

**VOUCHERS AND PUBLIC POLICY:
WHEN IDEOLOGY TRUMPS EVIDENCE**

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INTRODUCTION

The economic model of educational policy is premised on the view that there is a common set of educational goals on which there is substantial consensus. The challenge is to determine the most efficient way of reaching those goals for any given level of resources. Most of the debate over educational vouchers has been embedded in this framework. Researchers have argued that the existing public schools use resources inefficiently because they lack incentives to do so (e.g. Hanushek, 1994). They cite as evidence the large increases in educational expenditure without compensating improvements in student achievement. Those who challenge this interpretation implicate changing student demography, expanded school responsibilities, and the increase in the cost of school personnel and, especially, the large number of female teachers as reasons for rising costs.¹

In the search for alternatives that would use educational resources more efficiently, vouchers have been posited as the answer. An educational voucher approach would provide government-issued certificates to parents that could be used at any school approved by the government to provide educational services (Levin, 2001). These certificates would be redeemed by schools by submitting them to the government for payment. An educational market based upon the use of vouchers would enable many types of schools to compete for students, providing incentives to outperform other schools to obtain clientele. Most economists view market solutions as superior to government solutions because they maximize consumer surplus and producer surplus.

¹ The expansion of the numbers of students covered by special education and the resource requirements for serving them from the 1975 “Education for All Students” Act (PL 94-142) are an example of growing responsibilities. The workforce in schools is largely female and college-educated. Earnings of this group have risen at a much more rapid rate than for males or than the consumer price index. Hanushek (1998) is the most important critic, and **he and Rivkin** have questioned these explanations. Rothstein (1995) has argued the opposite case.

But, this argument primarily refers to goods and services that do not yield important social externalities, that is benefits or costs that extend beyond the individuals who obtain those goods and services.

Importantly, the theoretical presumption is not equivalent to proof of superior effectiveness in the real world. Thus, researchers have attempted to develop empirical estimates of the educational impact of vouchers relative to that of the more traditional public school organization. The ability to make this comparison has been difficult because there exists no large-scale voucher demonstration project in the U.S.; and the experiences with vouchers in other countries such as Chile (or Colombia) may not be pertinent, given international differences in school systems.²

Nevertheless, the last few years have stimulated a frenzied search for useful data that might predict the impact of educational vouchers, especially on student achievement. This search has included several types of studies. Comparisons of student achievement have been made between public and private schools to predict what might happen with a market of private schools (McEwan, 2001). The degree of competition among public schools has been used as an indicator of the potential impact of competition among educational vouchers as well (Belfield and Levin, 2002). Evaluations of student achievement between public and voucher schools under existing voucher arrangements in Milwaukee and Cleveland have also been analyzed (Witte, 2000; Metcalf et. al., 2003). Finally, voucher experiments in three cities have served to consider voucher effects on educational achievement (Howell and Peterson, 2002). As we will note below, all of

² Chile has had a national system of vouchers for more than two decades. However, the impact on educational quality overall and the differences in educational effectiveness between private and government schools appear to be difficult to determine with certainty and have been found to be small. See Carnoy and McEwan (2003). For evidence on Colombia, see Angrist et al. (2002).

these studies have problematic features, so empirical evidence has not settled the issue to the satisfaction of those who have not made prior commitments to one side or the other.

To this point, some of the studies have found small, positive impacts of choice, competition, and vouchers on student achievement; others have found none. A few have found small negative impacts, but no study has found any substantial difference in student achievement, for example, an impact that would potentially close the achievement gap among races.

These searches for evidence are largely predicated on the view that the voucher issue will be decided largely on the basis of evidence, particularly as measured in effectiveness on student achievement. Increasingly it has become apparent that the search for evidence on the educational effectiveness of **vouchers is a charade that will not settle the debate**. Although different political groups and their organizational representatives search for evidence that supports their positions, they oppose or favor vouchers largely on the basis of their ideologies rather than evidence of effectiveness.

