

School Vouchers Spell Disaster for Tennessee

Research and examples from other states show ample proof

As Tennessee taxpayers and lawmakers weigh the possibility of instituting school vouchers in our state, one would do well to pay attention to which organizations and politicians are pushing the school-voucher agenda and explore how vouchers have performed in other states.

A disaster where implemented

Vouchers have been a disaster where implemented. Studies show no evidence that vouchers improve student outcomes. A recent front-page *Washington Post* story¹ on one of the nation's largest voucher programs in that city found half of all vouchers go to dubious education "programs." One such program, supported by an organization identified as a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center, held classes in small bedrooms and had only one bathroom with a floor blackened with dirt and a sink coated in grime. According to *The Washington*

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Post, the director of the nonprofit organization that manages the D.C. vouchers on behalf of the federal government calls quality control "a blind spot."

More horror stories emerged from Louisiana, where a voucher program similar to the one being considered in Tennessee was ruled unconstitutional in November 2012, roughly a year after it was started, but not before costing taxpayers more than \$25 million a year.

Lance Hill, executive director of the Southern Institute for Education Research at Tulane

University and a member of the New Orleans Education Equity Roundtable, told *The Louisiana Weekly* that "the low number of applicants to the voucher program in that state "proves that the voucher program is a disaster." Noting that the premise for the voucher program was the idea that people would "stampede" out of public schools if given the chance, Hill said: "I think it's safe to say that 98 percent of the parents did not feel that the school their child was attending was so poor performing that they need to take advantage of a private education."

While the numbers are strikingly low, representing only two percent of the total potential applicants, Hill acknowledged that factors other than preference could play a part in the pool. Hill also pointed out that "almost half the parishes... could not find voucher schools... willing to participate."

Since its passage, the Louisiana voucher program has been widely criticized for its lack of accountability for private schools accepting voucher dollars. In addition, *The Louisiana Weekly* reports that the quality of education offered at these schools has come under fire. The report cited the example of a school in Ruston, The New Living Word, which signed up 314 voucher students, yet has no library and offers classroom instruction over-relying on DVDs².

While vouchers may sound good to some in theory, they are a disaster in practice.

School vouchers can take two basic forms: 1) vouchers among public schools, regardless of system, district, or political boundaries; and 2) facilitating private or parochial school attendance with vouchers or tax breaks. Both efforts are championed by right-wing organizations.³

Facts about school vouchers

The facts about school vouchers are clear:

- **There is no link between vouchers and gains in student achievement.** No definitive study has ever shown statistically significant improvement in student achievement as a result of vouchers. According to *The Washington Post*, the most comprehensive study of the D.C. voucher program found “no conclusive evidence” that the vouchers improved math and reading test scores for those students who left their public schools.
- **Vouchers undermine accountability for public funds.** There are clear examples of fraudulent programs in Milwaukee, Cleveland, Florida, Washington, D.C., and elsewhere. An investigation by *Miami New Times News*⁴ found that in Florida, private schools essentially go unregulated, even if they're funded by taxpayer dollars. In the example of South Florida Prep, which received at least \$236,000 from a state-run tax-credit scholarship for children from low-income families, 200 students were crammed into ever-changing school locations, including “a dingy strip-mall space above a liquor store and down the hall from a... massage

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parlor.” Eventually, fire marshals and sheriffs condemned the “campus” as unfit for habitation, pushing the student body into transience in church foyers and public parks. The inexperienced teachers were mostly in their early 20s.

- **Vouchers do not reduce public education costs.** Rather, they require taxpayers to fund two school systems, one public and one private. In fact, two-thirds of all Cleveland vouchers went to families already sending children to private schools.⁵ Vouchers in Cleveland are

mostly rebates for families who were already sending their children to private schools. According to the *Akron Beacon Journal*, “rather than bring about a shift from public to private schools, the voucher program merely slowed an exodus from Cleveland's Catholic schools to the city's public schools.”

- **Vouchers do not give parents real educational choice.** More than 90 percent of Florida private schools refuse vouchers, while others have tuition higher than voucher worth⁶.
- **School vouchers in Tennessee raise constitutional issues.** The state constitution requires the Tennessee General Assembly to “provide for the maintenance, support and eligibility standards of a system of free public schools.” It does not mention support of private entities to educate Tennesseans.

There are proven, research-based ways to improve education outcomes in Tennessee schools. We simply need to fund them. As the *Chattanooga Times Free Press* observed⁷:

Schools still have too few teachers, resources and catch-up programs to effectively teach children who largely come from homes and neighborhoods where lack of early education and severe socio-economic circumstances hinder student achievement for the majority of kids from the get-go... It's time to double-down for the long-term on pre-kindergarten, before- and after-school mentoring programs, and serious parental outreach and mentoring. Anything less is not going to reverse the economic and cultural dysfunction that perpetuates under-achievement.

Vouchers in Tennessee

Tennessee currently has no private school voucher law in place. To advance the voucher agenda, Rep. Bill Dunn, R-Knoxville, and Sen. Brian Kelsey, R-Germantown, sponsored school voucher legislation which failed to pass during the 107th General Assembly.

The movement to divert public education dollars to private and religious schools in Tennessee is gaining momentum. On December 15, 2011, Gov. Bill Haslam formed a Tennessee voucher task force, pushing research and policy in favor of bringing school vouchers to Tennessee. The task force released its report in December 2012, but left many details of a Tennessee school voucher plan unanswered. Many of these questions have since been answered with the introduction of a voucher bill, SB196/HB190, supported by Haslam.

