

SCHOOL VOUCHERS: CHILD-CENTERED FUNDING FOR THE CHILDREN'S SAKE

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School vouchers have long been advocated by economist Milton Friedman and like-minded laissez-faire conservatives. Not surprisingly, vouchers have found little support among liberals opposed to all things Republican. But those who pride themselves on caring more about kids than cash need not oppose vouchers. Just as some conservatives are reconsidering the virtues of Smartgrowth, some liberals are reconsidering the virtues of school vouchers.

Although the urgency of school reform may seem remote here in Tiny Town (where rumors of all the children being above average are only somewhat exaggerated), the educational crisis in the US is no myth. As for methods of reform, some fear vouchers are a first step along the slippery slope to the privatization of schools. One argument for vouchers, however, is precisely that our so-called "public" schools are not so public after all.

The problem, to a great extent, is discrimination by demography. Affluent school districts may have two to five times as many dollars per child than poorer districts. To those unable to buy a house in the right neighborhood, the doors to good schools are no less closed than those of the local yacht club. In effect, we have school choice for the rich but not for the poor.

Enter legal scholar John E. Coons. Coons has long advocated for school choice not on the basis of free markets, but on the basis of social justice. To Coons, public services must be open and accessible to all. But although public funds are available to all sorts of non-governmental organizations, not so with schools. "No other public service," Coons comments, "entails such financial exclusivity." In short, using the term "public school" to refer only to government schools is a narrow, unnecessary, and unfortunate use of the word "public."

Basic fairness, Coons argues, requires that the state provide equally for all students. And the way to do that is through *child-centered funding*, otherwise known as vouchers.

This is an argument from the "voucher left," which, as columnist Matt Miller observes, has a "long but unappreciated intellectual pedigree among reformers who have sought to help poor children and to equalize funding in rich and poor districts." (For the full argument, see www.theatlantic.com/issues/99jul)

Of course, there are real and legitimate concerns about school vouchers. As to whether alternative schools will drain resources from government schools, child-centered funding

may result in smaller government schools, but not in reduced dollars per student. In fact, assuming that vouchers redeemed at non-government schools will be worth less than the actual cost per student in a government school, the resources per student in government schools would actually increase! (For example, in a district that spends \$10,000 per student, every student who takes a \$6000 voucher to a non-government school leaves \$4000 behind.)

Regarding the concern that alternative schools will accept only white, bright, and able-bodied students, non-discrimination can easily be made a precondition of qualifying for public funds. The point is that meeting minimal state requirements such as non-discrimination can easily be accommodated by a more flexible system of child-centered funding. In contrast, our current system is much narrower and more restrictive: to receive benefits from public funds, you must attend a government school.

As for the constitutionality of vouchers going to religious schools, the Supreme Court seems largely to have already decided this. In addition to the recent ruling that public money may be used for instructional equipment at religious schools, federal student loans have long been available to students attending religious colleges. In short, education—whether religious or secular—serves a public function, so long as it meets minimal and legitimate state interests such as skill-instruction and non-discrimination.

Ten years ago I considered school vouchers preposterous. Today, with my children approaching school age, I consider them essential. Whereas Republicans already support vouchers for financial and freedom of conscience reasons, Democrats also have good reason to support vouchers. Democrats should embrace child-centered funding for the children's sake.