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# Why Conservatives and Libertarians Should Support School Vouchers

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JOSEPH L. BAST

Conservatives and libertarians generally approve of returning the production of goods and services to the private sector. Why, then, do some conservatives and libertarians oppose school vouchers?

School vouchers are certificates or chits issued by a government agency to parents of school-age children, good for some or all of the cost of tuition at participating schools. Instead of tax dollars going directly (and only) to government-run schools, those dollars go directly to parents who choose the schools, whether private or government run, their children attend. Classical liberals such as Adam Smith and Tom Paine as well as, more recently, libertarians such as Milton Friedman, Thomas Sowell, and Walter Williams have advocated vouchers.

Some libertarians oppose vouchers on grounds that they don't go far enough. Like other forms of privatization such as contracting out and franchising, vouchers privatize the *production* of a service but leave government responsible for *providing* it (Savas 2000). Education, the opponents point out, remains an entitlement under a voucher plan, and libertarians (at least purist libertarians) oppose all entitlements.

Some conservatives, who do not necessarily oppose entitlements, reject vouchers for different reasons. They fear that vouchers would lead to increased regulation of

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the curriculum and hiring practices of religious schools or that vouchers would tempt parents who now enroll their children in religious schools or who teach them at home instead to enroll them in secular schools (Duffy 1995).

Antivoucher separationists' positions rest on beliefs and objections that do not withstand close scrutiny.<sup>1</sup> In this article, I hope to persuade libertarians and conservatives that school vouchers are consistent with their own beliefs and a necessary part of an effective strategy for accomplishing their own long-term objectives.

### **Not a New Entitlement**

Antivoucher separationist Marshall Fritz (2001) contends that vouchers not only fail to challenge an existing entitlement, but also expand it by subsidizing parents who already choose private schools. In this way, vouchers lead those who would otherwise take responsibility for educating their children at their own expense to become "dependent" on the state.

The argument has several flaws. The current system of school finance is patently unfair: parents who choose private schools for their children are forced to pay twice for education, once for tuition at the private school and again through taxes for the government school they did not select. Vouchers relieve such families of one of those burdens by paying for tuition at the private school. Does relieving parents of an unjust financial burden really amount to creating a new entitlement?

Even purist libertarians believe in one entitlement: equal justice under the rule of law. School vouchers simply restore or make real the justice that all parents and taxpayers deserve as a matter of right. To oppose vouchers on the grounds that they create a new entitlement suggests, nonsensically, that libertarians should oppose the retraction of all unjust taxes and regulatory burdens because their repeal creates new "entitlements."

Forcing parents to pay twice for their children's education is also unjust on grounds of religious liberty. Education and religion have been deeply intertwined historically as well as institutionally, and most religious movements rely on schools to pass along their values and beliefs to each new generation. (In the United States, some 86 percent of private schools are religiously affiliated, with Catholic schools accounting for approximately 50 percent of total enrollment and Protestant schools another 28 percent [James and Levin 1988, 34].) Nearly nine out of ten parents who choose private schools do so out of religious conviction. They oppose the secular humanism taught in government schools and want their children to learn their own values and religious beliefs. It is a well-established legal principle that no one should be required to pay a tax penalty to exercise a constitutionally guaranteed right (Coons 1985, 513 ff). Vouchers correct this injustice.

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1. By "antivoucher separationists," I mean those who oppose vouchers but nevertheless support the complete separation of school and state.

## Abolishing the Preexisting Entitlement

Some libertarians argue for ending all taxation for schooling on the grounds that taxation, being coercive, is no different from theft. Most libertarians would probably endorse a soft version of this doctrine, such as the one formulated recently by Edward Feser, that “taxation, though an injustice . . . would be justified *only* when required to prevent even greater injustices—only, that is, to fund a minimal state” (Feser 2001, 262, emphasis in original). Most libertarians do not think schooling belongs on the list of a minimal state’s duties.

