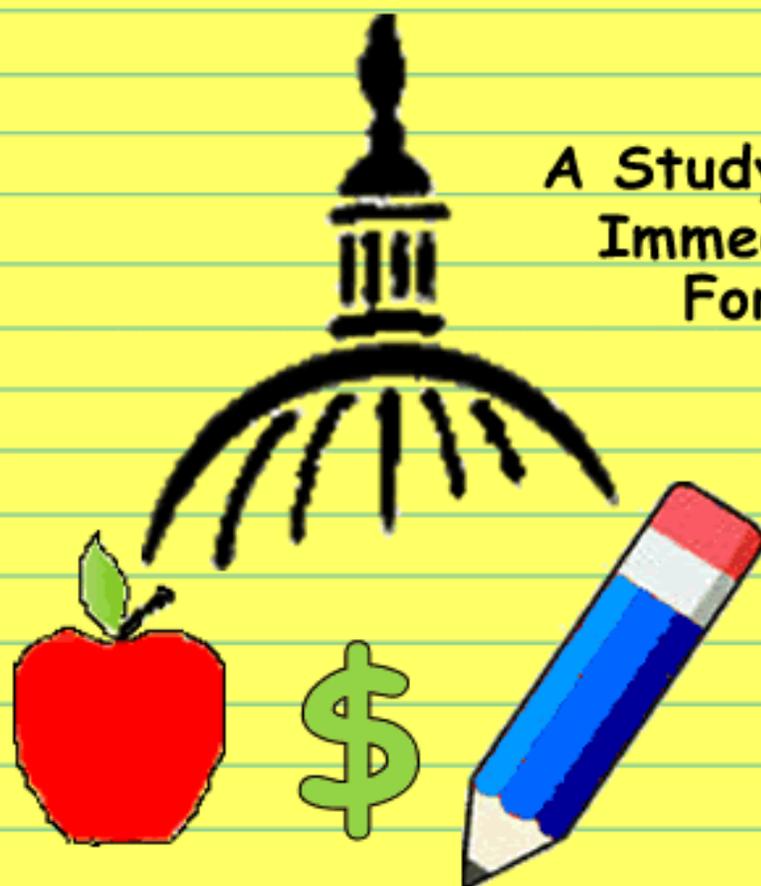


The District of Columbia School Choice Initiative:



A Study of Both
Immediate and
Forthcoming
Effects

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At a time when national security and foreign conflict seem to engage the minds of most Americans and, in turn, their elected Representatives, education initiatives slowly navigate through the legislative channels of the capitol. Though this legislation calls for the use of the District of Columbia as a pilot program, unbeknownst to many, the outcome may very well set the tone for the nation as a whole. Ultimately, the only stimulus that will launch these proposals into national exposure is their actual passage, but can the approval of Congress be expected? While the President has pledged his endorsement, the tenacity of the dissenting factions could result in perpetual delays or alter entirely the original form of the measures. Regardless of the success, or lack thereof, encouraged in the wake of the D.C. voucher experiment, these measures will rekindle educational reform rhetoric within all ranks of government; local, state, and national.

“To diffuse knowledge is to diffuse wealth. To give all an equal chance to acquire knowledge is the best and surest way to give all an equal chance [...]” Indeed the words of Rutherford B. Hayes, nineteenth President of the United States, echo the sentiments of many lawmakers today. This dated reference also pays testament to the fact that education reform is nothing new. In 1787, the Northwest Ordinance became the first legislation to employ federal aid for the purpose of public education. Following that historical mandate, education reform was an ingredient in the Administration of Jefferson to that of Johnson and, with his *No Child Left Behind* program, President George W. Bush is no exception. Among the many elements included in this sweeping legislation is support for school vouchers. Much like public education itself, school vouchers, and the broader classification of school choice that they fall under, are delicate subjects surrounded by considerable controversy.

