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Public Education in America: Continued Incremental Reform or Complete Voucher Implementation?

*The following is a Rogerian argument in favor of the voucher education reform program, catered to a hostile audience – specifically one comprised of liberals who hold to the idea that increasing government spending and intervention is the answer to America’s education problems.*

Good evening, fellow Americans. I would like to begin by voicing my appreciation for your commitment to the welfare of this country’s children and their education. Giving the next generation every opportunity to learn is a top priority for us all. Yet at the same time, I doubt that any of use would deny that education in this country is severely lacking in quality. In 2003, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) published results from a reading proficiency test of eighth grade children. Though these results showed little change over the past ten years, they demonstrated that the average score was less than 60% correct. The tests involved an eighth-grade level literary selection and questions on the reading which asked the student to explain from the selection why a certain event occurred. True, these tests can be vague and subjective, but currently 69% of children are testing *below* the “proficient” level.<sup>1</sup> Perfection is not expected, but parents should not have to accept such low standards. Clearly something must be done. Just what that something is, however, is heavily debated. As with nearly everything related to politics, there are multiple proposals which are hailed as the solution to education’s problems. One such proposal involves increased spending on education along with greater government intervention.

Many public schools currently suffer as a result of insufficient funding or government direction. In the small town of Sheldon, Iowa, a middle school has become so dilapidated that

portions of it have been condemned. The school has repeatedly requested permission to increase education spending (and thus taxes) in order to improve the children's schooling environment, yet the bond elections rarely pass. Clearly, children in this city are suffering as a result of insufficient funds. Examples of this problem exist in many areas, both rural and urban. Many school buildings across the country are in desperate need of renovation or complete reconstruction. If a school is struggling to repair roof leaks, it clearly cannot afford the best teachers or instructional materials. Additionally, if a school holds such low standards that the need for education is not taken seriously, it is important that an authority intervene and see that standards are raised. One answer to this, promoted by many, is to increase education funding at the federal and state levels. The American people deserve better education, and the government is capable of raising the necessary resources, so why not funnel more to our schools? After all, these are our children we are talking about.

The government also has the potential to be a great tool for overseeing and policing education in America. By consistently monitoring schools' performance, the government has not only the unique ability to gather information about schools from all over the country, but also the authority to see that failing schools are not ignored. Schools that become substandard will be exposed and the administrators responsible for them will be stigmatized by the community. The community and local government will demand better standards and the school district will be forced to work toward fixing the problem. Dallas schools are an example of this. Once their performance sunk below a certain level, citizens demanded that performance increase. As a result, civil authorities have placed heavy emphasis on improving schools in the city. The first step to fixing a problem is recognizing it, and this is an area where the government is effective.

These policies of increased government spending and intervention have been successful in a number of situations. One example of improvement that has come from increasing education funding relates to special education. According to a Manhattan Institute for Policy Research study,<sup>2</sup> financial incentives given to schools to seek out disabled students have resulted in a significant increase in special education enrollment. In this and many other situations, the government has the opportunity to be a great help. Clearly, sufficient funding and authoritative standards are important factors in achieving success in education. Still, school performance in general is not what it could be. This brings me to another position on education reform – the voucher. I believe the voucher, though certainly not without its difficulties, has the potential to take the progress made possible by the government and school districts to the next level. It is not an opposing viewpoint to the current established way of thinking regarding education, as some have claimed. Rather, the voucher is a progressive concept that combines government authority and funding with increased parent choice, resulting, I believe, in that which we all seek – well-educated children. As there are examples of benefits resulting from government action in public schools, I believe the nation’s private schools, already successful, may be employed on a larger scale to the benefit of all classes of society. Private academies, studies show, have found a way to produce higher proficiency test scores with less funding. The voucher would encourage the growth of these institutions and allow all children to benefit from their higher performance.

