

Why Conservatives and Libertarians Should Support Vouchers

Conservatives and libertarians, more often than liberals, approve of returning the production of goods and services to the private sector. Why, then, do some conservatives and libertarians oppose school vouchers?

Some antivoucher libertarians oppose vouchers on grounds they do not go far enough: vouchers privatize the production of schooling but not responsibility for paying for it. Schooling, they point out, remains an entitlement under a voucher plan, and libertarians (at least the purist libertarians) oppose entitlements.

Unlike libertarians, conservatives do not necessarily oppose entitlements. Some nevertheless oppose vouchers out of fear they would lead to increased regulation of religious schools or tempt parents who now enroll their children in religious schools or who homeschool to enroll them instead in secular schools. Some also fear that an influx of new students into private schools would diminish the quality of those schools.

The positions of antivoucher separationists—those who oppose vouchers but support complete separation of school and

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state—are based on fundamental beliefs and objectives that may be well founded but are not widely shared.¹ In this postscript, we argue that school vouchers are both consistent with the views of libertarians and conservatives and a necessary part of an effective strategy for accomplishing their long-term objectives.

NOT A NEW ENTITLEMENT

All citizens of the United States are entitled to enroll their school-age dependents in so-called free government schools. A voucher program alters this entitlement by expanding the range of schools among which parents are allowed to choose, but does not otherwise change it.

Currently, parents who choose private schools for their children are forced to pay twice for education: once for tuition at the private school and again through taxes for the government school that was not selected. Vouchers provide these families with financial relief by paying for tuition at the private school. A well-designed voucher plan also subtracts from the government schools' budget an amount roughly equal to the cost of private school tuition for their children, leaving taxpayers no worse off (or even better off) than before.

Most parents who choose private schools do so out of religious conviction. They oppose the secular humanism taught in government schools and want their children to learn their values and religious beliefs. It is a well-established legal principle that no one should be required to pay a tax penalty to exercise a constitutionally guaranteed right.² Simple justice demands this double payment should be brought to an end.

¹See Sheldon Richman, *Separation of School and State* (Fairfax, Va.: Future of Freedom Foundation, 1994), 83–85; Cathy Duffy, *Government Nannies* (Gresham, Ore.: Nobel Publishing Associates, 1995), 235–43; Kerry L. Morgan, *Real Choice, Real Freedom in American Education: The Legal and Constitutional Case for Parental Rights and against Governmental Control of American Education* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1997), 254–57.

²See John Coons, "Intellectual Liberty and the Schools," *Journal of Law, Ethics, and Public Policy* 1 (1985): 513ff.

Does relieving parents of an unjust financial burden amount to creating a new entitlement? Only in the most technical sense. Parents and taxpayers are already entitled to fair and equal treatment. School vouchers simply restore or make real what they are due as a matter of right. To oppose vouchers on the grounds they create a new entitlement suggests, nonsensically, that libertarians should oppose the retraction of all unjust taxes and regulatory burdens because their repeal creates new entitlements.

Some libertarians argue for ending all taxation for schooling on the grounds that taxation, being coercive, is no different from theft. But if abolishing all taxes is not a realistic possibility in the foreseeable future, it is surely a defensible strategy to call for the removal of the least-fair burdens first. Parents who pay twice for the education of their children certainly have a strong claim to be near the top of the list.

Under a voucher plan, not all parents have tax liabilities as large as the amount of the voucher they receive. They are still being subsidized by other taxpayers, although no more and probably less than they are under the current funding arrangement. Because private schools spend, on average, about half as much as government schools, the value of the vouchers could be significantly less than current per-pupil government-school spending.

Also, under a voucher plan individuals and couples without school-age children would continue to pay school taxes even though they do not use the schools the vouchers fund. Some libertarians believe this is an injustice. If it is, it is not a new injustice: Taxpayers today finance nearly 100 percent of the budget of government schools, and they do so regardless of their quality or their responsiveness to parents' and taxpayers' concerns. The extent of the injustice—the tax burden on households without school-age children—could once again be less under a voucher program because participation by lower-cost private schools would reduce government spending on schooling.