THE MEASURES IN QUESTION

If signed into law, H.R. 2556, the *D.C. Parental Choice Incentive Act of 2003*, and its counterpart in the Senate, S.4. IS, the *Opportunity for Every Child Act of 2003*, would allot \$40 million in appropriations to a number of D.C. public education programs, only one of which is the voucher initiative. The specific section of immediate question provides a maximum voucher of \$7,500 to 2,000 students, amounting to a \$15 million portion of the total funds appropriated. In the history of the legislation thus far, the House motion has passed through the Government Reform Committee with the slim vote of twenty-two to twenty-one. The demographic, excluding two Republican defectors, was divided straight down the aisle.¹ It now awaits a decision from the Congressional Republican leadership on whether it will stand alone for a vote or get attached to a future appropriations measure.² In the Senate, S.4. IS is not faring quite so well. Faced with a threat from the opposition to eliminate the voucher element from the legislation, the Senate Appropriations Committee was forced to delay a vote on the measure.³ The Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions does not foresee any action before the August recess, and should it eventually reach the floor, numerous senators have publicly indicated they are prepared to filibuster until the voucher clause is removed.⁴

THE ADVOCATING RATIONALE

New York, Florida, Texas, and Ohio all have voucher agendas, many of which show promising figures from analysis. A Manhattan Institute study found that in San Antonio's Edgewood school district, Texas Assessment of Academic Skills results from 1998 to 2001 surpassed those of eighty-five percent of school districts in Texas.⁵ Edgewood has had private vouchers since 1998.

The school choice success of Edgewood is not an anomaly either, but perhaps no example can match that of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. In 1990, Milwaukee Public Schools, the twelfth largest school district in the nation, began to offer underprivileged students the opportunity to attend private schools without religious affiliation by way of vouchers. The original participants numbered 1,500, but by 1995, the popularity of the initial program spurred a waiting list of more than 1,000 students with a private scholarship funding a further 3,000

¹ Moreno, Sylvia. "House Panel Approves Plan For Vouchers at District Schools." The Washington Post 11 July 2003: B05.

² Ibid.

³ Hsu, Spencer S. "Foes Halt Vote on School Vouchers." The Washington Post 18 July 2003: A01.

⁴ Ibid.

students to broaden the demographic.⁶ By the middle of 1995, Governor Thompson had signed into law a bill that extended the offer of vouchers to 15,000 students, leaving the Milwaukee Public Schools District on the brink of losing a substantial portion of its student body.⁷ What ensued was a massive overhaul of the public school system in an effort to retain its students. Reforms included:

- ❖ “[...] the opening of seven new “Innovative” schools, designed largely to offer low-income students the same quality education previously reserved for specialty magnets.”
- ❖ “All-day childcare expanded from three to twenty-seven schools.”
- ❖ “In January, 1996, the board passed the nation’s most stringent graduation requirements.”⁸

In his evaluation of the effect that school choice has had on the public school system, John Gardner, member of the Milwaukee School Board, writes:

- ❖ “Only twelve percent of MPS high school seniors passed the new math proficiency exam when it was first administered in 1995. Over ninety percent passed in both 1996 and 1997.”
- ❖ “Elementary school students have improved performance on standardized writing proficiency tests by more than [30] percent. On one national standardized test last year [1997], [65] percent of fifth graders scored above the national average – the only major urban district in the nation to do so.”
- ❖ “More MPS teachers were terminated for incompetence in 1996-97 than in the preceding twenty years.”⁹

At the time of publication for Gardner’s report, school choice was no longer an option in Milwaukee because of a 1996 ruling by the Wisconsin Circuit Court. The consequences were almost immediate. He writes,

⁵ Greene, Jay P. “Choice Helps Public Schools.” 14 Jan. 2003. Manhattan Institute for Policy Research. 11 July 2003 <<http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/nys-choice-helps.htm>>.

⁶ These statistics were found in an essay entitled “How School Choice Helps Public Education,” by John Gardner, a member of the Milwaukee School Board. The piece was printed January 12, 1998.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

“The MPS board, so entrepreneurial and courageous during the school choice threat, suddenly found reasons for caution [] could not bring itself to move one of the successful innovative schools space in a failing high school, or insist on school-based hiring by teachers and parents during continuing labor negotiations.”

