

What American Education Needs



For over four decades the public education establishment has delivered one educational disaster after another. “Solution” after “solution” has fallen far short of promises. The education establishment’s perennial answer to our education problems is more money. Educational expenditures have skyrocketed (more than doubling every 20 years since 1960) and yet SAT scores plummet.

National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) test results partially demonstrate our dismal education picture. Of 17-year olds taking the test: 47 percent could not express 9/100 as a percent; only 5 percent could calculate the cost per kilowatt on an electric bill that charged \$9.09 for 606 kilowatts; 26 percent did not know the U.S. Congress was part of the legislative branch of government; 43 percent of high school juniors could not place World War I within the period 1900 to 1950; 75 percent could not place Abraham Lincoln’s presidency in the era 1840–1880.¹

The education establishment’s latest “solution,” supported by President Clinton, is massive federal expenditures to hire 100,000 additional teachers. This they claim will reduce class sizes and thus improve academic performance. The United States already has smaller classes than countries where student academic performance is much greater than ours. For example, Japan averages 41 students per class compared to 26 in the United States.

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In mathematics, where their students run circles around ours, their average math class size is 43 compared to our 20.²

Breaking the education monopoly will solve most of the nation’s education problems. A way to achieve this is through education vouchers or tuition tax credits. With education vouchers, state and local governments make direct payments to parents, in the form of vouchers that are used to pay tuition at public or nonpublic schools.

Tuition tax credits give parents a credit against their income taxes for tuition expenses. For example, if parents spent \$3,000 in tuition to send their kid to a nonpublic school, all or a percentage of the tuition would be subtracted from their tax liability. Tuition tax credits are far preferable to vouchers because we would not run the risk of government intervention in the form of state Departments of Vouchers.

Opponents interested in maintaining the monopoly of education have advanced arguments against greater competition in the education of America’s children. These arguments seem to be plausible; however, upon a little reflection they are simply baseless.

If a voucher or tuition tax system is instituted, public schools will be destroyed. This charge amounts to a tragic confession that public schools are so inferior that given a choice, all parents would opt out. The fact of the matter is some public schools are doing a satisfactory job; those schools would survive. Schools doing a poor job would have to either improve or perish.

If there is a voucher or tuition tax credit system, private schools would skim off the best students leaving public schools with the least motivated students. Assume for a moment this might happen. To object to parental choice for that reason is callous arrogance and cruelty. It differs little from saying that parents who want better education prospects and a brighter future for their children should be held hostage until some undetermined time when public schools have improved. While the education establishment is willing to hold parents hostage, they want choice for themselves. Public school teachers enroll their own children in nonpublic schools to a much greater extent than the general public.

Vouchers or tax credits will lead to school racial segregation. Most voucher and tuition tax proposals prohibit racial discrimination. The major thrust for school choice programs has come from black parents, most likely to be served by poor schools. Moreover, most large city public schools are already racially homogeneous. For example, in Manhattan, public schools are nearly 90 percent black or Hispanic, while private schools are 80 percent white. While there is a smaller overall percentage of blacks in private schools, private schools are more racially heterogeneous. Therefore, if racial diversity is deemed desirable, school choice would contribute to that goal.

Even if school choice is a good idea, there are not enough nonpublic schools. This is an absurd criticism and reflects ignorance of markets. In the 1970s, there were no computer software stores and few video rental shops. Would you have argued back then that the manufacturing and marketing of computers and VCR machines should be held up until software and rental shops were in place? Consumers having purchased computers and videos created the demand for those shops. We would expect the same with private schools. If parents had vouchers or tax credits, one can rest assured that entrepreneurs, in the pursuit of profits, would emerge to meet the demand for private schools.

Parents, particularly those who are low-income, are incapable of making wise choices. This is a demeaning attitude toward the poor and it also reflects ignorance of how markets operate. People have little direct information about the quality of most goods and services they use. They depend on indirect information such as word of mouth, consumer reports, advertisements, and so forth. I know that Lafite-Rothschild is an excellent Bordeaux not because of my wine-tasting skills but because of the testimony by others who spend their lives studying wine. Markets generate information about quality, and information would be generated about K through 12 schools just as markets already provide information about colleges and universities.

Even if parents made mistakes, it is inconceivable that parents, particularly black parents, could choose schools worse than the schools already serving them. On occasion I have put the matter more starkly saying that if the Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan wanted to sabotage black academic excellence, he could not devise a more effective way of doing so than the schools serving most black children.

Education vouchers and tuition tax credits face another source of criticism. It comes from those fearful of government control of nonpublic schools through regulations that might accompany vouchers and tax credits. I share that concern and urge strong measures be taken to minimize that likelihood. The question I pose to these critics of vouchers and tuition tax credits is: which is the more serious and costly risk, that associated with the prospect of increased government intervention in nonpublic schools that might accompany vouchers and tax credits, or continued educational destruction of the nation's youngsters, particularly its black and Hispanic youngsters? □

1. William J. Bennett, *American Education: Making It Work* (Washington, D.C., April 1988), cited in *Making Government Work: A Conservative Agenda for the States*, ed. Tex Lezar (San Antonio: Texas Public Policy Foundation, 1992), p. 4.

2. Thomas Sowell, *Inside American Education: The Decline, the Deception, the Dogmas* (New York: Free Press, 1993), p. 12.