In what follows, we will present a framework that sets out four criteria for evaluating the relative desirability of any educational system in a democratic setting. Moreover, we will show how three major dimensions of design can be used as policy tools to ascertain the probable impact of any particular system on the four dimensions. We will, then, suggest that even if we had evidence of the impact of educational vouchers or another approach on the four dimensions, the preferences for any approach depend to a much greater extent on ideological attractiveness than on evidence of educational

effectiveness.³ Finally, we consider why this ideological motivation has grown in intensity, and what changes are possible to reduce its influence.

ANALYTIC FRAMEWORK

In order to understand the consequences of vouchers that might make them attractive or unattractive, one must set out an overall framework that is amenable to analysis. In the discussions that surround educational vouchers as well as other approaches to education, four major goals are represented: a) freedom of choice; b) productive efficiency; c) equity; and d) social cohesion. As we will see, these goals may be in conflict with each other, so tradeoffs must ultimately be made in designing an educational system.

- (1) **Freedom of Choice**—This goal places a heavy emphasis on the private benefits of education and the liberty to ensure that schools are chosen that are consistent with the child-rearing practices and preferences of families. It is particularly important to voucher advocates relative to those who oppose vouchers.
- (2) **Productive Efficiency**—This goal refers to the maximization of educational results for any given resource constraint. Educational voucher advocates assume that market competition among schools for students will create strong incentives, not only to meet student needs, but to improve educational productivity. Voucher detractors believe that the assumptions that make competition effective will not be present in the

³ One hint of this bifurcation is found in an extensive survey carried out in 1999 by the noted, public opinion firm, Public Agenda (Farkas et al., 1999). About 80 percent of the general public and parent audiences responded that they needed to learn more about school vouchers in order to have an opinion on the subject. Two thirds indicated that they knew little or nothing on the subject. Yet, when asked what they thought would be the consequences of vouchers, about half indicated what they believed was “very likely” to happen under vouchers. More than half of the general public either “strongly opposed” or “strongly favored” educational vouchers rather than taking a more moderate position consistent with their limited knowledge.

educational marketplace and that the public and private costs of constructing and maintaining a voucher system are not accounted for.

- (3) **Equity**—This goal refers to the quest for fairness in access to educational opportunities, resources, and outcomes by gender, social class, race, language origins, handicapping condition, and geographical location of students. Voucher advocates argue that the ability to choose schools will open up possibilities for students who are locked into inferior neighborhood schools, and that the competitive marketplace will have great incentives to meet the needs of all students more fully than existing schools. Challengers argue that vouchers will create greater inequities because parents with education and income are better informed and have greater resources such as access to transportation. Also, they believe that the choices, themselves, will further segregate the poor and disenfranchised as those with power and status will select schools with students like themselves and schools will also select students by such criteria.
- (4) **Social Cohesion**—This criterion refers to the provision of a common educational experience that will orient all students to grow to adulthood as full participants in the social, political, and economic institutions of our society. Social cohesion is usually interpreted as necessitating common elements of schooling with regard to curriculum, social values, goals, language, and political institutions. Voucher advocates believe that this goal is achieved in schools without making special provisions or that it will only require minimal regulations. Voucher opponents believe that market choice will promote differences in knowledge, beliefs, and values that will undermine democratic functioning.

Vouchers By Design

There is not a single voucher plan, but many different ones, each with emphases on a somewhat different mix of priorities among the four goals. Although some refer to "the voucher plan", differences among voucher plans can have profoundly different results. Within limits, educational voucher arrangements are highly malleable. Plans can be constructed with particular features to address each of the four goals by using three design instruments: (1) finance; (2) regulation; and (3) support services.⁴

- (1) **Finance**—Finance refers to the overall magnitude of the educational voucher, how it is allocated and whether schools can add tuition charges to the government voucher for families willing and able to purchase a more costly education. A larger voucher will promote more options in the marketplace with greater freedom of choice and competition. If the educational voucher is differentiated by educational need such as larger vouchers for those with handicaps and from poverty backgrounds, some issues of equity will be addressed. Schools will have greater incentives to attract such students and provide the resources and programs to address their needs. If families can add-on to vouchers from their private resources as Milton Friedman (1962) proposed, there will be advantages for families with higher incomes in the educational marketplace who are able to send their children to more expensive and restrictive schools with potential increases in inequities relative to the present system.
- (2) **Regulation**—Regulation refers to the requirements set out by government for eligibility of schools to participate in the voucher system as well as any other rules that must be adhered to by schools and families in using educational vouchers.