The State Supreme Court has since reversed the decision of the Circuit Court and Milwaukee remains the most potent weapon in the arsenal of school choice advocates.

THE DISSENTING ARGUMENT

Critics, however, contend that school choice will actually impair, not stimulate, public education. Eleanor Holmes Norton, District of Columbia delegate to the House of Representatives and staunch opponent of school vouchers, argues that money allotted to vouchers could be spent on improving and bolstering public programs. Looking back at a previous example, Arlene Sershon, an administrative analyst for the Milwaukee school system said, “It’s making it very difficult for us to continue. There is a financial price to pay for all this.”¹⁰ The other price to pay, assert opponents, could come in the form of a vast flight of bright pupils leaving a school, rendering it even less capable than it was prior to vouchers.

Should the public funding for education be derived on a per pupil basis, as is the case in Washington, each student that departed with a voucher would depart with appropriated funds as well. This damaging potential could sound the death knell for an already weakened school. Such was the dilemma faced in Edgewood as the school district lost \$3 million in state funds during the first year that vouchers were offered.¹¹ How can a disadvantaged district be expected to turn themselves around when funds are being siphoned away from the problem?

Others, including The People for the American Way, a left-leaning foundation opposed to vouchers, have issued their own interpretation of the results in Milwaukee and other seemingly successful examples of vouchers. In “Voucher Veneer: The Deeper Agenda to Privatize Public Education,” they point to Milwaukee during the first five years of the voucher initiative and how close to one quarter of new private schools failed.¹² Eleanor Holmes Norton, in a recent press release, cited the General Accounting Office in finding that the vouchers already in place in

¹⁰ Blum, Justin. “Voucher Lessons Not Quite Complete.” *The Washington Post* 4 May 2003: C01.

¹¹ “About Edgewood.” Online posting, 22 Nov. 2002. Edgewood Independent School District. 4 Aug. 2003 <<http://www.eisd.net/about-eisd/about-eisd.htm>>.

¹² “Voucher Veneer: The Deeper Agenda to Privatize Public Education.” Online posting, 11 July 2003. People for the American Way. 15 July 2003 <<http://www.pfaw.org/pfaw/general/default.aspx?oid=11405&print=yes>>.

Washington, though privately funded, amounted to no improvement following three years.¹³ Furthermore, she said that, of the participating children, only twenty-nine percent were still enrolled in private institutions.¹⁴ Vouchers also pose a monetary challenge. Many cite the example of the annual cost of a D.C. private school education potentially reaching \$20,000 and how most would-be recipients of vouchers could not afford this price even with some assistance.

A final, often overlooked, dispute with school choice is the gray area surrounding the Constitutional implications. If public resources are being diverted into the coffers of non-secular institutions, questions arise regarding the separation of church and state. Similar doubts crop up concerning the level of accountability that can be imposed upon these parochial institutions once public students matriculate. If these private schools refuse to administer similar tests or adhere to public standards, how is it possible to evaluate the performance of a given voucher program?

THE UNIQUE CASE OF WASHINGTON, D.C.

With the numerous fiscal and performance-related concerns surrounding school vouchers, it may seem logical to attribute the D.C. pilot program debate to similar issues, but the true contention is of a much simpler sort. The impetus for using Washington, D.C. as a litmus test for the voucher component of *No Child Left Behind* is at least partially rooted in its status as a federal territory, subject to the whim of the federal government. The District of Columbia serves as a laboratory for many ideas that no Representative is willing to risk in his or her own district. Eleanor Holmes Norton lacks voting privileges, leaving the more than 500,000 D.C. residents without an effective voice in government. Holmes Norton points to efforts already underway in the District and how it is an inappropriate venue for such an experiment, “Unlike the District, most states have failed to respond significantly to federal legislation passed in 1994 to encourage charter schools – for example Maryland has only one and Virginia only eight, while the District has 39 charter schools and a huge, burgeoning unmet demand.”¹⁵

Another, more candid reason for arriving at the District becomes painfully apparent when the performance of its public schools is taken into account. Despite the District’s budget of \$10,852 per pupil, the third highest in the nation, the school system has amassed a record of sobering statistics:

¹³ Norton, Eleanor Holmes. “President Uses a D.C. Charter School to Make a Pitch for Vouchers Only.” Online Posting. 1 July 2003. Congressional Website. 16 July 2003 <<http://www.norton.house.gov/issues2.cfm?id=6273>>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Norton, Eleanor Holmes. “Norton Presses Substitute for Davis Voucher Bill at Mark-up.” Online Posting. 10 July 2003. Congressional Website. 16 July 2003.<<http://www.norton.house.gov/issues2.cfm?id=6410>>.

