support private schools today, are likely to create educational opportunities that will compete with the city's often all-black public offerings. Business enterprises may go in for franchising. Families and teachers with specific curricular or value preferences will surely band together to form specialized schools—emphasizing music, feminism, or whatever. In short, variety and innovation would flourish.

Would diversity be divisive, as critics charge? To the contrary, claim the advocates of choice: In a heterogeneous society like ours, the best way to win lasting loyalty to our nation is to show ideological, ethnic, and racial minorities that we trust them to decide for themselves what values to teach their children. Common schooling might have been more important in the past, when immigrants often would otherwise be far removed from the mainstream. Today with the common link of television, as well as the pop culture in music and dress, we don't risk isolation of our youths in the same way. Rather, what is now threatened are family and ethnic values and ways. Under a scheme of choice, school can join with home to form a refuge from the uniformity of modern society.



As for the alleged threat to racial integration, such cries of alarm are much overblown. The reality is that in the urban areas throughout America there is precious little integration right now, and the prospects for substantial integration under our existing arrangements are getting bleaker all the time. Metropolitan integration plans could make a big difference, but neither courts nor legislative bodies seem at all willing to push hard in that direction. In short, what we have to look forward to is more and more cities in which the white school population drops below 15 percent.

While choice does not promise integration, private schools and public schools in the suburbs

now closed to minorities because of costs or local rules will become accessible, and new schools emphasizing racial harmony will open up. Moreover, just as out-of-work minority teachers will be able to form new schools, in order to hold on to their minority families public schools will be quicker to promote minorities to administrative positions.

WILL IT HAPPEN?

Choice movements are afoot throughout the country. Three separate educational choice initiatives were recently circulated for signatures in California. Although none of them obtained the necessary signatures to go on the ballot the first time around, the sponsors of each have vowed to try again. Now that the public better understands the issues, few doubt that the necessary signatures

can be garnered, if only enough money can be raised to finance a sensible signature campaign.

In Ohio a voucher or "parent-check" plan has recently been introduced into the legislature. In Washington, Senator Moynihan, now stymied in his drive for tax credits, has proposed that elementary and secondary school children receive grants akin to those provided college students under the Basic Educational Opportunity Grant program. The sentiment for choice in education reflects a growing mood throughout America: It is time to stop asking government to do everything for us and to take back responsibilities for ourselves. The sentiment for choice in education may not command majority support at present, but for voucher advocates immediate victory is not the goal. Choice is an idea for the long run, and it will not go away. □

THE WIZARD OF WINOOSKI

"Residents of this unstately town in northern Vermont want to go Kubla Khan one better. They are asking the federal government for \$55,000 to study a proposal to enclose Winooski's entire 800 acres under a gigantic dome. This money is the eye-catching part of a much larger request . . . \$3.4 million which would go mostly for reconverting old homes.

"The dome is the brainchild of Mark Tigan, the town's community development director. One of the most successful local grantsmen in the country, Mr. Tigan has already managed to get almost \$30 million for Winooski in federal grants during the past 15 years. For a town of 7,000 (its name is the local Indian word for 'onion'), that is no mean achievement.

"Supporters of the 'onion dome' argue that it would free summers of pigeons and winters of snow and road salt. It would give winter warmth to Winooskians too poor to fly to Florida, they say, and would give the Montreal Expos a convenient northern site for baseball training."

—*the Economist*
May 3, 1980

GRAHAM'S NO CRACKER

"A person guilty of rape should be castrated. That would stop him pretty quick."

—Reverend Billy Graham

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