

Myth vs. Fact

Private School Vouchers

Promoters of "educational choice" make many assertions about the positive effects of private school vouchers on America's educational system. Are these claims true? What would vouchers really do? Let's examine some of the common myths about vouchers and review the facts.

MYTH: All voucher programs are constitutional.

FACT: Sectarian schools account for 85 percent of the total private school enrollment in the United States. These schools serve as arms of religious ministries and integrate religious values and doctrine throughout their curriculum, indoctrinating students on controversial subjects such as abortion, creationism and the role of women in society.

Despite these facts, however, the Supreme Court, in June 2002, upheld a voucher program in Cleveland, Ohio. The decision was extremely narrow. It is limited to circumstances in which the non-religious options that are available to students – such as through charter and magnet schools – predominate over religious options. The Court refused to overrule pre-existing decisions striking down voucher systems where private schools are the only options available to students apart from regular public schools.

In addition, the Court's decision does not resolve the constitutionality of voucher programs in those states that have constitutional provisions that are stronger than the Establishment Clause. Approximately two-thirds of the states have provisions that go beyond the terms of the federal Establishment Clause by explicitly prohibiting the funding of religious institutions. In these states, voucher programs would be constitutionally suspect, even after the Supreme Court's 2002 voucher decision.

MYTH: The people support vouchers and other forms of aid to parochial and other private schools.

FACT: Voters in 21 states and the District of Columbia have rejected various forms of parochial school aid in ballot initiatives. In 2000, California voters rejected statewide vouchers for all students by 71 percent to 29 percent, and Michigan voters defeated a proposal that would have phased in vouchers slowly, starting with "failing" urban schools, 69 percent to 31 percent. In 1998, Colorado voters defeated a tuition tax credit proposal 60 percent to 4 percent. In other actions, Washington voters disapproved a voucher proposal in 1996 by 65 percent to 35 percent, while in 1993, California voters trounced a voucher initiative 70 percent to 30 percent. State legislatures also have consistently voted down voucher proposals. Only three states have implemented voucher plans, all of which have been controversial and have resulted in drawn-out court battles. The driving forces behind vouchers are not parents, but sectarian school lobbies, the Religious Right and free-market ideologues.

MYTH: Vouchers will pay only for secular subjects at religious schools.

FACT: Because religious schools integrate religion throughout their curriculum, there is no way to prevent vouchers from paying for sectarian education. Voucher monies are unrestricted in their use and will pay for all aspects of a religious education, including costs associated with theological training and for religious items such as Bibles, icons and other religious material. In addition, vouchers will end up paying for discrimination. Because religious schools are permitted to hire co-religionists only and may require that employees' personal conduct conform to the tenets and teachings of that faith, vouchers will

result in publicly supported employment discrimination, not only on religious grounds, but also on the basis of gender and sexual orientation.

MYTH: Vouchers will ensure "parental choice" in education.

FACT: When it comes to private schools, the concept of parental choice is meaningless. Private school administrators have the only real choice concerning which children are admitted to the schools and which are not. They may reject virtually anyone applying to attend or to teach in private schools. No voucher plan will change this fact.

MYTH: Vouchers will make public schools better by promoting competition in education.

FACT: There is simply no evidence to support this assertion. Public and private schools don't compete on an even playing field. Public schools must accept all children regardless of academic ability, physical handicap or family background. Private schools may reject any child with problems and enroll only the academically gifted. Also, competition implies there will be winners and losers; that may be fine for breakfast cereals, but it could be disastrous for schools. Public schools will improve only if our government officials and the public decide to make a serious commitment to educational quality. Diverting money from public schools to private schools will not achieve this goal, but will hurt the nation's public education system.

MYTH: The American public school system is failing our children.

FACT: New studies indicate that American students are among the best educated in the world. The U.S. has one of the highest graduation rates and U.S. schools steer more students to college than does any other country, even though many of those countries weed out mediocre students. Academic achievement among U.S. students - with the majority educated in public school - continues to rise. Moreover, according to a *Money* magazine study, private schools rank no better scholastically than comparable public schools. Recent studies of the Milwaukee and Cleveland plans have indicated that participation in choice programs does not result in significant educational improvement among students. Polls show that the vast majority of parents support the public schools their children attend and believe those schools are doing a good job. Vouchers will impede the public school system by draining the funding necessary to provide quality education for all children.

MYTH: Vouchers can be limited to certain private schools.

FACT: Courts have ruled consistently that the government may not play favorites among religions or classes of people. Attempts to limit vouchers to traditional parochial schools would only raise an equal protection claim of religious discrimination. Therefore, if enacted, voucher subsidies would be available for any private school, even those run by unconventional or extremist groups with theologies or political views that most Americans find distasteful.

MYTH: Vouchers will correct the injustice of "double taxation" for private school parents, who must pay to support a public school system they don't use.

FACT: "Double taxation" does not exist. Private school tuition is *not* a tax; it is an additional expense some parents have chosen to pay. All members of society are expected to support certain basic public services such as the police and fire departments, libraries and the public schools, whether they use them or not. (Childless couples and single people, for instance, must still pay school taxes.) We all have a vested interest in maintaining a strong public school system to make certain that our children are educated. Under a voucher plan, all taxpayers face double taxation. They have to pay for public schools, then pay increased taxes to make up for funds being channeled to parochial and other private schools.

MYTH: A voucher plan would empower poor families.

FACT: The better private schools charge high tuition. Because all current and proposed voucher plans provide limited funds, the vouchers will pay tuition for the poorest private schools only, many of which perform no better than public schools. Even then, few private schools are located in the nation's inner cities or other economically depressed areas. Fewer still are likely to admit children with disabilities or special needs. In any event, no voucher plan will benefit more than a small number of poor children. Public schools remain the only reliable educational resource for all children.

MYTH: Because private schools are cheaper to operate, vouchers will save taxpayer money.

FACT: Many private schools have lower operating costs only because they are subsidized by local parishes and public school districts. Taxpayers already pay for many services at private schools, which relieves those schools of significant financial obligations: transportation, textbooks, hot lunches, counseling and speech therapy, and those costs associated with educating disabled and special needs children. Under a voucher system, taxpayers will continue to pay for such services over and above the value of the voucher. In addition, public schools continue to bear the same operating expenses (and realize no savings) when select numbers of students transfer to voucher schools. In those instances, the public schools make do on less money.

If you would like to learn more about religious liberty, please contact:

*Americans United for Separation
of Church and State
518 C Street N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20002
Phone: (202)466-3234 Fax: (202)466-2587
e-mail: americansunited@au.org
website: www.au.org*