- ❖ “Seventy-six percent of D.C. fourth-graders performed below grade level in math, and only 10 percent read proficiently.”
- ❖ “Seventy-seven percent of eighth-graders performed below grade level in math, and only 12 percent were proficient in reading.”¹⁶

Perhaps even more shocking than the statistics above is the fact that they were cited by Diane Feinstein, a Democratic senator from California, and a long-time advocate of public schools.

THE LINE IN THE SAND

In the recent past, the voucher debate was separated along strict party lines, with Republican support and Democratic dissent. Though this intense partisan contention is rooted in party principles, the proposed D.C. experiment has initiated a large crack in the foundation. Traditional opponent of vouchers and Mayor of Washington, Anthony Williams, facing what seems like a hopeless situation, referring to, “approximately 40% of adults in our city read only at a third grade level...[and] can’t complete a job application or advance beyond an entry-level position,” is now an ardent supporter of the legislation.¹⁷ Peggy Cooper Cafritz, President of the D.C. school board, a position traditionally opposed to school choice, is behind the measures as well. *Both* sides of the debate have been joined by unusual bedfellows, however. Senator Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania, after supporting vouchers during the Clinton Administration, has suddenly decided to oppose the measures.¹⁸ Teacher unions, a traditional opponent, categorically oppose any form of vouchers, fearing school choice will lead to eventual full-scale privatization and a subsequent loss in membership and, more importantly, a loss in jobs.

In the roar of such a great political battle, it is often the very constituents affected by the legislation who find their voice silenced. Such seems to be the case in Washington. If those on Capitol Hill paused for a moment to take the pulse of the families whose lives are in question, the verdict would be rather conclusive. The *Trends in the Use of School Choice: 1993 to 1999 Statistical Analysis Report* published in May of 2003 found,

“Choice makes a difference in parent satisfaction. Parents whose children attended either public, chosen schools or private schools were more likely to say they were very satisfied with their children’s schools, teachers, academic

¹⁶ “Let D.C. Try Vouchers.” Editorial. The Washington Post 22 July 2003: A17.

¹⁷ “Freeing D.C. Kids.” Editorial. The Wall Street Journal 11 July 2003: A8.

¹⁸ “Mary Landrieu, Where Do Your Kids Go to School?” Editorial. The Wall Street Journal 24 July 2003: A14.

standards, and order and discipline than were parents whose children attended public, assigned schools.”¹⁹

A LOOK TO THE HORIZON

With respect to the D.C. measures, the critics’ concerns are either hit or miss. The fear of siphoning existing funds from public education to vouchers is not warranted as of yet. The legislation presently in Congress consists of new resources, not a plan for divvying up current funds. Russ Whitehurst, Assistant Secretary for Educational Research and Improvement, who feels the legislation has a “reasonable chance” for passage, uses the term “sweetener” when referring to the \$25 million in additional funding to which the voucher clause is attached.²⁰ Detractors may claim that *all* of the appropriations should be sent into the failing District, but for the time being, the vouchers are not tapping into the budgets of existing programs. Union fears of privatization are well-founded however, as the D.C. pilot has the potential, if successful, to open the floodgates for nationwide initiatives.²¹ Although the potential exists, even outstanding success in Washington will not pose an immediate threat to other districts due, in main part, to the poorly-performing economy that has left most states far short of funding new initiatives, let alone including a “sweetener” as in the case of Washington.²²

