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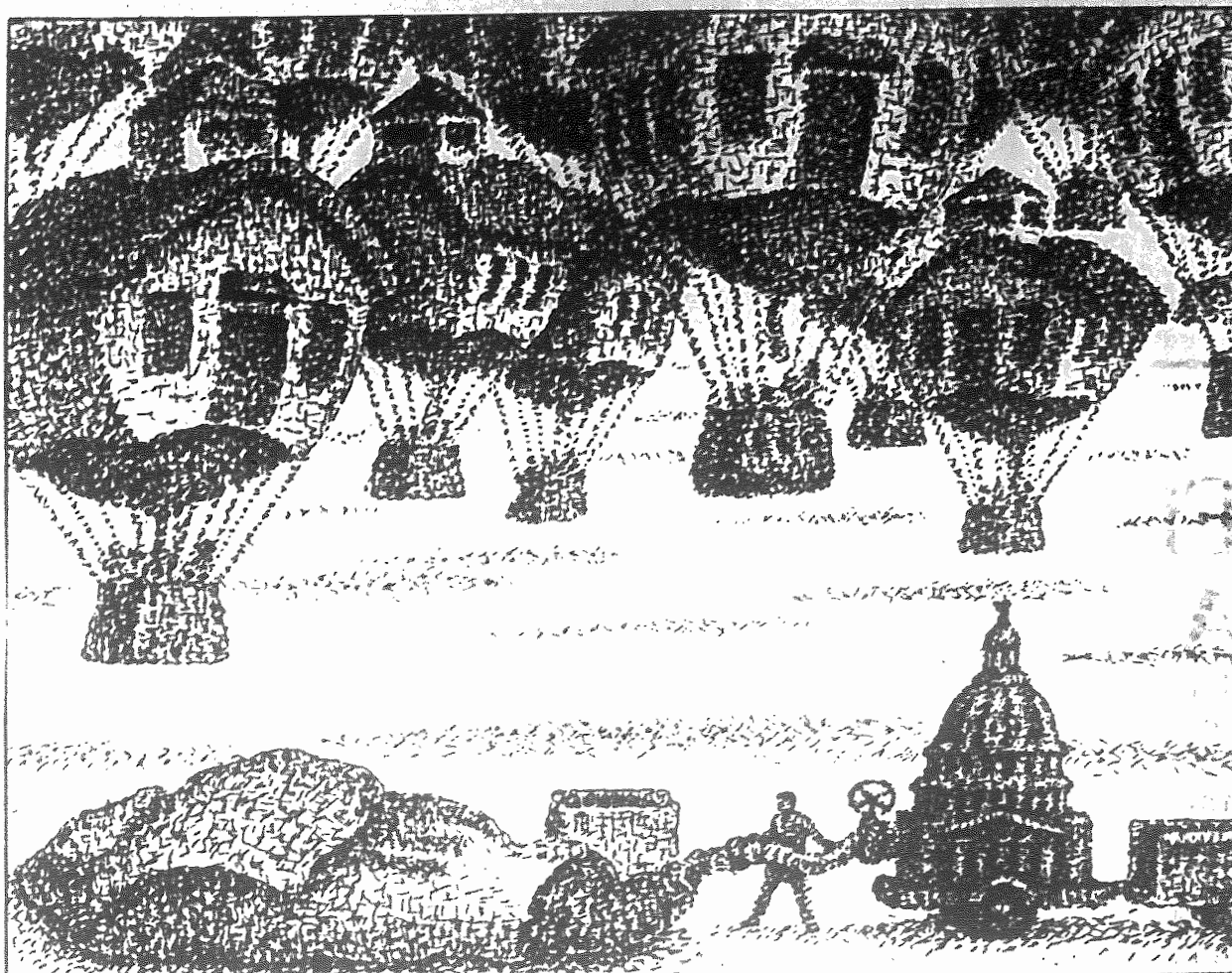
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Use U.S. education vouchers to give poor families a chance

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 at this application of the "devolution" principle. The money should indeed devolve, 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 so 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 policy to improve our urban schools, the market promises what "federal aid" cannot — competition that would reward the successful schools and close the failures. Evidence from several privately funded school-voucher plans in San Antonio and Indianapolis confirms the belief that authentic choice improves educational outcomes for children of the poor. But in most cities today, even though most private schools cost significantly less to run than public schools, even a modest tuition still makes them financially inaccessible to the working class and the poor.