Yet today many economists and political scientists, as well as the general public, view education as a public good whose positive neighborhood effects justify its public subsidization. President Bill Clinton was responding to opinion polls and focus groups when in all eight of his State of the Union addresses he called for increasing the federal government’s role in education, and his successor, George W. Bush, did the same when he oversaw a 43 percent increase in federal spending on education in his first year in office. The posturing of presidents may signify many things, but in these cases the clear message is that the public and its elected representatives view education as a public good.

Perhaps they are not to be blamed. After all, subsidizing schooling, at least for the poor, was often among the tasks that classical liberals, including Adam Smith, Thomas Jefferson, Tom Paine, and even Milton Friedman, assigned to the minimal state (Friedman 1962, 88). Relatively few libertarians today still include schooling in such lists. Friedman himself wrote in 1983, “the case for government financing is far weaker today, when literacy is nearly universal and the majority of the population can afford to pay directly for the schooling of their children if they are relieved of having to pay indirectly through taxes” (Friedman and Friedman 1983, 144). The robust growth of the for-profit education sector since the 1980s (Moe and Blodget 2000) and strong evidence that the individual benefits of schooling provide sufficient incentive for investment in it (Becker 1975) make the case for subsidies even weaker today.

The point of this brief detour into the history of libertarian thought on education is to suggest that although libertarians have always favored privatizing the production of education, the idea of ending the government’s role in providing access to education is relatively new and, not surprisingly, more controversial. It may make good strategic sense to fashion political proposals that can point to two centuries of education and advocacy and to widespread support even among non-libertarian experts, rather than proposals that require agreement on a more radical notion that is much farther from the political and intellectual mainstream. Vouchers, of course, fit the first definition, whereas calls to “abolish public education” fall under the second.

Vouchers do not abolish the preexisting entitlement to an education at public expense. They only alter or remove those provisions that punish parents who choose

private schools or who seek religious instruction for their children. Although this change obviously benefits the parents, it does not necessarily increase the number of people eligible for financial aid or the cost of delivering it. Indeed, as I argue here, it would be the first step toward reducing both the extent and cost of the entitlement.

### Vouchers: Not Utopia

If abolishing *all* taxes is not a realistic possibility in the near term, calling for the immediate removal of the least-fair burdens is surely a defensible strategy. Parents who pay twice for the education of their children certainly have a strong claim to such relief, and vouchers, in an admittedly roundabout way, provide it.

Under a voucher plan, not all parents would have tax liabilities as large as the amount of the voucher they receive. They still would be subsidized by other taxpayers, though no more and probably less than they are under the current funding arrangement. Because private schools spend, on average, half as much as government schools, the value of the vouchers might be significantly less than current government-school spending per pupil. A well-designed voucher plan would subtract from the government schools' budget an amount approximately equal to the cost of private-school tuition, leaving taxpayers no worse off or even better off.

Also under a voucher plan, individuals and couples without school-age children would continue to pay school taxes even though they did not use the schools that the vouchers funded. If such taxation is an injustice, it is not a new one: taxpayers today finance nearly 100 percent of the budget of government schools, and they do so regardless of the schools' quality or responsiveness to parents' and taxpayers' concerns. The extent of the injustice—the tax burden on households without school-age children—might be less under a voucher program because participation by lower-cost private schools would reduce government spending on schooling.

Vouchers would benefit taxpayers a second way by severing the institutional connection between school board members, who generally decide the amount of school taxes and how they are spent, and the staffs of government school systems. Under the current arrangement, school board members face conflicting incentives: they are pledged to *provide* schooling opportunities for all, but they finance and actually help *produce* schooling by only one government-owned school system. They naturally become defenders of the monopoly product.

A voucher program would reward school board members who promised to provide access to the best education at the lowest cost to taxpayers, regardless of who actually produced the schooling. Taxpayers without school-age children, who previously had little reason to vote in school board elections, suddenly would find themselves courted by candidates offering genuine tax relief by supporting a lower voucher amount or by imposing income caps on eligibility for the vouchers. Parents who chose private schools would also want to vote to protect their right to choose and the autonomy of participating schools.