Taxpayers would also benefit because voucher programs sever the institutional connection between school board members—who generally decide how much school taxes are collected and how they are spent—and the staffs of government

school systems. Under the current arrangement, school board members face conflicting incentives: They are pledged to provide schooling opportunities for all, but they finance and actually help produce schooling by only one government-owned school system. Naturally, they become defenders of the monopoly product, often bitterly resisting competition. When they yield to the even more narrowly self-interested teachers unions, they fail altogether to represent the interests of parents and taxpayers.

A voucher program rewards school board members who work to provide the best education at the lowest cost to taxpayers, regardless of who actually produces the schooling. People who previously had little reason to vote in school board elections—taxpayers without school-age children and parents who choose private schools—will suddenly find themselves courted by candidates offering genuine tax relief by supporting a lower voucher amount or by imposing income caps on eligibility for the vouchers.

LET PARENTS AND EDUCATORS DECIDE

Taking away from people their freedom to choose because of fear they will choose poorly is a shortcoming more commonly found among liberals than libertarians and conservatives. Yet this view is at the center of the conservative and libertarian case against school vouchers.

Antivoucher separationists are afraid vouchers will come with strings attached, thereby compromising the independence and creativity of participating schools. They fear school administrators, always hungry for money, will overlook or ignore the trade-off between easy money and having to comply with new regulations. They fear that parents, too, will fail to see that trade-off and continue to patronize the now-lower-quality schools. They are afraid good private schools that refuse to accept vouchers will be unable to compete with bad private schools that do. They are afraid, in short, that other people would not see the negative effects of vouchers as quickly or as clearly as they do.

All of this fear is, perhaps, understandable. But it is fundamentally wrong to substitute one's own judgments for the informed decisions of people who must live with the consequences of their decisions. Doing so is to indulge in the conceit of Adam Smith's "man of the system," who seizes on some idea of perfection of policy and law and insists on establishing, and establishing all at once and in spite of all opposition, everything that idea may seem to require. Such an attitude, wrote Smith, "must often be the highest degree of arrogance. It is to erect his own judgment into the supreme standard of right and wrong. It is to fancy himself the only wise and worthy man in the commonwealth, and that his fellow-citizens should accommodate themselves to him, and not he to them."³

Ludwig von Mises, too, rebutted the presumption that the general public cannot be counted on to perceive what is in its own best interests: "The outlook of many eminent champions of genuine liberalism is rather pessimistic today. As they see it, the vitriolic slogans of the socialists and interventionists call forth a better response from the masses than the cool reasoning of judicious men. . . . [I]t is not true that the ideas of genuine liberalism are too complicated to appeal to the untutored mind of the average voter."⁴ Von Mises's most prominent student, Friedrich Hayek, often pointed out that knowledge in a free society is widely dispersed and unknowable to any one individual.⁵ We should therefore submit to the superior wisdom embedded in and revealed by social and economic processes. Choices voluntarily made in impersonal markets reveal who really wants something and at what price. That same humility should lead us to give parents the opportunity to decide for themselves whether vouchers and the schools that accept them are a blessing or a curse.

³Adam Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759; reprint, Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1976), 381.

⁴Ludwig von Mises, "The Political Chances of Genuine Liberalism," in *Planning for Freedom* (South Holland, Ill.: Libertarian Press, 1980), 180–81.

⁵Friedrich A. Hayek, *Individualism and Economic Order* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1948).

Conservatives and libertarians should have a higher regard for the wisdom and wits of the average mother and father and their sincere interest in their children's learning and welfare than what is shown by the antivoucher separationists. In this, the latter are little different from voucher critics on the Left, who claim that specially trained bureaucrats care more for the well-being of children than do parents.