⁴ More detail is provided in the Appendix to Levin (2002, 170-71) presenting "Questions for Analyzing Design Dimensions of Vouchers."

Presumably, only schools that meet certain standards will be eligible to redeem vouchers. Some voucher plans have emphasized a common curriculum and uniform testing as a condition of school participation to ensure that students are meeting goals of social cohesion and that schools can be compared for their productive efficiency along common measures of student achievement. Admissions requirements have also been a matter of scrutiny where schools with more applicants than available places would be required to choose a portion of students by lottery to assure fairness in selection procedures. Eligibility for vouchers may be restricted to certain populations in the name of equity. For example, public and private voucher programs in Milwaukee and Cleveland have been limited to children from poorer families in order to give them choices outside of their neighborhoods. The Florida legislation limited vouchers to children in failing public schools.

- (3) **Support Services**—Support services refer to those types of publicly-provided services designed to increase the effectiveness of the market in providing freedom of choice, productive efficiency, and equity. Competitive markets assume that consumers will have access to a wide variety of choices as well as useful information for selecting among them. In the United States the availability of public transportation is very limited, necessitating a system of school transportation from children's neighborhoods to schools of choice. In the absence of school transportation, school choices and competition for students will be limited, reducing both the competitive efficiency of schools and creating inequities for those who cannot afford private transportation.

Information must be widely available for families to make informed choices about the schools that they select for their children. Accurate information on school programs and effectiveness as well as other important aspects of school philosophy and practice would need to be collected and disseminated to parents to assist in making decisions (Schneider et al., 2000). It could be argued that the schools will provide their own information through promotional materials and informational sessions to parents. However, there is little assurance that the information will be accurate and balanced, and it may be especially difficult for less-educated parents to comprehend in a manner that contributes to good decisions.⁵ Technical assistance might also be provided by government agencies through information and training to new schools to advance the productivity of the entire sector.

Different Voucher Plans

Different voucher plans have incorporated specific designs that utilize these three policy instruments to achieve particular goals. Depending upon the specifics, a given voucher plan may differ from another plan in its impact on choice, efficiency, equity, and social cohesion. In essence, each plan uses the design tools to construct a plan which either implicitly or explicitly places greater weight on some goals rather than others.

(1) Designs for Freedom of Choice—A voucher plan that maximized choice would allow for a very broad definition of education that would encompass most types of schools and schooling; would provide either a large voucher to all or a smaller voucher with parents permitted to add to it out of private resources; would minimize regulation of curriculum, admissions, and other dimensions of school operations; and would provide a good system

⁵ The dearth of knowledge and understanding by parents is heavily underlined in Public Agenda (1999). Schneider, Teske, and Marschall (2000) also found class and race differences in knowledge of schools. For a detailed investigation of public attitudes, see Moe (2001).

of comparative information on schools as well as an adequate system of transportation. Such a design would ensure a large number of alternatives on the supply side that parents could choose from. This type of plan is especially attractive to Libertarians who prefer to see the least government interference in the marketplace, utilizing a modest voucher with the freedom of parents to add to it. Libertarians may believe that the support services of information and transportation are unwarranted because the cost of government intervention exceeds its value, and they would favor a low voucher with add-ons (Friedman 1962) rather than a large basic voucher from public funding.