In the course of one or two decades of operation, a voucher program would create a dramatically larger and more diverse marketplace of K–12 schools. This industry would be competitive because individual companies and nonprofit organizations would be competing for customers rather than for government subsidies. If parents were given the option of depositing the difference between the value of the voucher and the actual tuition into savings accounts, to be used for future educational needs, robust price competition would be fostered.

Like any industry, the new competitive K–12 education industry would contain both elements that favored more regulation (to exclude competitors) and elements that favored less regulation (to innovate and attract more customers). Given the national and international trend toward deregulation and privatization taking place worldwide, it is hardly inevitable that advocates of greater regulation would win the day. Schools that specialize in meeting the needs of certain types of students and parents would achieve greater productivity and probably lower costs (Merrifield 2001), giving them a natural interest in opposing regulations. Such schools might also join with taxpayers and school board members to form a coalition against increasing the value of the vouchers—an antispending coalition that currently does not exist.

### **Problems with Tax Credits**

I described vouchers earlier as an “admittedly roundabout way” to remove some of the unjust burden on parents who now must pay twice if they choose private or religious schools for their children. Tax credits also would help to achieve tax justice by removing some or all of that burden. Because tax credits simply allow people to keep more of their own money, some libertarians and conservatives think they are more principled than vouchers. These libertarians also believe (or hope) that tax credits would be less likely to result in greater regulation of participating schools.

Libertarians and conservatives should agree that anything that increases choice and reduces taxes is good. This “ecumenical” approach works so long as advocates of one approach don’t attack the other as an inferior or counterproductive option. Alas, in the school-choice movement, tax credit advocates routinely publish such attacks on vouchers (Anderson et al. 1997; Coulson 2000; Reed 2001). Voucher proponents have been remarkably restrained in response, creating the appearance that they concede the argument, but politeness should not be mistaken for agreement.

In practice, it is difficult or impossible to design tax credits that produce substantial financial relief for most parents (Bast 2001). The annual state income tax liability for all but the wealthiest 1 or 2 percent of taxpayers seldom reaches 10 percent of the annual tuition charged by a typical private school. A credit against federal income tax liabilities ignores the fact that federal funds equal less than 7 percent of total government spending on education. In 1988, I proposed a tax

credit against local property taxes in Cook County (Chicago), but it received little support (Bast et al. 1988).

## Letting Parents and Educators Decide

Taking away from people their freedom to choose because of our own fears and presumption of superior understanding is a shortcoming more commonly found among contemporary liberals than among libertarians and conservatives. Yet this view lies at the center of the conservative and libertarian case against school vouchers.

Antivoucher separationists are afraid that vouchers will come with strings attached, thereby compromising the independence and creativity of participating schools. They fear that school administrators, always hungry for money, will overlook or ignore the trade-off between gaining easy money and having to comply with new regulations. They fear that parents, too, will fail to see that trade-off and will continue to patronize the now lower-quality schools. They are afraid that good private schools that refuse to accept vouchers will be unable to compete with bad private schools that do. They are afraid, in short, that *other people* won't see the negative effects of vouchers as quickly or as clearly as they do.

All of this fear is, perhaps, understandable, but it is wrong to substitute one's own judgments for the informed decisions of people who must live with the consequences of their decisions. To do so is to indulge in the conceit of Adam Smith's "man of the system" who "seems to imagine that he can arrange the different members of a great society with as much ease as the hand arranges the different pieces upon a chess-board" ([1759] 1976, 380–81). Ludwig von Mises has rebutted the presumption that the general public is too stupid to resist the false promises of expanded government: "The outlook of many eminent champions of genuine liberalism is rather pessimistic today. As they see it, the vitriolic slogans of the socialists and interventionists call forth a better response from the masses than the cool reasoning of judicious men. . . . [I]t is not true that the ideas of genuine liberalism are too complicated to appeal to the untutored mind of the average voter" ([1952] 1980, 180–181).