Since the voucher program’s success is dependent upon the nation’s private schools, allow me to provide some relevant statistics. On average, per-student funding at public schools is twice as high as at most private schools<sup>3</sup> – schools whose students consistently achieve higher scores on aptitude tests.<sup>4</sup> In the notoriously low-performing Washington DC school

districts, over \$10,000 is spent on each student – an amount comparable to the tuition of the nation’s *most expensive* private schools.<sup>5</sup> America is faced with a choice. This choice is not between government providing public education or not, but rather concerns how the government should most effectively accomplish this goal. Should we continue to work towards more incremental reforms of public schools as we have been doing for years, or should we turn our attention to a resource (private schools) that has apparently already accomplished that which we all seek – quality education at a price that will save America money? Many individuals, me included, believe that the most effective method of overhauling public education in America is by choosing the latter option and accomplishing it through the use of vouchers.

Essentially, the voucher distributes government money, ear-marked for education, to the parents of American children. Currently, these funds are raised by the local, state, and federal taxing authorities and automatically go to the local public school. With the voucher, these funds would continue to be raised by these entities but would allow the family to determine at which institution their child’s share of the money is spent. Theoretically, the voucher program is an effective solution because it is based on the time-tested capitalistic system. In capitalism, healthy competition exists – competing alternatives which must show themselves to be more attractive than everyone else in order to receive any customers. Currently, public schools enjoy a monopoly on the education industry because they are automatically funded through government. This renders competition practically nonexistent and therefore public schools need not improve in order to keep their customers (students). As long as they stay “average” they will avoid investigation, and funding will continue to pour in. That school funding is collected as a mandatory tax is not the problem with education in

America today – indeed this is the only reliable way to ensure that all children have the opportunity to learn. The problem is that this funding is not earned by schools but is rather distributed by default to public schools, regardless of their performance. As soon as parents are given the option of where to send their child’s share of education funding, however, former public schools will immediately have to raise their standards in order to compete with other schools in the area, or lose their student body and go bankrupt. This is the beauty of capitalism – standards automatically increase.

Because of its capitalistic basis, the voucher program should work on a variety of economic levels. If a family cannot afford to supplement their voucher, they may choose a less expensive, more modest school. But with a system that encourages school choice, there would likely be multiple modest schools which would compete against each other by boasting higher standards and better teachers than the competition. Urban education, frequently in the news for poor performance, could be revolutionized if the families were allowed to choose between competing schools, rather than being assigned a single (often failing) one. Vouchers would also be a great aid to those who currently choose to send their children to private schools even without the voucher program in place. For the lower-income families in this group, the voucher system would relieve a significant financial burden. For all of these families – wealthy and modest alike – it would treat them more fairly. In the current system, families who send their children to private schools without vouchers fund public schools by paying taxes yet do not get a cent of it back because their children do not take advantage of public education. From urban lower-income families to the high-income wealthy, vouchers would benefit all levels of society.

I hope that I have demonstrated why I believe the voucher program has great promise. Yet the voucher is not merely a theory – significant evidence in favor of the plan exists as well. To date, school choice programs have been implemented to a limited extent in several cases which provide a glimpse of the benefits that may be reaped. A study in Florida by the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research provides a perfect illustration of the dramatic advances made possible by vouchers. The report closed with: “we are left with the conclusion that the gains low-performing schools are making on Florida’s statewide assessments are the result of the competitive pressure of school vouchers.”<sup>6</sup> This is not the only study that concludes thus. The Cato Institute produced a study on the educational situation in Washington DC. The District of Columbia, notorious for its poorly-performing urban schools, has a mere 10% of its eighth graders at or above the “proficient” level in reading. Only 48% reach the “basic” level. These students cannot afford private schools and are thus trapped in a situation where 90% of eighth grade students cannot read proficiently. In order for these students to have the opportunity to learn, one of two things must be done. Either the public school must improve, or they must switch to a private school which has a far higher success rate among its students. Politicians have been trying to improve the public schools by increasing their funding. As I mentioned earlier, public schools in the District of Columbia spend at least \$10,000 on each student per year, though the actual number is probably over this amount. The average private school in the area, on the other hand, charges less than \$7,500 per year, often less than \$5,000, for tuition and produces far higher proficiency scores (approximately 400 points higher on the SAT than DC public schools). The Cato Institute’s conclusion? “Children in the District [of Columbia] would benefit from competition created by public, private, and charter schools vying for their tuition dollars.”<sup>7</sup> Yet another example may be found in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