(2) Designs for Efficiency—Productive efficiency is maximized when schools produce a given level and type of education for the least cost. That is, they are operating at the lowest point on their average cost curve. This is somewhat difficult to assess because under a system of freedom of choice, schools may be producing very different types of education. It is the matching of these educational offerings to the preferences of families in a competitive environment that is viewed as the heart of efficiency. Accordingly, designs that focus on efficiency would have a voucher that is high enough (including parental add-ons) to attract many competitors into the marketplace. Regulations would be minimal because they would tend to inhibit competition. However, some would argue that academic achievement is so central to the productivity of all schools that testing of student achievement should be required and reported. Support services such as information and transportation would raise efficiency through increased competition, but the cost of those services would have to be taken into account relative to the efficiency gains.

(3) Designs for Equity—Equity in education refers to equality in access, resources, and educational outcomes for groups that have traditionally faced differences on these dimensions. From a finance perspective, an equitable design would seek compensatory vouchers where more funding was available for students with greater educational need such as those in educationally at-risk and handicapped categories. In addition, families could not add-on to the voucher so that income differences would be neutralized. The most fundamental regulation on equity is the question of who is eligible to receive and use a voucher. Thus far all of the voucher plans in the U.S. have been limited to students from low income families or those enrolled in failing schools. Thus, the voucher has been accessible to students who are worst off educationally, providing greater equity in choice for them as it has been provided traditionally through residential location and private schools for those who are more affluent. Equity-oriented regulations would also embrace a provision of non-discrimination in admissions. Schools would be required to choose some portion of their students by lottery if there were more applicants than openings. Arrangements that encourage or require that schools not limit themselves to a narrow social or ethnic population are likely, given the evidence that peers have an important impact on educational outcomes (Zimmer and Toma, 2000). Transportation and information would be required support services to provide access to those who are less advantaged and an informed basis for choosing schools. Specimen examples of voucher proposals which emphasize equity are outlined in Godwin and Kemerer (2003) and Viteritti (1999).

(4) Designs for Social Cohesion—Social cohesion connotes a common educational experience, one that prepares all students for civic responsibilities and participation (see

the discussions in Wolfe, 2003). The voucher would have to be large enough to provide a common educational experience beyond specialized and elective subjects and activities. The voucher would have to be structured so that all students could gain access to schools where they would be exposed to peers from a variety of backgrounds. This means that parental add-ons to the voucher would probably be proscribed because they would tend to place students from different income strata into different schools. Regulations would focus on establishing common elements in curriculum and certain school activities including the possibility of all students engaging in community service. Support services might focus on the provision of technical assistance in helping schools develop a common educational core as well as the information and transportation to enable families to find and gain access to schools with a heterogeneity of students.

IDEOLOGY VERSUS EVIDENCE

Why do strong views on educational vouchers prevail, far outweighing the potential influence of evidence in the preference for or opposition against vouchers? In the main, these strong views are premised on the underlying perspectives that people hold on the purposes of education. The essential tension is found between those who see elementary and secondary schooling as an experience that should be guided primarily by private values and goals and those who see it as an experience designed to mold citizens and society through addressing social goals. This division permeates the debate over vouchers.

Libertarian versus Social Contract Positions

On one side is the libertarian belief that freedom of choice is the highest priority. This belief is evident in the writings of E.G. West (1967, 1991) and Milton Friedman (1962, 1993), as well as recent contributions, e.g. by Lott (1987), Coulson (1999), and Merrifield (2001). It is also manifest in the agendas of research agencies such as the Cato Institute, the Friedman Foundation, and the Manhattan Institute.⁶ These groups actively promote evidence that supports vouchers, but they also argue for freedom of choice as a strong criterion in making value judgments about educational policies and programs.