Mises's most prominent student, F. A. Hayek, often pointed out that knowledge in a free society is widely dispersed and unknowable to any one individual (Hayek 1948). We therefore must submit to the superior wisdom embedded in and revealed by social and economic processes: choices voluntarily made in impersonal markets reveal who "really" wants something and at what price. That same humility should lead us to give parents and school administrators the opportunity to decide for themselves whether vouchers are a blessing or a curse.

Conservatives and libertarians should have a higher regard than the antivoucher separationists display for the wisdom and wits of the average mother and father. In this respect, the antivoucher separatists differ but little from voucher critics on the left, who claim that specially trained bureaucrats care more for the well-being of children than parents do.

## Government Control Is Not Inevitable

One antivoucher conservative told an audience recently that his late father had accepted government payments to enroll some of his farmland in a soil-bank program, and crippling regulations soon followed. His father always regretted having succumbed to the temptation of government subsidies. The example, he said, shows that regulations invariably follow subsidies. The audience nodded in agreement.

In fact, the example proves a different point. The farmer who sought and received subsidies was a *producer*, not a *consumer*. Regulations followed because the government was paying him to do certain things. Over the years, some of his crops almost certainly went to people who “paid” for them with food stamps—a form of voucher—or with their Social Security checks. The fact that the farmer probably wasn’t even aware that some of his customers were using these programs to purchase his goods—he had no way of knowing who they were or what they bought—illustrates the fact that subsidizing demand need not lead to increased regulations on suppliers.

Virgil Blum, Milton Friedman, Thomas Sowell, Walter Williams, and other leading conservative and libertarian thinkers have endorsed school vouchers precisely because those vouchers subsidize consumers rather than producers and therefore offer a means of moving from an 87 percent socialist system to a competitive education marketplace without the risk of increasing regulations on private schools. Antivoucher separationists rarely acknowledge or admit the critical distinction between subsidies to providers and those to consumers. So great is their fear of government control that they would rather live with socialism than dare to experiment with privatization.

Their faulty assumptions are that the Hayekian “road to serfdom” (Hayek [1944] 1965) is a one-way road for all time and that any proposed reforms that still involve public funding—even proposals that dramatically reduce government’s capacity to commit evil and set the stage for further privatization—will lead to dependency, government control, and decline. If such were the case, however, why did Hayek even bother to write *The Road to Serfdom*? Why do conservatives and libertarians bother to fight Leviathan if they are convinced it cannot be defeated?

In “Trends Can Change,” Mises wrote: “One of the cherished dogmas implied in contemporary fashionable doctrines is the belief that tendencies of social evolution as manifested in the recent past will prevail in the future too. Study of the past, it is assumed, discloses the shape of things to come. Any attempt to reverse or even to stop a trend is doomed to failure. Man must submit to the irresistible power of historical destiny” ([1952] 1980, 173). The “contemporary fashionable doctrines” Mises refers to are the theories of history and progress advanced by Hegel, Marx, and Comte, but they just as easily could be the doctrines of antivoucher separationists. The “cherished dogma” is the same for both: a helplessness to stop the trend toward greater government power and control. An obvious consequence of this dogma is paralysis. The antivoucherites are afraid to dismantle the government schools because any such effort “is doomed to failure.”



## Overlooking Current Realities

The previously mentioned antivoucher conservative also told the audience, “Our goal must be to keep our education pure.” If by “pure” he meant free of government interference, as he seemed to, then he is wearing blinders. Education today isn’t “pure”; it’s 87 percent financed, owned, regulated, staffed, programmed, certified, and tested by the government. A program that would allow every parent to choose a private school without financial penalty, on the other hand, would improve greatly the overall “purity” of schooling in the country.

