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plan we have proposed, state constitutions may well forbid it. Perhaps three-quarters of all America's poor live in states, such as California, which forbid the expenditure of state funds for religious (and, in some states, all private) education. Even if state leaders were willing to convert block grants to scholarships, they would face litigation over using federal funds in this way. Such a legal tangle could be avoided, however, by direct federal subvention to the family.

HERE IS a venture for classical Republicans that has so far escaped their roster of market-oriented policies. Maybe such a plan could even win the support of Democrats in Congress who have expressed both their faith in the market and their commitment to education.
Use U.S. education vouchers to give poor families a chance

John E. Coons and Stephen D. Sugarman are law professors at the University of California, Berkeley.

By John E. Coons and Stephen D. Sugarman

A federal bundle of about $6 billion annually goes, with many strings attached, to aid the education of disadvantaged children living in school districts of concentrated poverty. The Republican leadership in Congress is proposing to whittle this bundle down and then ship it to the states in relatively unrestricted block grants.

But Democrats such as ourselves are puzzled by the application of the "devolution" principle. The money should indeed devote, but why send it to Sacramento, Albany and other state capitals? The proper terminus for this largesse is the consumer whose good it is ultimately intended to serve. So why not give low-income families their own block grants in the form of federal scholarships that they could use in any school, public or private?

The policy arguments for this solution are straightforward. The hope of both the school and the family in the inner city rests upon making parents responsible for their own actions - beginning with the crucial responsibility of choosing their children's school. Of all the injuries that government has visited upon the low-income family, none is more gross and so unnecessary as the denial of school choice.

Up until age 5, a child experiences the parent (even the inadequate parent) as advocate and champion. When it comes time for kindergarten, the child discovers the same parent to be helpless to alter whatever the school district decrees. The parents in turn learn to despise their own incapacity to nourish the minds and spirits of their children.

The experience in Milwaukee's small, publicly funded school-choice plan indicates that, when given a chance, it is the exasperated welfare mother who transfers her child from the local public school to a participating private school. As a result, she is far more satisfied with the education her child receives.

It is one thing to criticize parental irresponsibility; it is another to impose it upon those who cannot buy their way out. The social price of the present system is apathy, ignorance and hostility. The victims are fully aware that society allows wealthier parents to choose their child's school by paying private tuition or by moving to fancy suburbs.

As a trial, we propose that children who select religious schools would, in one year to receive a grant of $5,000, whichever is less, to the student. The $5,000, whichever is less, should be adjusted to reflect the differences in costs of the school and elementary school that the student would attend.

If a child chose the public school, perhaps the regular school-night would be transferred from the home to the school, which it would be transferred to remain a public school. In public schools, schools could qualify to be used on out-of-school programs selected by students - such as individual music lessons. Public schools might well turn into schools that compete for students in this manner, evening offerings.

Using $5 billion this way would improve the economic freedom of low-income poor children. It would begin to make the hinging and rusted and rotten door that far too many inner-city schools have become.

Some advocates of school choice agree with this approach; they would prefer to let the parents decide whether to pay the dollar or $5,000 into vouchers. Unfortunately, there is little American experience to justify this expectation; the states and cities that have used their own money to create the autonomy of families, of elementary and secondary school.

Moreover, many states have a similar legal problem. As a result, the Constitution appears
As a trial, we propose that eligible children who select private and religious schools would be entitled each year to receive a grant amounting either to the school's regular tuition or $5,000, whichever is less. The limits could be adjusted up or down to reflect the differences in costs for high school and elementary school.

If a child chose an out-of-district public school, perhaps $2,000 beyond the regular school-spending amount would be transferred to the new school from the home district. Those who chose to remain in local public schools could qualify for $2,000 a year to be used on out-of-school enrichment programs selected by their families - such as individual tutoring or music lessons. Public-school employees might well turn out to be major competitors in this new market for after-school, evening and weekend offerings.

USING $5 billion or $6 billion this way could provide enormous freedom for several million poor children. It might even begin to make the hinges squeak on the rusted and rotten detention camps that far too many urban public schools have become.

Some advocates of devolution may agree with this approach and yet would prefer to let the states on their own decide whether to turn the federal money into vouchers for the poor. Unfortunately, there is little in American experience to justify such an expectation; the states have almost never used their own money to enlarge the autonomy of families in the realm of elementary and secondary schooling.

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