This libertarian view gains support from the Supreme Court ruling in *Pierce v. Society of Sisters* (1925). In that decision, the Court ruled that prior legislation “unreasonably interferes with the liberty of parents and guardians to direct the upbringing and education of children under their control”. Thus, considerable weight must be given to parents’ views on and choices of education. More recently, freedom of choice was emphasized in the U.S. Supreme Court decision on vouchers in *Cleveland (Zelman v. Simmons-Harris, 2002)*. The Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program, which allowed government funds to be used at private religious schools, was justified as a “program of true private choice, consistent with *Mueller*, *Witters*, and *Zobrest*, and thus constitutional... [It is] neutral in all respects toward religion. It is part of a general and multifaceted undertaking by the State of Ohio to provide educational opportunities to the children of a failed school district” (p.11). In law, new opportunities and parental liberty are important in designing new educational programs.

⁶ The Cato Institute’s research is motivated toward an agenda of “individual liberty, limited government, free markets, and peace” (www.cato.org). The Friedman Foundation “strives to educate parents, public policy makers and organizations about the desperate need for a shift of power to the disenfranchised parents of America who have limited choices and voices in the education of their children” (www.friedmanfoundation.org). The Manhattan Institute “is a think tank whose mission is to develop and disseminate new ideas that foster greater economic choice and individual responsibility” (www.manhattan-institute.org).

The libertarian position assumes that choice options will promote greater efficiency and (possibly) equity. Where families have choices between schools, then these schools will compete to provide the best education and so will be efficient in terms of meeting consumer preferences and in doing it in a manner in which outcomes are maximized for the resource effort. This argument relies on the presence of a sufficient supply of schools being responsive to family preferences (as well as these preferences being flexible, e.g. between a secular and a religious school). Where families are given vouchers that more accurately compensate for different circumstances such as family income or special educational needs, then the education system may become more equitable. But, this argument is contingent on a specific design which may not be politically feasible. Moreover, a strict libertarian may insist that no restrictions should be imposed on the amount families wish to spend on their children's education, and regulations of any sort should be proscribed or minimized.

Critically, the libertarian position is largely silent on how educational vouchers will influence social cohesion.⁷ In *Capitalism and Freedom*, Milton Friedman does justify public funding of education as necessary for producing “neighborhood effects”, i.e. positive externalities. But he does not give any detail about how such “neighborhood effects” are produced (e.g. through the curriculum, school ethos, peer interactions, or pedagogy); and there is no suggestion that some education systems might produce negative “neighborhood effects”, e.g. through residential or racial segregation, or through religious fundamentalism. It is not explicit what amount of education is needed to

⁷ E. G. West, an important supporter of private markets in education, has argued that public benefits or externalities of education are largely mythical or are not worth the burden of tax support because of the dead-weight loss of public welfare created by that level of taxation. His views imply that the provision of payment for education should be privately arranged rather than being a matter for the government. See West (1965,1991).

generate these effects. Little attention is paid to the regulations on admissions, curriculum, and testing that may be necessary to create positive externalities. Instead, such regulations are regarded as red tape, and a direct threat to the promotion of freedom of choice.

The other side of the debate on vouchers is that of the social contract advocates. Their argument is that education strongly generates positive externalities, and that these are best promoted through a school system which is free, publicly funded, and democratically determined. In addition, such a school system would be the most equitable; it most effectively allows for the establishment of bilingual education, ensures adequate provision for special education, for parity across students according to class, race, and gender. This position is exemplified in the writings of Michael Apple (2001), Alex Molnar (1996), and others (see the contributions in Wolfe, 2003; and Smith, 2003). Institutions committed to production of education by government sponsored schools include the National Education Association, the American Federation of Teachers, the National School Boards Association, People for the American Way, and most civil rights groups such as the Urban League and the NAACP.⁸ These groups urge their memberships to oppose educational vouchers, often emphasizing how positive externalities and democratic goals of education such as equity would be undermined.