Federal scholarships for the children of the poor would be the functional equivalent of Pell grants, the current federal scholarship program at the college level. The individual grants to qualifying families should be large enough to induce new school providers to enter the urban market.

As a trial, we propose that children who select religious schools would receive a grant of \$5,000, whichever it could be adjusted to reflect the differences between the school and elementary school.

If a child chose a public school, perhaps the regular school would be transferred from the home who chose to remain in public schools could qualify to be used on other government programs selected families — such as individual music lessons. Public schools might well turn into competitors in this market, evening out the differences.

USING \$5 billion this way could give millions of poor children a chance to make the inner city a more trusted and rotten place that far too many schools have become.

Some advocates of vouchers agree with this approach and would prefer to let the parents decide whether to put their own money into vouchers. Unfortunately, there is no American experience to justify this expectation; the states have never used their own money to give the autonomy of families of elementary and secondary schools.

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Vouchers gives a choice

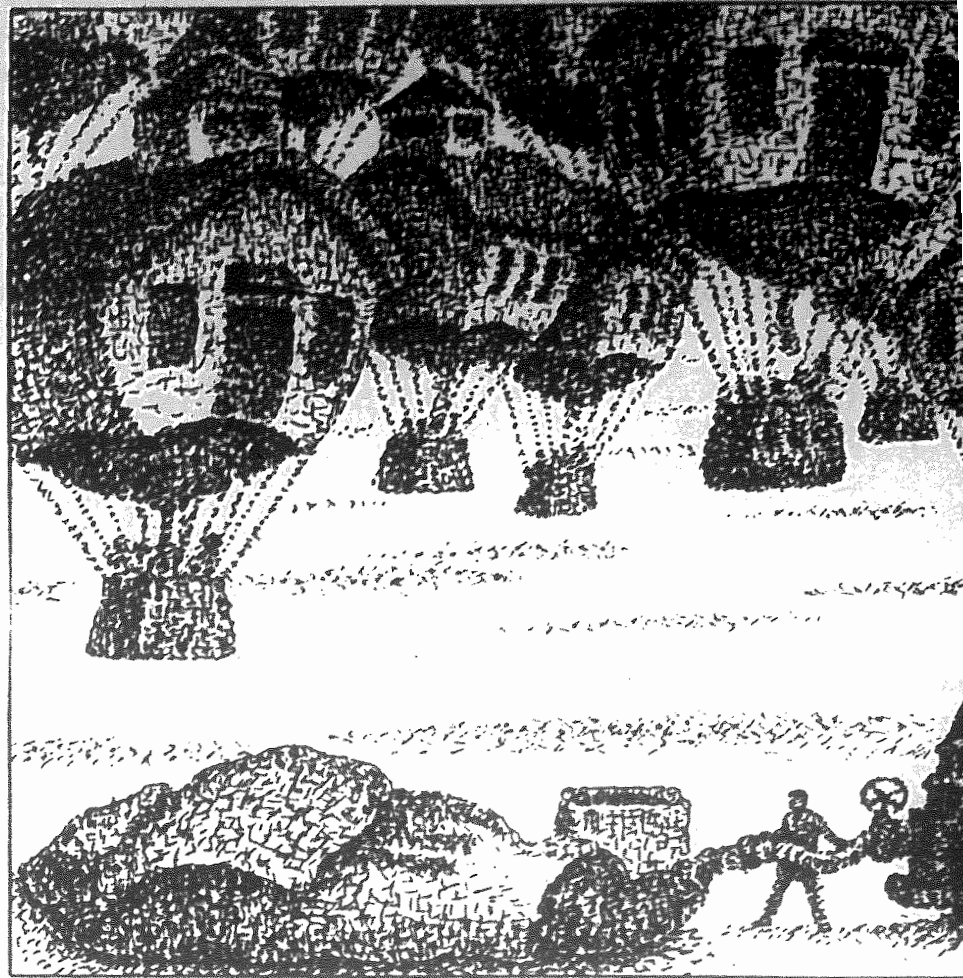
As a trial, we propose that eligible children who select private and religious schools would be entitled each year to receive a grant amounting either to the school's regular tuition or \$5,000, whichever is less. The limits could be adjusted up or down to reflect the differences in costs for high school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