While the Tennessee Education Association has long opposed any proposal that could divert much-needed funds from public schools to private entities, in January 2013, the TEA Board of Directors adopted a forceful resolution opposing school vouchers, noting:

- School vouchers reduce public accountability by diverting tax dollars to private entities that do not meet state-approved academic or teacher licensure standards, do not make budgets public, do not adhere to open meetings and records laws, do not publicly report student achievement and do not face the public accountability requirements contained in major federal laws.
- School vouchers leave many students behind—including those with greatest need—because vouchers divert tax dollars to private entities that are not required to accept all students nor offer the special services many students need.

In Tennessee, variations in state and local funding for school districts also complicate the prospect of school tax dollars following students. A recent editorial in *The Jackson Sun* stated⁹:

Most voucher proposals would allow students in failing schools to transfer to a better school... Finding alternative schools, private or public, that have room, are willing to participate and can be fairly compensated is no small task. Then there are issues of transportation, where underperforming students would fit into the new school, social issues, loss of student peer

group and additional challenges for parent involvement, to name a few.

Most of the state's failing schools are in poor communities. How many [of these] students might be able to take advantage of a school voucher to attend school in a different school district or even a different county? Probably not very many. The more difficult question to answer is what happens to those who can't flee to better schools?

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The idea of school vouchers appeals to our sense of wanting to afford every child the best educational opportunity possible. But, as a practical matter, school vouchers only offer that opportunity to a relatively small number of students. School vouchers might be in Tennessee's future, and some students could benefit. But what is being done for those who can't take advantage of a school voucher?

The more pressing challenge is to fix failing schools so all of the students get a better education, not just a few.

Other news media are also joining the chorus of opposition to school vouchers. The *Crossville Chronicle* recently editorialized¹⁰:

Instead of fixing schools so all of our students get a better education, our learned lawmakers are promoting vouchers for a few. They are not trying to improve public education; they are trying to kill it. They are proposing to take taxpayer money away from public schools that educate the vast majority of our kids and funnel it into corporate and religious schools that are only interested in turning a profit or indoctrinating students with religious ideology. Then they can just sit back and watch the public schools die.

There are many reasons that a voucher-driven raid on scarce school funds would be bad for Tennessee. But there is an issue that trumps all those reasons. Voucher plans that include religious schools violate the First Amendment. It constitutes a direct government subsidy of religion. No citizen should be compelled by the government to furnish funds in support of any religion. I feel a profound obligation to pay taxes to finance the best public school system possible for all the children in Tennessee. If anyone wants to send their kids to private schools, that is fine and dandy with me. But I have no obligation whatsoever to finance it. I believe the majority of Tennesseans feel the same, and now is the time to let it be known.

Few experts summarize the consensus on the school voucher movement better than Diane Ravitch, a former assistant secretary of education and once a leader in the drive to create a national curriculum. As Ravitch studied the impact of various education reforms on America's public schools, she re-examined her views and came to oppose many of the positions she previously advocated.

"I just wish that choice proponents would stop promising that... vouchers will bring us closer to that date when 100 percent of all children reach proficiency," Ravitch wrote in her blog on May 11, 2011¹¹. "If evidence mattered, they would tone down their rhetoric. But I won't hold my breath."

For the past several years, the education reform plate in Tennessee has been filled with new initiatives, including those spurred by Race to the Top. Vouchers and other school-choice initiatives would rob Tennessee public schools of much-needed funds, divert tax dollars to private and religious schools and invite other private entities not even engaged in education to develop storefront "education" programs. This expensive proposition will undermine the quality of teaching and learning in Tennessee's public schools.

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As documented in states where school vouchers have been implemented, the inability of a government bureaucracy to oversee and regulate every school accepting taxpayer funded vouchers creates fertile ground for corruption and other abuses, while robbing the public education system which is held accountable for every penny it spends.

¹ Lyndsey Layton and Emma Brown. "Quality controls lacking for D.C. schools accepting federal vouchers," The Washington Post, November 17, 2012.

² Zoe Sullivan. "Parents shy away from voucher program," The Louisiana Weekly, July 16, 2012.

³ Prominent promoters of school choice include the American Legislative Exchange Council, the Friedman Foundation for Education Choice, the Jeb Bush-led Foundation for Excellence in Education, and the Heritage Foundation.

⁴ Gus Garcia-Roberts, "McKay scholarship program sparks a cottage industry of fraud and chaos," Miami New Times News, June 23, 2011.

⁵ National Education Association. Issues and Action. <http://www.nea.org/home/16970.htm>

⁶ National Education Association. Issues and Action. <http://www.nea.org/home/16970.htm>

⁷ "Disservice to Public Schools," Chattanooga Times Free Press, January 31, 2013

⁸ Resolutions of the Tennessee Education Association.

⁹ "Our View: Vouchers are appealing, but don't solve the larger problem," The Jackson Sun, November 27, 2012.

¹⁰ Clyde Ussery. "We the People: Don't use my taxes for private schools," Crossville Chronicle, January 30, 2013.

¹¹ Education Week: http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/Bridging-Differences/2010/05/dear_deborah_last_month_a.html