The inherent characteristic of the D.C. pilot alone seems to dictate that much has yet to be done to prepare vouchers for sweeping implementation. Bill Caritke, D.C. Assistant Superintendent of Education Accountability, points to the small, even miniscule, percentage of District students that the program will touch initially and the difficulty that ventures in privatization have had in translating the success of small-scale reform into district-wide programs.²³ Caritke goes further by drawing parallels with *Out-of-Boundary*, a program that has been in place in the District for two decades that offers students a chance to enroll in any District school. Letters were mailed to 10,000 eligible parents last year, but fewer than 300 matriculated into the program, casting serious doubt upon whether a similar program with vouchers would stimulate high participation.²⁴ He also doubts the existence of a large group of parents who are willing to see their children off to a different school if the school is more than a few blocks from the original. On a similar note, a private voucher program that has been in place since 1993 in D.C. poses further questions regarding interest. In the 1998 lottery, only fifty-three percent of

¹⁹ United States. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Trends in the Use of School Choice: 1993 to 1999. Stacey Bielick and Christopher Chapman. Washington: 2003.

²⁰ Whitehurst, Russ. Personal Interview. 23 July 2003.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Caritke, Bill. Personal Interview. 29 July 2003.

²⁴ Ibid.

those offered vouchers accepted, and at the conclusion of the two-year period that followed, only thirty-eight percent of the initial participants deferred back into the program.²⁵

Assistant Secretary Whitehurst foresees the adoption of vouchers based upon highly-individual characteristics that vary from district to district. Some of the chief factors will include the presence, or lack thereof, of a strong teacher's union, the strength and prominence of religious institutions, and the economic viability of a particular district.²⁶ The multitude of factors surrounding school choice would lend to the belief that, although vouchers do pose a threat to public education, the threat is rather dispersed and certainly not of an immediate nature. In short, the large-scale revolution some fear will be waged by a successful D.C. pilot is simply not on the horizon.

By the same token, quantifying the success of any educational system begets such considerable controversy in itself that the results of the D.C. pilot are likely to stir debate for years to come. Should the voucher proposal pass Congress, its implementation will likely be under scrutiny from the very start. According to Eleanor Holmes Norton, the performance of a voucher education wanes the longer a pupil remains in the system; thus an extended study would behoove any evaluation.²⁷ On the other hand, however, Bill Caritke feels that a program that alters the fundamental education a child receives should show immediate results.²⁸ Assistant Secretary Whitehurst also advises that the assessment should be multi-faceted in approach, consisting of random trials, an academic performance tally, a parent satisfaction survey, and, of particular interest, a cost-benefit analysis.²⁹ If vouchers garner academic results comparable to those of public school systems for a comparable price, the fundamental question of who should choose the educational path of a child may, and most-likely will, surface.³⁰

The notion of school choice and a voucher proposal seem to stir at least as many questions as the initiatives strive to answer. In a city so charged with partisan debate, perhaps it is best that these Congressional measures are played out in the seat of government, for the success or failure of the D.C. pilot will stimulate other districts around the nation, albeit in an idiosyncratic and limited fashion, for the foreseeable future. Whatever the conclusion, though, any publicity that may be garnered in Washington is overdue. The performance of public

²⁵ Wolf, Patrick J., Paul E. Peterson, and Martin R. West. Results of a School Voucher Experiment: The Case of Washington, D.C. After Two Years. Aug. 2001. Program on Education Policy and Governance. 4 Aug. 2003 <<http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/pepg/pdf/PEPG01-05%20Exec%20Sum.pdf>>.

²⁶ Whitehurst, Russ. Personal Interview. 23 July 2003.

²⁷ Norton, Eleanor Holmes. "President Uses a D.C. Charter School to Make a Pitch for Vouchers Only." Online Posting. 1 July 2003. Congressional Website. 16 July 2003 <<http://www.norton.house.gov/issues2.cfm?id=6273>>.

²⁸ Caritke, Bill. Personal Interview. 29 July 2003.

²⁹ Whitehurst, Russ. Personal Interview. 23 July 2003.

³⁰ Ibid.

schools warrants the attention of today's policy leaders and a revitalization of the educational reform movement.

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