This social contract view also gains support from the Supreme Court ruling of *Pierce v. Society of Sisters* (1925). In upholding parents' liberty, the ruling asserts that "No question is raised concerning the power of the State reasonably to regulate all

⁸ The NEA is opposed to vouchers as a method for school improvement. "NEA believes that instead of diverting scarce school resources to vouchers for a select few, we should help public schools work for all students" (www.nea.org). The National PTA believes that public education provides a common experience for building and maintaining a commitment to the basic values of a democratic system of government. A strong public education system is vital to America's well-being." (www.pta.org)

schools, to inspect, supervise and examine them, their teachers and pupils; to require that all children of proper age attend some school, that teachers shall be of good moral character and patriotic disposition, that certain studies plainly essential to good citizenship must be taught, and that nothing be taught which is manifestly inimical to the public welfare”. Thus, the courts allow for considerable regulation of any schools, public or private, to ensure social cohesion. Further, although the recent Supreme Court decision of *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* emphasizes choice (over social cohesion), some attention is paid to the concern that state entanglement with religion may create social tensions. Justice O’Connor – in deciding in favor of vouchers – recognized that small-scale programs are unlikely to have a powerful societal impact; this allows for a reserved judgment on large-scale programs. Justice Stevens – in dissenting – concluded that “whenever we remove a brick from the wall that was designed to separate religion and government, we increase the risk of religious strife and weaken the foundation of our democracy”. This legal interpretation would foreclose any programs which would allow public funding of religious school options.⁹

However, the social contract position gives little weight to efficiency or freedom of choice. These are regarded as subordinate to the need to ensure a social order through education. The tacit or explicit assumption is that schools run by governments through democratic mechanisms (even imperfect ones) will be more efficient at producing public goods such as civil obedience, respect for laws, appreciation of diversity, and preparation for adult participation in social and economic institutions than ones based upon the

⁹ Paradoxically, the social contracts view comes closer to the arguments of so-called “cultural conservatives” such as William Bennett, former U.S. Secretary of Education with his model curriculum for all U.S. schools (e.g. Bennett 1987) and E. D. Hirsch with his emphasis on a common canon of cultural knowledge that all children must learn (Hirsch 1987).

diversity of markets. Indeed, freedom of choice may be regarded as directly antithetical to the establishment of an equitable education system where families can select schools on the basis of ideology, political values, race, and socio-economic status.¹⁰ Much of the appeal of a market system is its ability to differentiate education finely according to the narrow desires of families in the marketplace.

The libertarian and social contract positions thus appear as binary opposites, each rejecting the values that support the others' arguments. Obviously, complete attention to either an exclusively private purview or an exclusively public one is extreme, and most people recognize that each has some legitimacy.¹¹ But, the ideology becomes an important driving force because there are enough persons and organized groups at the opposing ends of this spectrum to advance very strong opinions on the purpose and consequences of vouchers; whether a voucher plan is acceptable, and what an acceptable voucher plan should look like. In general the unfortunate result is a 'debate' where it is very difficult to find evidence or arguments that might objectively discriminate between the two positions and offer compelling guidance to those who are undecided about the merits of vouchers. The lack of importance of evidence is certainly reflected in the fact that a major public opinion poll found that about 80 percent of respondents expressed their views on vouchers, but only about one third seemed to possess even rudimentary knowledge of what they were (Public Agenda 1999).

The Rise of Ideology in Education

¹⁰ Certainly, these types of choices are evident today in residential choice which leads to schooling differences. The issue here is whether markets would streamline the choice of schools on these criteria, making it even more difficult to use schools to obtain social cohesion.

¹¹ The overall tension between education as a public or private good is addressed in H. M. Levin (1987, 1991).

The tension between the libertarian and social contract positions is long-standing, with roots that can be traced back to philosophers such as John Locke, Adam Smith, Edmund Burke, and JJ Rousseau. Yet, the ideological strain in debates in education appears to have grown stronger within the last decade (see the synthesis in Gill et al., 2001, and commentary by Sugarman and Kemerer, 1999). There are a number of reasons for this rise in ideological fervor.

One reason is that the legality of vouchers appears to have been settled at the federal level, opening the way for public initiatives that include public schools. Now the struggles over the issue have landed at the state level with challenges to state constitutions with strong language on the separate of government and religion. The Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program was subject to a lengthy legal challenge until the Supreme Court decision of June 2002. The Colorado Opportunity Contract Pilot Program was intended to operate in 2004, but it has been subject to court challenge and is currently awaiting further legal clarification. As noted above, both advocates and opponents can infer support for their arguments from existing decisions. This ambiguity means that both sides will seek to use the legal system to influence public policy.