Antivoucher conservatives are blind to the needs of the vast majority of children because they focus on only the 12 percent of children already in private schools and another 1 or 2 percent of students who are taught at home. Antivoucher separationists point to this 13 percent of students who do not attend government schools as a precious remnant of the free-enterprise system that vouchers would destroy. However, the great majority of private schools—virtually every Catholic school—would not hesitate to accept vouchers so long as the school-choice program had reasonable restrictions on government regulation of participating schools. When Wisconsin enacted legislation expanding the Milwaukee pilot voucher program, 102 of the city’s 120 private schools signed up to participate. The National Catholic Education Association (NCEA) strongly supports school choice (“NCEA’s 1st Lay President” 1996). Participation in voucher plans is never mandatory: those who manage private schools are free to remain outside the program if they believe the accompanying regulations are too burdensome.

If private schools now were to enroll 87 percent of all students rather than 12 percent, then a proposal to fund school choice through vouchers would indeed be at odds with the liberal and conservative commitment to individual freedom and limited government. Today’s reality, however, is just the opposite. The choice is not between vouchers and utopia, but between vouchers and an 87 percent socialist system. A voucher system almost certainly would increase the proportion of students attending private schools—dramatically, if school-choice advocates are right, or modestly, if voucher critics are right. Such change is certainly movement in the right direction. Whether it is *fast enough* or *far enough* is a matter of strategy, not principle.

Under a voucher program, what would happen to schools so unconventional that they would not be eligible to participate in a choice program? Such schools already exist, despite the presence of “free” government schools that typically outspend them two or three to one. A voucher plan would not worsen their odds of survival significantly. They probably would lose very few students precisely because they *do* offer a unique product.

It is too easy to romanticize the independence and superiority of today’s private schools and then to place their survival above the interests of children. Why, if these schools are so much better than government schools, have their enrollments as a percentage of total enrollment remained about the same since 1965 (James and Levin 1988; National Center for Education Statistics 1993, 1)? Why, after controlling

for socioeconomic status and other variables, are the differences in student achievement between private and government schools statistically significant but actually modest and apparently subject specific (Coleman and Hoffer 1987, 92–95, 242)?

One reason may be that nonprofit private schools often are not much different from the government schools against which they compete. Another reason is that they simply cannot compete against a lavishly funded “free” public service. Vouchers overcome both problems by making possible a new generation of more efficient and effective private schools, giving more parents a reason to choose a private school. At long last, a “flight to quality” might occur.

### Separation in a Single Bound?

An opinion poll produced by an antivoucher separationist group apparently showed that 26 percent of the people polled were willing to entertain the idea that the state stop funding schools altogether.<sup>2</sup> Conservatives and libertarians can celebrate that this number is higher than most would have thought to be the case, but there is less to these survey data than meets the eye. Opinion polls typically show much higher levels of support for educational choice and vouchers—as high as 70 and 80 percent—prior to the inevitable, massive, and well-funded negative campaigns of the education establishment. California’s Proposition 174 enjoyed 66 percent approval only a few months before it lost two to one.

Consider how much more difficult it would be to mount a referendum effort for complete separation, how easily the opponents of school choice could demonize the initiative. Who would fund the media campaign to defend it against teacher union attacks and distortions? By how large a margin would such a referendum fail, and what would be the effect of such a resounding defeat on grassroots efforts elsewhere?

If not popular referenda, what do the antivoucher separationists offer instead of vouchers? Vague promises that government schools will “collapse” in time, if only we wait long enough. “Plans” that consist of abolishing the Department of Education and ending regulations on private schools and tax support for government education—*objectives* that conservatives and libertarians may agree are fine and worthy of support, but objectives are not *plans*. They fairly scream at us the obvious question: How do we get there from here?

Antivoucher separationists criticize the first step in the right direction (vouchers) because it doesn’t immediately take them to their ultimate destination (separation), arguing with utter implausibility that in some glorious day to come we’ll get there in a single leap. That idea is a prescription and an excuse for standing still. In fact, standing still is what the antivoucher separationist philosophy has delivered for nearly half a century.

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2. The poll was conducted in 1994. See Marshall Fritz, Separation of School and State Alliance, <http://www.sepschool.org/misc/faq.html>.