GOVERNMENT CONTROL IS NOT INEVITABLE

An antivoucher conservative told an audience recently that his late father had accepted government payments to enroll some of his farmland in a soil bank program, and crippling regulations soon followed. His father always regretted succumbing to the temptation of government subsidies. The example, he said, shows that regulations invariably follow subsidies. The audience nodded in agreement.

In fact, the example proves a very different point. The farmer, who sought and received subsidies, was a producer, not a consumer. Not surprisingly, regulations followed, because he was being paid by the government to do certain things. Some of his crops over the years almost certainly went to people who paid for them with food stamps—a form of voucher. No new regulations were imposed on the farmer because these consumers were being subsidized. In fact, he probably was not even aware that some of his customers were using food stamps to purchase his goods.

Virgil Blum, Milton Friedman, Thomas Sowell, Walter Williams, and other leading conservative and libertarian thinkers endorsed school vouchers precisely because they subsidize consumers rather than producers and therefore offer a way to move from a 90 percent socialist system (as indexed by student enrollment) to a competitive education marketplace without the risk of increasing regulations on private schools. Antivoucher separationists rarely acknowledge or admit the critical distinction between subsidies to providers and to consumers.

The faulty assumption here is that the “road to serfdom” is a one-way road for all time, and any proposed reforms that still involve public funding—even proposals that dramatically scale back government’s capacity to interfere and that set the stage for further privatization—will lead to dependency, government control, and decline.⁶ But if this were true, why did Friedrich Hayek even bother to write *The Road to Serfdom*? Why do conservatives and libertarians get up in the morning to spend the day fighting Leviathan if they are convinced it cannot be defeated?

In “Trends Can Change,” Ludwig von Mises wrote, “One of the cherished dogmas implied in contemporary fashionable doctrines is the belief that tendencies of social evolution as manifested in the recent past will prevail in the future too. Study of the past, it is assumed, discloses the shape of things to come. Any attempt to reverse or even to stop a trend is doomed to failure. Man must submit to the irresistible power of historical destiny.”⁷

The contemporary fashionable doctrines von Mises refers to are the theories of history and progress advanced by Hegel, Marx, and Comte. But they could just as easily be the doctrines of antivoucher separationists. The cherished dogma is the same for both: a helplessness to stop the trend toward greater government power and control. An obvious consequence of this dogma is paralysis. The antivoucherites are afraid to dismantle the government schools because any such effort is doomed to failure.

In Chapter 11 we described several legislative strategies for avoiding new regulations on private schools. Some of them, by decentralizing the authority of states to regulate schools, would actually leave private schools (and homeschoolers) with greater autonomy than they now have. By weakening the ability of teachers unions to raise money for political purposes, vouchers weaken the strongest force now in place that opposes privatization of any kind. For these reasons, conservatives and libertarians who oppose

⁶Friedrich A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (1944; reprint, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965).

⁷Ludwig von Mises, “Trends Can Change,” in *Planning for Freedom* (South Holland, Ill.: Libertarian Press, 1980), 173.

regulations on schooling ought celebrate, rather than oppose, the voucher effort.

OVERLOOKING REALITY

The previously mentioned antivoucher conservative who described his father's encounter with government regulators also told the audience, "Our goal must be to keep our education pure." If he meant free of government interference, as he seemed to, then he is wearing blinders. Schooling today is nearly entirely government financed, owned, regulated, staffed, certified, and tested. On the other hand, a program that would allow every parent to choose a private school without financial penalty would greatly improve the overall "purity" of schooling in the country.

Antivoucher conservatives are blind to the needs of the vast majority of children because they focus only on the 11 percent of children already in private schools and another 1 or 2 percent of students who are homeschooled.⁸ Antivoucher separationists think of this 12 percent as a precious remnant of the free enterprise system that would be destroyed by vouchers. But the great majority of private schools—including religious schools—would not hesitate to accept vouchers so long as the school-choice program had reasonable restrictions on government regulation of participating schools.⁹ Participation in voucher plans is never mandatory. Those who manage private schools are free to remain outside the program if they believe the accompanying regulations are too burdensome.

