

# Liberals and the School Choice Debate

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**L**iberals should support well-designed school choice plans that include the participation of religious schools. It is a cliché among liberals that our society should pay most attention to the needs of children from low-income families, often from non-white families. These are the children who would benefit most from well-designed school choice plans; they are also the worst served by today's public schools. The right kind of school choice promises to improve the education of those neglected children who now leave school ill-prepared to become productive contributors to either our economy or our democracy.

Yet, liberals are the most outspoken opponents of school vouchers. Now, it is good that liberals oppose Milton Friedman-inspired, extreme-free-market school voucher schemes. But not all school choice plans are the same. Progressive voucher systems that focus on the needs of low-income families—like those adopted in Milwaukee, Cleveland and Florida—deserve the liberal support they briefly received in the 1960s during the War on Poverty.

Liberals are all for “choice” when it comes to abortion, and most want the government to pay for abortions sought by poor women. They are for “family autonomy” when it comes to deciding which TV programs and movies children are allowed to watch, and most would like the government to put up the needed funds to prevent a large “digital divide” in computer access across our nation's economic classes. Liberals recoil at the thought of government bureaucrats seizing children and placing them in foster care simply because of a social worker's disenchantment with a mother's lifestyle. Why can't more liberals see the desirability of extending choice to all families when it comes to education?

Alas, most liberals seem content for other people's children to remain stuck in public schools that we would never tolerate for our own children. When strangers are the victims, liberals typically put their faith in internal reform of public education. Yet, everyone knows that many public schools are awful, despite decades of reform efforts.

**T**HE same liberal who works in the private sector and would be horrified at the prospect of government taking over his or her industry is often indifferent to the government's near monopoly in elementary and secondary education. We know from the rest of the economy that private initiative and healthy competition is desirable. Our system of higher education benefits enormously from the innovation and leadership of a strong, publicly-subsidized, nonpublic sector. As with higher education, a sensible school voucher plan would not put our public schools out of business. But it would put pressure on them to improve.

Many liberals persist in arguing that government-owned and -managed “common” schools are necessary because they

are society's way of transmitting democracy and tolerance to everyone. This is a romanticized picture of what actually happens in public schools in the year 2000. Nor is there any reason to believe that children who now attend private (including religious) schools are on average less tolerant. Do most liberals, in the end, simply not trust the poor?

Those liberals who care about religion, and who can afford to send their children to religious schools if they wish, often seem indifferent to the religious beliefs of parents who are too poor to make the same choice for their own children. Giving vouchers to children from low-income families should be a “free exercise” issue with civil liberties organizations. Instead, vouchers are miscast as an “establishment” of religion. But the right kind of school choice plan no more breaches the wall of separation between church and state than does the current income tax deductibility of contributions to religious organizations.

**O**F course, school choice by itself is not a silver bullet that will magically cure all our public school woes. That will come only from

changed behaviors of both teachers and students in individual classrooms. But choice can pave the way to those changes. In addition to giving public schools financial incentives to get better, it gives them something psychologically indispensable that private schools now have. That is family loyalty. When families choose a private school today, they identify with the school in a way that is different from families who passively accept the school to which they are assigned. This choice-created commitment translates into an active loyalty that schools can draw upon in demanding the best from their families. This is surely part of the reason why inner-city Catholic schools do much better than their public school counterparts in both graduating and sending on to college children from financially impoverished backgrounds. These schools make it clear that a successful elementary and high school experience is expected of all, and they reinforce that expectation at every step. Nearby public schools often have given up, and frequently treat their charges more like inmates than partners in the enterprise. With that sort of relationship, it should not be surprising that a third or more never make it through the twelfth grade.

CONSIDER the parallel to charter schools, which have proved a highly popular innovation in public education. President Clinton supported them at every opportunity. During his eight years in office, charter schools were transformed from an exciting policy idea into a real world development, with over 2000 charter schools in operation in more than 30 states around the nation by the fall of 2000. Both the Gore and Bush campaigns warmly endorsed charter schools.

Granted, charter school laws vary enormously from state to state in terms of who can obtain a charter, how much funding the charter school receives, and how free from regulation the charter

school is. As a result, a few reasonably charter-friendly states (like Arizona, California, Texas, and Michigan) are home to the lion's share of all the charter schools. Nonetheless, this is a movement that has united both liberals and conservatives.

SPeAKING generally, attractive charter school regimes have these five fundamental features:

1) Charter schools receive enough money to offer a good program. (In reality, though, many charter schools are now unfairly financially starved—especially if they have to pay for their school buildings from a funding package that envisions payment only for current operating expenses).

2) Charter schools may not generally select among applicants but, rather, must admit all who apply, accepting their pupils by lottery if there are too many applicants for the available slots.

3) Charter schools may not charge families extra fees or tuition (which would price out low-income families), but must rather live on the per-pupil allocation they receive from government (plus any modest additional moneys they, like other public schools, might obtain from charitable or foundation fund raising).

4) Applicants can obtain a charter fairly easily, as long as they present a plan that is sensible, both educationally and financially. (In fact, charter-hostile local school districts reject deserving charter applicants).

5) Charter school operators are given great autonomy in setting the mission, pedagogy, teacher hiring policies, and curricula of their schools, even if their pupils are required to take standardized tests required of traditional public school pupils, with the schoolwide scores disclosed as in other public schools. (In fact, in some states, excessive regulation makes the charter school law a sham).

The important point here is that a charter school regime containing those

five features differs very little from the voucher plans that liberals ought to support. Indeed, the most important difference is that, whereas no state allows religious schools to be charter schools, voucher schools could be religious schools, assuming that were Constitutional.

HOW the U.S. Supreme Court will view school voucher plans that include religious schools is not entirely clear. At the moment constitutional law experts admit that the Court's Establishment Clause jurisprudence is in disarray. But, regardless of legal doctrine, the votes of seven, and probably eight, of the justices are easy to predict. In the end, it seems, unless the Court's composition changes, the outcome will turn on the views of Justice O'Connor, who has been careful to write her past opinions narrowly so as not to prejudice the voucher case.

But, assume the Court will approve governmentally-funded school choice plans that include religious schools. In that event, for liberals to support a generous charter school scheme, all the while opposing a pro-poor voucher scheme, is deliberately to disrespect the values of those low-income families with strong desires for their children to attend religious schools. This hostility towards religion in the school choice setting is closely analogous to the position of those who say they respect a woman's right to choose to have an abortion, but who then oppose the payment for abortion services by Medicaid.

It is time for more liberals to help shape and support specific school voucher plans that well serve the poor. It is anything but liberal to automatically oppose every voucher plan that would empower low-income families to send their children to schools of their choice.

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