

The Voucher Argument

by Erik Jacobson

[Reprinted from Issue 18: Voting in the 2004 Elections, March 2004]

Recent changes in education policy at the federal and local levels have raised tensions between supporters of public and private education. As part of the federal No Child Left Behind Act, parents have the option to use portions of their local schools' federal money to pay for public or private supplemental services for their child. On the local level, some states and cities have been experimenting with school voucher programs. The use of vouchers is often proposed as a way to help underperforming school systems perform better. Some worry that these policies take steps toward privatizing all education in the United States.

What Is a Voucher?

A voucher is a credit given to parents who want to move their child from a public school to a private school of their choice. Sometimes this credit comes from a private source (such as a charitable foundation), but many voucher programs involve moving taxpayers' money from public schools to private schools. The voucher is for a fixed amount (for example, \$2,000 a year) that parents can put toward the tuition of the private school (including religious schools). If the school tuition is higher than the amount of the voucher, the parents have to make up the difference. In some voucher programs, parents who send their children to private schools can get a tax credit (money back from the government) to subsidize their child's private schooling.

How Is a Voucher Program Different from School Choice?

School choice programs allow parents to choose which public school they want their child to attend, usually within one school district. Voucher programs involve transferring money from one school to another, usually from a public school to a private school.

What Is the Purpose of Vouchers?

Supporters of voucher programs believe that parents should have the right to choose where to send their children for schooling. They also believe that, if students move from public to private schools, the money that would have been spent on those students should move with them. Supporters of vouchers say that the government should support children, not schools. If schools are not providing good service, why should they receive money?

Critics of vouchers programs believe that voucher programs will damage public schools, and do not provide the kind of education they promise. They believe that we need to work toward maintaining well-funded schools for all children, rather than promoting a system of poor schools and well-off schools.

Claims of those who are in favor of vouchers include the following:

- Public education in the United States is in crisis.
- Voucher programs help children escape bad schools.
- Voucher programs give flexibility to parents.
- Voucher programs hold public schools accountable.
- Voucher programs produce productive competition between schools.
- A majority of parents from minority communities support voucher programs.

Claims of those who are against vouchers include the following:

- Public education in the United States is in crisis and voucher programs will only make the situation worse.
- Voucher programs take needed money away from poorly performing schools, creating a downward spiral. The less money a school has the harder it will be for it to make needed improvements.
- It is not fair to give schools unequal funding but hold them accountable for the same quality.
- Private schools do not have to take students with special needs, or those who are learning English, so these students would be left behind in public schools with less money.
- Voucher programs don't fully cover the schooling costs for poor parents.
- Voucher programs are tax cuts for wealthy families.

Erik Jacobson is an adult educator and researcher who is interested in supporting students and teachers who are making the effort to connect their classrooms and communities.



Reading Activities

- Find out what students already know about school vouchers. If they have children in school, what information have they received from the school? Did they understand it? What questions do they have about school vouchers?
- To make the text accessible to new readers, read it one section at a time. If you need to shorten it, consider removing the first and third paragraphs and provide the background information orally. Read the remaining text together, as a class.
- As you read, create a class chart of the pros and cons of vouchers. Write down the arguments in the students' paraphrased words. To help students formulate their opinions, have them discuss the various arguments listed in the chart. Which are more important or convincing? They can also individually rank the importance of each argument, on a scale of one to five.

