

VOUCHERS: NO SOLUTION TO EDUCATING THE POOR

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President Bush has disingenuously offered about \$1,500 for the children of poor single mothers to escape the failing schools their children attend. But even heavily subsidized religious schools charge around \$3,000 per year, and the better non-sectarian private schools cost \$10,000 and more.

The \$1,500 buys nothing for poor people -- those whom the president says he wants to help. Poor people, even with the president's voucher, lack the money to send their children to private schools. But the president seems determined to get Congress to support this meaningless voucher program, perhaps to pave the way for full-scale statewide voucher programs later. Bush is joined in this goal by state Superintendent of Public Instruction Lisa Graham Keegan and Congressman Jeff Flake.

Vouchers are not likely to improve poor children's education. Differences between poor and middle-class students are evident on the first day of school. These achievement differences cannot be the product of failing public schools in which poor students are "trapped," or due to the "soft racism of low expectations," as voucher advocates charge.

They have many causes: lower educational attainment of parents in poverty, the restricted access these children have to proper nutrition, health care, day care and educational resources in pre-school years. Those differences are exacerbated when these children are concentrated in deteriorating schools that lack resources and amenities found in wealthier communities.

Even if we did conclude that vouchers for poor children resulted in positive effects, should we then generalize the findings from a few small studies to promote a large-scale voucher program? Will vouchers for millions of students at a cost of billions of tax dollars improve schools? Research on this issue says "no."

Voucher experiments have been completed in Chile and New Zealand. In neither nation did low-income students end up better off. Voucher programs reinforced segregation and inequality between poor students and middle-class students.

As might be suspected, private schools competing in the free market employed screening procedures that kept out those who were the most challenging to teach -- the academically weak, the disabled, and the poor. As many predicted, the middle and affluent classes profited from vouchers and the disadvantaged classes suffered.

Indeed, when private schools do have beneficial effects, they can almost always be attributable to involvement of parents, smaller school and class sizes, and powerful peer effects. The peer effect is the positive influence of achievement-oriented students on the school, after those who will not or cannot achieve have been dumped from the school.

There will never be enough room, or enough desire, to accommodate all the poor students in the few excellent private schools that exist. Inevitably, most students who choose to leave public schools will end up in second-rate proprietary schools. So vouchers for low-income students cannot be expected to benefit their overall achievement, but vouchers would inevitably segregate poor students from middle-class and more affluent students.

When a police force becomes corrupt, brutal, and unresponsive to civilian complaints, no one seriously suggests granting vouchers to private citizens to purchase private protection. Instead, political leaders recommend police department reforms and invest resources to make communities safer.

So it should be with public schools. We should fix them, but not with a system known to have failed elsewhere. Furthermore, voucher money subsidizes private schools that are often supported by families who do not want their children to mix with those who differ from them.

Vouchers only add another means to segregate our citizens.

Those who offer vouchers as the solution to the low academic achievement of poor students ignore the complexity of what contributes to student achievement, and they turn their backs on the goal of building a more democratic society.

Instead of subsidizing private schools and further fragmenting society, the world's richest nation might consider ways to improve low-income communities. We could invest in job-training, public transportation, quality day care for working families, after-school and Saturday programs, and community youth groups to teach adolescents pro-social behavior, to name just a few.

Improving the quality in urban schools means improving the quality of life in urban neighborhoods. That's a job that vouchers can't do, and one that would make vouchers unnecessary. The president can help our nation more by worrying about poor neighborhoods than by trying to impose a voucher system likely to fracture our society even more.