Moreover, many states face a peculiar legal problem. Although the U.S. Constitution appears congenial to the



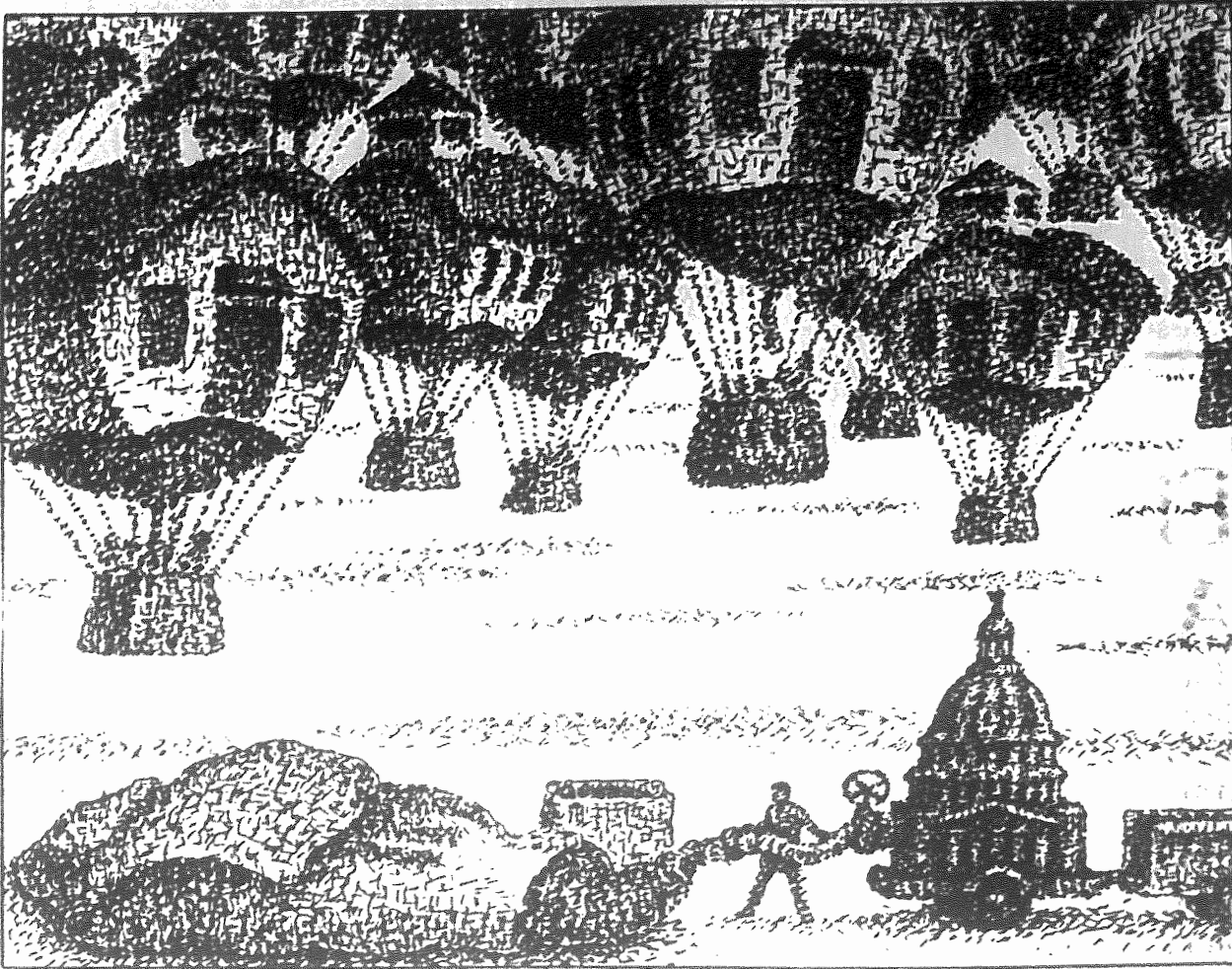
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HERE IS a venture for classical Republicans that has so far escaped their roster of market-oriented policies. Maybe such a plan could even win the support of Democrats in Congress who have expressed both their faith in the market and their concern for the poor.

Special to The Bee

ning up the transplant odds