⁸These are mostly (86 percent) religiously affiliated schools, with Catholic schools accounting for approximately half of total enrollment and Protestant schools another 28 percent. Thomas James and Henry M. Levin, *Comparing Public and Private Schools*, vol. 1 of *Institutions and Organizations* (New York: The Falmer Press, 1988), 34.

⁹When state legislation expanding the Milwaukee pilot voucher program was passed in Wisconsin, 102 of the city's 120 private schools signed up to participate. The National Catholic Education Association (NCEA) is a strong proponent of school choice. See Jeff Archer, "NCEA's 1st Lay President Rides in on Waves of Change," *Education Week*, 1 June 1996, 10.

If private schools now enrolled 87, rather than 11, percent of all students, a proposal to fund school choice through vouchers would indeed be at odds with the libertarian and conservative commitment to individual freedom and limited government. But the reality today is just the opposite. The choice is not between vouchers and Utopia, but between vouchers and a system that is 87 percent socialist. There is little doubt that a fully implemented voucher system would increase the proportion of students attending private schools—dramatically, if school choice advocates are correct, modestly if voucher critics are correct. This is certainly movement in the right direction. Whether it is fast enough or far enough are matters of strategy, not of principle.

Under a voucher program, what would happen to schools so unconventional they would not be eligible to participate in a choice program? Such schools already exist despite the presence of “free” government schools that typically outspend them two-to-one. A voucher plan would not significantly worsen their odds of survival. They would probably lose very few students precisely because they offer a unique product.

It is too easy to romanticize the independence and superiority of today’s private schools and then to place their survival over the interests of children. Why, if these schools are so much better than government schools, have their enrollments as a percentage of total enrollment remained largely unchanged since 1965?¹⁰ Why, after controlling for socioeconomic status and other variables, are the differences in student achievement between private and government schools modest and apparently subject-specific?¹¹

One reason may be that nonprofit private schools often are not much different from the government schools against which they compete. Another reason is they are simply unable, or have chosen not, to compete against a lavishly funded free public service.

¹⁰James and Levin, *Public and Private Schools*; National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics*, 1993, 1.

¹¹James S. Coleman and Thomas Hoffer, *Public and Private High Schools: The Impact of Communities* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), 92–95, 242.

Vouchers overcome both problems by making possible a new generation of more efficient and effective private schools, giving more parents a reason to choose a private school. At long last, a flight to quality could occur.

SEPARATION IN A SINGLE BOUND?

An opinion poll produced by an antivoucher separationist group apparently showed that 26 percent of the people polled were willing to entertain the notion that the state should stop funding schooling altogether.¹² Conservatives and libertarians can celebrate that this number is higher than most would have thought to be the case. But there is less to this polling data than meets the eye.

Opinion polls typically show much higher levels of support for educational choice and vouchers—as high as 70 and 80 percent—before the inevitable, massive, and well-funded negative campaigns by the education establishment. California's Proposition 174 was at 66 percent approval only a few months before it lost two-to-one.

Think of how difficult it would be to mount a referendum effort for complete separation. Think of how easily the opponents of school choice could demonize the initiative. Who would fund the media campaign to defend it against teachers union attacks and distortions? By how large a margin would such a referendum fail, and what would be the effect of such a resounding defeat on grassroots efforts elsewhere?

What strategy do the antivoucher separationists offer instead of vouchers? Sometimes, little more than vague promises that government schools will collapse in time, if only we all withdraw our children and homeschool them. Plans that consist of abolishing the U.S. Department of Education, ending compulsory attendance laws, abolishing tax support for government education: these are objectives that conservatives and libertarians may agree are fine and worthy of support, but objectives are not plans. They fairly scream at us the obvious question: How do we get there from here?

¹²The poll was conducted in 1994. See Marshall Fritz, Separation of School and State Alliance, <http://www.sepschool.org/misc/faq.html>.

