

Book Review:
**Moe, TM. 2001. *Schools, Vouchers and the American Public*. Brookings:
Washington.**

This book is Professor Moe's contribution to the school choice / voucher maelstrom. Those expecting it to stir things up further will, however, be disappointed. There are some important ideas and discussion here, but they are delivered in a deliberative, measured tone. To begin, Moe summarizes recent voucher politics; and to conclude, he considers possible future pro-voucher reform. But essentially, *Schools, Vouchers and the American Public* is a discussion of the findings from a large-scale survey. This survey is of approximately 4700 individuals (parents and non-parents) from random-digit dialing across the US in 1995, on a barrage of highly specific questions about education, vouchers, and public school quality.

Professor Moe works this survey pretty hard, with over 80 Tables interspersed through the text. (The book reads well, nonetheless, helped as well by the author's candor about his support for public school reform schooling and acknowledgment of where the evidence is sparse, or where voucher advocates fail to make a good case). Part I (Chapters 1–5) focuses on general views about schooling and Part II (Chapters 6-8) on vouchers.

After the introductory Chapter, Chapters 2–3 report cross-tabulations on parental views generally about education. Many of these findings are comforting, rather than provocative, with parental satisfaction being reasonably high. People are more critical of state education than their local provision, with non-parents more critical on average. Dissatisfaction is with poor discipline and teaching of moral values, not with test scores (as parents care most about test scores, actual dissatisfaction is low).

In these Chapters Moe articulates the idea of a 'public school ideology'. Specifically, 67% respond "yes" to "public schools deserve our support, even when they are performing poorly" and 43% of public school parents respond "yes" to "I believe in public education, and I would not feel right putting my children my kids in private school." Mixed in is the relationship between parental education and school quality. The lower educated have higher satisfaction because of lower expectations, so "the people in American society who are the most desperately in need of education reform are precisely those least likely to demand it" (p.96). Both these factors –the ideology and the inertia– have to be acknowledged by voucher advocates.

Chapter 4 uses multivariate regression to explain parental satisfaction with schooling. Again the results are conforming, rather than conflicting. Income has the strongest positive effect (for parents at least), and this – along with school quality – dominates ethnicity. Null effects are found for Republican/Democrat status and across religious affiliation. As with most such estimations, however, the unexplained variance of satisfaction is high.

In Chapter 5, 'The Attraction of Private Schools', Moe offers a further thesis. Of the sub-sample of 'inner-city' parents (largely low-income/minority), 67% respond "yes" to "If you could afford it, would you be interested in sending your children to a private or parochial school?" The figure for the whole sample is 52%, leading Moe to conclude that private schooling would be

more diverse, if people who most wanted to move could move: vouchers would moderate/diversify the private sector. This is a challenging thesis, not readily supported by other evidence from choice reforms on who does switch (e.g. Milwaukee). Being interested in something is not the same as being able to obtain it: if vouchers were introduced, inner-city parents may still be the least likely to switch. And, as is acknowledged, this demand would need a supply to meet it, the elasticity of which is unknown.

Turning to Part II, “Public Opinion on Vouchers”, the evidence base is more swamp-like. This is not to criticize the book; it is explicit about just how swampy public opinion can be. Interpreters and populist pundits should tread carefully, as Moe does.

In Chapter 6 Moe reports on low levels of voter interest or knowledge of vouchers: 65% of Americans had not heard about them (although knowledge increases with own education and income). And Chapter 7 forces home the sensitivity of opinion-based research: simply, the public’s views are fiendishly difficult to tease out. Moe discusses –at length– question phraseology and interpretation across several important surveys (e.g. Gallup, NPR). This discussion adds to the skepticism about identifying stable, consistent public opinions about complex policies (and is a useful corrective to the view of some advocates that broad public agreement about values translates automatically into the specific policies they happen to be proposing). Yet given this skepticism, it is then hard to know what to read into Moe’s results, e.g. that 60% (77%) of the general public (inner-city parents) support vouchers.

Chapter 8 considers the ‘Consequences of a Voucher System’, with some surprising results. Respondents report vouchers would “promote racial balance” (60%); and on “private schools would discriminate”, only 43% agree (49% disagree). Around three-quarters of respondents think that: vouchers would help low-income children; “parents would have enough information”; and “vouchers help get kids out of bad schools”. On the negative side, voucher schemes appear “risky” and “relatively high cost”. A final pass through the data in Chapter 9 looks at the ‘Regulating a Voucher System’. Most respondents favor vouchers for use at religious schools and expect strong school accountability. Again, though, these are complex issues; ‘accountability’ might run all the way from government regulation over financial disclosure, to open enrollment, to high-stakes testing.

These are data-laden Chapters, yet these particular findings may offer a micro-foundation for future research. Such survey data is important in Social Science: what people say and what they do may differ, and both are relevant. But the danger with self-report surveys is that of over-interpretation. Primarily, the voucher topic is so complicated – even for those who study the topic. (Moe does make some adjustment for voter sophistication). Respondents may give socially desirable answers; views may have changed since 1995. (Moe dismisses this latter cavil). Respondents may even modify their opinions over the course of questioning (see Chapter 7). Having said this, the appropriate response to these concerns is more testing, not less.

In his final Chapter, Moe discusses the role of elites in policy formation and the direct democracy reforms, e.g. Proposition 174/38 in California in 1993/2000. Here, the arguments are more challenging (but also contestable), and it is not possible to do these all justice here. On the latter topic, Moe declares the odds against voucher reform through referenda too high. Voucher opponents, ‘the establishment’, have an unassailable advantage in creating doubt and confusion amongst voters: the “voucher movement is hardly about to die. And because initiative campaigns

are contexts in which public opinion is manipulated rather than simply expressed, the defeat of voucher proposals says little (at least directly) about what Americans really think about the issue” (p.369). This argument is perhaps convenient, but there is justification for a focus on mainstream political routes to voucher reform. Moe’s discussion of these routes makes for interesting reading.

And the future of vouchers is still nicely poised: reforms through referenda appear hopeless, but if there is genuine success in Milwaukee and Florida, then education voucher schemes may grow. Rather than try to tip the balance, though, Moe returns to the evidence and asks what the public knows (and does not know), what the public wants, and what policy reforms might be built from this knowledge. In this respect, *Schools, Vouchers and the American Public* is an important scholarly contribution.

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