Real spending on government schooling per pupil rose by 72 percent between 1960 and 1970, by 26 percent between 1970 and 1980, and by 36 percent between 1980 and 1990 (Evers and Walberg 2002, 78). Do these figures demonstrate a trend away from government schools?

Urging the most concerned and informed parents to remove their children from government schools and enroll them in private schools is another favorite recommendation of the antivoucher separationists, but such exhortations have not slowed the growth of government schooling. They perversely may have accelerated its growth by removing from its path those citizens who could most effectively resist it. Today, private schools and home schooling act as safety valves for the government schools: they enable just enough upset parents to leave the system to keep the Rube Goldberg contraption running.

Whatever its merits ideologically, complete separation has little chance of succeeding politically. Vouchers offer a halfway house to wean the public from its addiction to government finance and provision of education. If vouchers succeed, they will remove institutional barriers to further privatization and set in motion a dynamic that ensures further movement toward competition and choice. Vouchers are a necessary step toward complete separation.

## Dueling Moral Commitments

Many cultural conservatives believe the Bible holds parents responsible for educating their children, and some believe parents abdicate that responsibility by sending their children to government schools. Because school vouchers would “turn private schools into government schools,” the argument goes, they would encourage more parents to neglect their biblical duty.

Parents are also responsible for feeding, clothing, sheltering, and safely transporting their children, but we don’t accuse them of abdicating those responsibilities when they pay others to grow and prepare food, sew clothing, and build houses and cars. Do antivoucher conservatives and libertarians believe people should withdraw from other aspects of contemporary life that require contact with secular humanism or the state? If not, why make an exception for schooling? If this position is a principled one, then antivoucher separationists should admit that they are asking their listeners to live as Amish farmers or anarchist protesters.

Do not parents who choose private schools, even religious ones, also “abdicate” their responsibility? Or are they only “delegating” the task to others, taking advantage of the opportunity for specialization that benefits everyone? One suspects that the antivoucher separationists would grant that only home schooling or enrollment in small Bible schools fulfills the biblical injunction because if they make a greater concession, they must grant the difference between abdication and delegation. Only the most zealous advocates of home schooling would claim that it is

the right choice for every parent, family, and child. Other parents should continue to delegate the task to others. If the problem is that public schools don't encourage, allow, or require as much involvement by parents as private schools do, then the solution is to allow parents to choose private schools without financial penalty—the voucher plan.

While we debate with the antivoucher separationists the precise meaning of the Bible's call on parents to be responsible for their children's education, a far greater sin is allowed to persist undiminished. Forty-two million children remain trapped in a system in which the government owns the buildings, hires the teachers, employs the principals, determines the curriculum, and oversees testing and evaluation. What is happening to these children?

- Millions of them are not being taught adequately to read or write, so they enter society without the skills needed to become contributing members. This outcome is surely one of the largest single causes of crime, drug abuse, domestic violence, and many other problems that plague our society.
- Children are being indoctrinated with creeds and dogmas that are profoundly at odds with the values of their parents and with what is needed to prepare them to be citizens in a democracy and producers in a capitalist economy. Radical environmentalism, political correctness, and other distortions of meaning and truth have become standard elements of high school and even elementary school curricula.
- Children are being sold drugs, recruited into gangs, introduced to sex without meaningful moral contexts and are sometimes caught in the crossfire of gang wars while still on school property. Instead of being places of peace and safety in a community, many inner-city government schools resemble war zones and barely contained riots.

An accurate understanding of the current system makes it plain that although the interests of the 13 percent of students attending private schools or being taught at home and the 1 or 2 percent of students whose education might be affected adversely by a voucher plan are important and must not be overlooked, it is cruel indeed to overlook the calamity facing the 87 percent now trapped in government schools. To oppose vouchers in favor of complete privatization is equivalent to abandoning any realistic hope of rescuing a generation of children.

School choice offers hope. It is politically possible now, not sometime in a romanticized future. It would set in motion the changes needed to make further privatization and separation, if merited, possible. For these reasons, libertarians and conservatives ought to be once again at the forefront of the school voucher movement.

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