Private schools and homeschooling today act as safety valves for the government schools, not as elements of a workable strategy to privatize education. They enable just enough upset parents to leave the system to keep the failed system nominally running. Real spending on government schooling per pupil rose by 72 percent between 1960 and 1970, 26 percent between 1970 and 1980, and 36 percent between 1980 and 1990.¹³ Is that a trend away from government schooling?

Urging the most concerned and informed parents to remove their children from government schools and enroll them in private schools has not slowed the growth of government schooling. Perversely, it may have accelerated its growth by removing from its path those citizens who could most effectively resist or reform it.

Whatever its merits ideologically, complete separation has little chance of succeeding politically. Vouchers, by contrast, offer a halfway house to wean the public from its addiction to government finance and provision of education. If vouchers are successful, they will remove institutional barriers to further privatization and set into motion a dynamic that encourages further movement toward competition and choice. Vouchers are a necessary step toward complete separation.

A MORAL DUTY

Many cultural conservatives believe the Bible holds parents responsible for educating their children. Devout Jews, Muslims, and others may hold similar views. Some conservatives believe parents abdicate that responsibility by sending their children to government schools. The argument goes that, because school vouchers would turn private schools into government schools, they would encourage more parents to neglect their religious duties.

Parents are also responsible for feeding, clothing, sheltering, and safely transporting their children, but we do not accuse them

¹³Williamson M. Evers and Herbert J. Walberg, *School Accountability* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2002), 78.

of abdicating those responsibilities when they pay others to grow and prepare food, sew clothing, and build houses and cars. Do antivoucher separationists believe people should withdraw from other aspects of contemporary life that require contact with secular humanism or the state? If not, why make this exception for schooling? And if the position is a principled one, then antivoucher separationists should admit that they are asking their listeners to live as Amish farmers or anarchist protesters.

Some antivoucher separationists seem to believe that only homeschooling or enrollment in Bible schools fulfills the biblical injunction. If they concede more than this, they must admit there is a difference between abdication and delegation and hence a place for private schools and programs that make them affordable for more families. Only the most zealous advocates of homeschooling would claim homeschooling is the right choice for every parent, family, and child. Other parents should continue to delegate the task to others. If the problem is that public schools do not encourage, allow, or require as much involvement by parents as private schools, then the solution is to allow parents to choose private schools without financial penalty—the voucher plan.

While we debate with the antivoucher separationists the precise meaning of the Bible's call on parents to be responsible for their children's education, some 42 million children remain trapped in a system where government owns the buildings, hires the teachers, employs the principals, determines the curriculum, and oversees testing and evaluation. What is happening to these children?

- *Children are not being adequately taught to read or write, and so enter adulthood without the skills needed to become contributing members of the community.* This is surely one of the largest single causes of crime, drug abuse, domestic violence, and many other problems that plague our society. It should offend both our economic and moral sensibilities.
- *Children are being indoctrinated with values profoundly at odds with those of their parents and with what is needed to prepare them to be citizens in a democracy and producers in a capitalist*

economy. Radical environmentalism, anticapitalism, political correctness, language policing, and other distortions of discourse, meaning, and truth have become standard elements of school curricula.

- *Children are being sold drugs, recruited into gangs, introduced to sex without meaningful moral contexts, and caught in the cross-fire of gang wars while still on school property.* Instead of being places of morality, safety, and learning, many inner-city government schools resemble war zones.

The interests of the 12 to 13 percent of students attending private schools or being homeschooled are important and must not be overlooked. But it is cruel indeed to overlook the calamity facing the 87 percent now trapped in government schools. To oppose vouchers in favor of complete privatization is to abandon any realistic hope of rescuing a generation of children.

School choice offers hope. It is politically feasible now, not sometime in a romanticized future. It would set into motion the changes needed to make possible further privatization and separation, if merited. For these reasons, libertarians and conservatives ought to position themselves squarely at the forefront of the school voucher movement.