A study by Harvard University and the University of Houston concluded thus in regard to Milwaukee's voucher program: "Instead of indicating that choice schools are not effective, as earlier scholars have claimed, the weight of the evidence points in exactly the opposite direction. The highest quality evidence in the data set indicates that students in choice schools learn more after three to four years."<sup>8</sup>

Despite these results, however, the current implementation of the voucher is not an acceptable solution – it is discriminatory. At this time, the voucher program is generally only awarded to those families with children in especially poorly-performing school districts and who cannot afford private schools. Other families who might have a marginally higher income, or whose children happen to be assigned a marginally better public school, are not granted the opportunity to send their children elsewhere without footing the bill completely out of pocket. For this reason, I support a complete, not case-by-case, implementation of the voucher. This sweeping change would take time, of course, but I wholeheartedly believe that it would produce great results.

Before concluding, I would like to admit that the voucher program is not without its difficulties. Before implementing the voucher on such a scale as I support, the government would have to determine ways to ensure that vouchers are not abused and that its money really is spent on education. Some form of criteria would have to be followed for a school to be able to accept vouchers – criteria based not on the school's affiliation or extra-curricular studies, but on results from standardized tests that are acceptable for schools of all types: secular, religious, etc. Other potential roadblocks exist as well, such as whether home-school families should be eligible, but I am confident that all can be overcome if we are committed to the voucher concept.

As I conclude, I would like to stress that the voucher program is not contrary to the idea of public education. It *is* public education, though different in form from the current “public school” concept. The voucher receives its funding in the same way that public schools currently do and would guarantee that every child, poor and wealthy alike, has the opportunity to go to school. Where it differs, however, is in exactly where the money goes. Studies show that private schools generally produce higher proficiency among students for less money than do public schools. The voucher program aims to offer all children the chance to learn at these successful institutions, rather than just the privileged few. A school choice program also has the potential to promote morality in schools because they would often be smaller (and thus more able to exercise discipline) and chosen by the parents (who can choose a school with values that reflect their own). Proponents of the voucher do not desire to hurt public education, we wish to refocus it. The voucher program combines the current concept of government funded education with the success of private institutions; this results in public education that saves the government, and thus American taxpayers, money while producing not only quality education, but education that improves as competition springs up all over America.

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<sup>1</sup> NCES reading proficiency statistics – <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/reading/results2003/natachieve-g4.asp>

<sup>2</sup> Effects of Funding Incentives on Special Education Enrollment – [http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr\\_32.htm#08](http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr_32.htm#08)

<sup>3</sup> How to get financial assistance for private school tuition – <http://www.parentcenter.com/refcap/learning/schoolsuccess/8148.html>

<sup>4</sup> CAPE June 2002 “outlook” (Academic Outcomes) – <http://www.capenet.org/Outlook/Out6-02.html>

<sup>5</sup> School Voucher Venture – <http://www.cato.org/dailys/09-28-03.html>

<sup>6</sup> When Schools Compete: The Effects of Vouchers on Florida Public School Achievement – [http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/ewp\\_02.htm](http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/ewp_02.htm)

<sup>7</sup> School Choice in the District of Columbia: Saving Taxpayers Money, Increasing Opportunities for Children – <http://www.cato.org/pubs/briefs/bp86.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> The Effectiveness of School Choice in Milwaukee – <http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/pepg/op/evaluate.htm>