A second reason for the rise of ideology is that there is now the possibility of a greater financial stake in education for both existing and potential suppliers in the private sector. (The political dynamics that affect decisions about U.S. education are catalogued by Chubb and Moe, 2001). To persuade the electorate to support programs or to win government contracts, it is therefore necessary to campaign or lobby effectively with a simple message that will be persuasive. Thus, advocacy groups boldly declare themselves in favor of vouchers and free markets, and the more nuanced issues – about

the design of the program or the problems associated with program implementation – are drowned out or downplayed. These advocacy groups are accompanied by private firms that realize that lucrative contracts may be available for providing educational services, perhaps on a national scale to a captive clientele of 55 million students. Opposing groups send out messages of alarm about the threats to democracy and public education of vouchers and the private marketplace. They lobby forcefully to undermine shifts to privatization and advocate for more funding for existing public schools as a solution to dissatisfaction. And as the costs of educating each student rise, this financial motivation to influence education policy grows more powerful and more strident.

A third reason why ideological arguments and political expressions have increased is that extension of present voucher programs to large-scale versions will have potentially radical consequences on the control and forms of education. Presently, voucher programs are small-scale, limited to a few cities and with student eligibility thresholds. They are also funded at modest levels compared with public school spending, although certainly approaching public school levels in Milwaukee and (potentially) Colorado when differences in student composition and services are accounted for.¹² Some advocates expressly favor these types of program. However, others may favor national voucher programs, without limits to school or student participation and with voucher financing that is relatively generous. A small-scale program therefore serves as a stepping stone to a national program. The costs and outcomes from small-scale versus large-scale programs may differ greatly (see Levin and Driver, 1997); and once a small-scale voucher program is legal, advocates may push for its expansion. For example, the

¹² For example, voucher schools do not have provisions for or enroll the most expensive students, moderately and severely handicapped students, and do not provide transportation. These are expensive services that are not required of public schools and are included in their spending (See Levin 1998).

Milwaukee Parental Choice Program began as a voucher program where only private schools were eligible; in 1998 it was expanded to allow religious schools to participate. Obviously, it is the intention of voucher advocates to promote their expansion. Opponents of vouchers therefore see it as essential to forcefully defeat even small-scale programs.

Using Evidence to Rebut Ideology

Possibly the most important reason why ideology trumps evidence in determining education reforms is that the evidence has been extremely contentious. Despite a sizeable research effort, the evidence on vouchers does not provide clear guidance. A full review of the evidence is not possible here, but a couple of examples may indicate the ambiguity.

The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP) is the longest running and largest voucher program in the US; it has been operating since 1990 and presently enrolls over 11,000 students. Ideally, this program should provide plausible evidence to evaluate educational vouchers. However, evaluations of MPCP have not established clearly whether students gain from participation. The evaluations look only at academic achievement (not efficiency) and only cover the period from 1990-95 when only secular schools were eligible to redeem vouchers (Witte, 2000). Earlier evaluations were controversial and contradictory with data that had missing information, considerable attrition, and instability among comparison groups. The initial evaluation for the State of Wisconsin showed no difference in achievement between voucher and non-voucher students (Witte, 2000). A re-analysis using a somewhat different approach by Greene et al. (1998) found achievement advantages in both mathematics and reading for longer-term voucher students. A third evaluation that made considerable adjustments for data

problems showed no difference in achievement for reading and a slight advantage for the voucher students in mathematics (Rouse, 1998). Each evaluation was based on a small sample of schools and students. No information is available on the performance of these students since 1995; this lacuna is important because the program was substantially modified in 1998 to make religious schools eligible to redeem vouchers. Unfortunately, testing on a common instrument has not been required since 1995, so comparable test score data with that of the Milwaukee Public Schools is not available.

Another example of the debate over evidence relates to the randomized field trials of vouchers in Dayton, Washington DC, and New York City. Using an experimental design, Howell and Peterson (2002) randomly assigned educational vouchers among a group of voucher applicants from low-income families, forming a group of voucher recipients and a similar control group. The voucher amount of about \$1,400 a year was applied mainly to tuition at low-cost Catholic schools for up to three years in the three cities. The use of a randomized field trial is commendable, because this may be the best way to establish causality between voucher receipt and educational outcomes.

The full results are reported in Howell and Peterson (2002, Table 6-1) for voucher recipients who used their voucher at a private school (but not for those who were offered the voucher but did not use it). Overall, no achievement advantages were found from using educational vouchers after three years. There are positive gains for one specific group, African Americans, after three years of voucher enrollment, but these gains are based on the second year advantages at one site (Washington, DC). Moreover, these results have been challenged on methodological grounds and non-robustness when statistical corrections are made. The challenge – set out in Krueger and Zhu (2004ab) – rests on a re-analysis of racial classifications and alternative sampling schemes to include

students without pre-test scores; it has been rebutted by Peterson and Howell (2004).

Notwithstanding, on either set of assumptions or re-classifications there is no evidence, at present, that voucher programs make a large difference to educational outcomes for participating students.

The overall conclusion from both these research investigations is therefore difficult to discern: education vouchers might have some modest positive impact, but it is not clear whether this represents a clear efficiency gain.¹³ (Of course, this ambiguity has not stopped both advocates and opponents from drawing strong conclusions about vouchers). More importantly, without compelling evidence there is a greater tendency to resort to ideological claims about vouchers.

CONCLUSION

The engine of ideology in motivating views towards educational vouchers is particularly frustrating to social scientists who believe that their role in uncovering evidence on consequences should be central to the choice of educational reform. The voucher conflict arises because voucher reform is complicated and multi-faceted, because it impacts on all the fundamental purposes of education, and because it involves value judgments which cannot easily be reconciled. Even the types of evidence that might be crucial to a particular audience are highly contested in terms of their importance. As well,

¹³ Another case where evidence has yielded little is the Florida A-Plus Accountability and School Choice Program. This very small-scale voucher program has been analyzed, with considerable media attention, by Greene (2001); a counter-argument was then offered by Camilli and Bulkley (2001) and Kupermintz (2001). No consensus can be ascertained from this research as to the effectiveness of vouchers. Moreover, because resources were re-allocated as part of the program, it is not possible to relate efficiency gains to effectiveness gains. Finally, a related example is the debate over the relative effectiveness of public versus private schools. In review, only a slim advantage for private schools is evident (McEwan, 2003). But this evidence pertains only to Catholic private schools. The very poor financial performance of for-profit private schools suggests that they do not have a clear efficiency advantage over the public sector (Levin, 2001).

there is a lot at stake: large-scale voucher reforms may offer lucrative contracts to education providers and necessitate a radical restructuring of the public education system. Although both sides argue about what is best for children, the fact is that there will be winners and losers among adults with different interests. Finally, the evidence base on which to make public policy decisions is not clear: at best it is very limited in scope with only modest differences between voucher and existing systems in effects on student achievement. The rise of ideology is therefore disappointing, but not surprising.

Resolving these problems may be difficult. Although we have shown a consistent and relatively simple set of policy instruments for designing voucher programs and a general framework for evaluating them, the details of any particular program still need to be worked through case by case. Difficult decisions must be made about the appropriate trade-offs, and we predict that it is extremely hard to reach a consensus where philosophical differences are so strongly embedded in the libertarian and the social contract views. However, researchers face a clear imperative for research which meets high methodological standards and which can be replicated by others. Most importantly, this research should aim to be comprehensive, in addressing all four criteria of freedom of choice, efficiency, equity, and social cohesion, presuming that there is still some audience whom evidence will sway, even given a strong set of prior values.

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