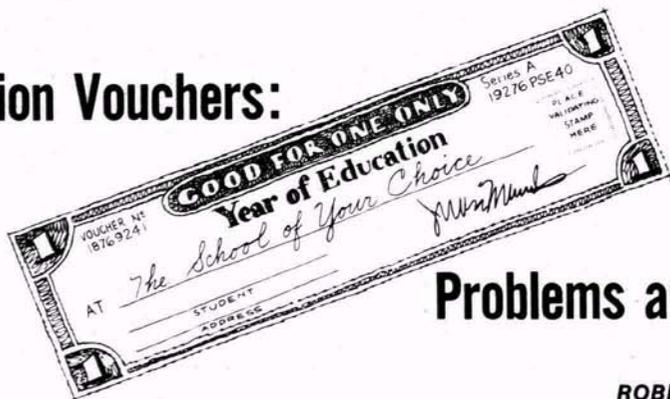


# Education Vouchers:



## Problems and Issues

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**A**N INTERESTING phenomenon is now occurring in American education. The introduction of the concept of the Education Voucher, or Voucher Plan, has generated as much support and enthusiasm as it has criticism without the plan's ever having become operational. This plan is a proposed system for financing schools through payment, directly to parents, of vouchers which are redeemable at schools of their choice. The concept of the education voucher is not new. As perceived today, however, the education voucher is quite complex, in that it concerns itself with many of the crucial social, political, and economic issues facing society.

Basically, the plan necessitates the issuance of a voucher, at a predetermined monetary value, to parents with school-age children. The voucher would be issued by either the public school district or other agency of government. Extra funds would also be available for compensatory vouchers for disadvantaged or poor children. Parents could purchase educational services at any participating voucher school of their choice.

The philosophy behind this approach is that only those schools offering a high quality of education will attract clients and receive the necessary financial support to remain open. Proponents of the plan perceive it as a mechanism providing for greater parental choice and encouraging competition within the educational system. Thus, the voucher plan is seen as having the effect of making schools directly accountable to their

clients, since parents could take individual action for or against a school through the use of their voucher.

Several forms of the voucher plan have been developed in recent years.<sup>1</sup> The model receiving greatest attention was recommended in the study, *Education Vouchers*,<sup>2</sup> which was prepared by Harvard professor Christopher Jencks and his associates at the Center for the Study of Public Policy. This study was supported by funds from the Office of Economic Opportunity.

All models of the voucher plan presently being advanced closely resemble one another in their basic design. Each provides a process for allocating funds through a governmental agency, to be spent at the discretion of parents for the education of their children. The participating voucher schools in the various plans call for an expenditure level comparable with per pupil costs within the existing school districts where the plan would become operational. Each plan also has its own approach for addressing such

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed description of the currently advocated forms of education vouchers, see: Ray A. Carr and Gerald C. Hayward. "Education by Chit: An Examination of Voucher Proposals." *Education and Urban Society* 2: 179-91; February 1970.

<sup>2</sup> Center for the Study of Public Policy. *Education Vouchers: A Preliminary Report on Financing Education by Payment to Parents*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: the Center, March 1970.

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questions and issues as desirable level of pupil racial balance, church school eligibility, promotion of unorthodox social or political views, level of parental involvement in the decision-making process, and relationship to already existing educational agencies.

### **Why the Education Voucher?**

The quality of American public schools is presently being seriously questioned. Educators frequently suffer serious embarrassment when pressed for clearly stated written goals and objectives of American education. Far too few educational objectives have been translated into behavioral terms with criteria for measurement which produce data to answer queries relative to the quality of the educational system's end product, the student.

Increasing numbers of people perceive schools as being unresponsive to minorities, the poor, and the disadvantaged. Schools also are not viewed as adjusting to the rapid social and cultural changes taking place in our society. Some argue that while some schools are performing better than ever, few educational systems have served the disadvantaged in a fashion which allows them to compete on an equal basis with the majority of Americans.

The concerns viewed here, coupled with recognition of the need for all children to receive a high quality of education, have led some people to look toward alternative forms of schooling. One such alternative, hailed as having potential for providing a high quality of schooling, is the education voucher.

### **OEO Demonstration Project**

The OEO, in February 1971, granted funds to the Gary, Indiana, public school district, and later to Seattle, Washington, and Alum Rock, California, for feasibility studies of the voucher plan. All three school districts sought the assistance of external agencies for conducting the preplanning studies.

OEO was interested in having several feasibility studies under way in municipalities which have heterogeneous populations of approximately 12,000 to 15,000 elementary

students in public and private schools. The preplanning took about eight weeks and is being followed by a longer period of planning prior to the actual operation of a five- to eight-year experiment. Costs are estimated at 6 to 8 million dollars in each of the communities selected to participate in the demonstration project.

In the demonstration project, the vouchers will be administered by an Educational Voucher Authority (EVA). Several proposals as to membership on the EVA and its relationship to the existing board of education have been suggested and are still being discussed. The EVA will be responsible for establishing the necessary policy and administering the voucher demonstration project. The EVA will also operate an extensive parent and teacher education program and will provide parents and students with counseling services. Proponents of the voucher plan are hopeful that the resultant educational system will provide educational freedom and flexibility of benefit to both children and teachers and that it will revitalize the role of the family as an important agent in the process of education. Of particular concern to advocates of the voucher plan is whether it will provide a means of equalizing educational opportunity for the disadvantaged.

Specifically, the education voucher is seen as leading to improvement in the quality of education, such as:

1. It would give individuals greater freedom to move about within the public education system, because they would not be required to accept the standardized program offered in the assigned public school. A choice of schools would not necessarily be the privilege of the wealthy.
2. It would give parents a more significant role in shaping their child's education, and this should renew the importance of the family's role in education, which could improve the attitudes of both parent and child. Also, it would allow teachers to enter into a more direct relationship with parents and children.
3. It would facilitate educational experimentation and diversification. A range of choices in schools should become available.

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Small new schools of all types would come into operation—Montessori, Summerhill, open classroom, and traditional style schools, among others.

4. It would give teachers and principals greater freedom to vary their teaching methods. They could arrange their curriculum to appeal to a particular group, or to reflect a particular school of thought on educational methods. Schools could emphasize music, arts, science, or basic skills. Parents not pleased with the emphasis of one school could choose another. Thus, public school administrators and teachers would be freed from the necessity of trying to please everyone in an attendance area, a practice that often really pleases no one.

5. Special resources for the disadvantaged could be more accurately channeled directly to that group, since they would follow the child holding the voucher.<sup>3</sup>

The OEO's voucher plan includes guidelines requiring the participating school districts to establish safeguards which would prevent discrimination against pupils or teachers by reason of race or economic position. Thought is still being given to the development of appropriate criteria and processes for handling student applications to avoid possible discrimination. Some form of lottery will likely be used for the selection of at least half a school's student body, with the remaining half selected on the basis of criteria established by a particular school. Without regulation, some schools might attempt to exclude racial minorities.

<sup>3</sup> *The Feasibility of Implementing a "Voucher Plan" in Seattle*. Seattle: University of Washington, May 1971. Appendix A-2, pp. 2-3.

It is also possible that if no controls were set, some schools might require parents to add money to a voucher. This could result in economic segregation in the schools. Controls are also needed to prevent schools from making false or misleading claims as to their worth, particularly since the voucher plan is a system designed to function in the competitive market.

The three school districts participating in the preplanning stage have now completed the feasibility studies and are moving slowly into the next phases of the study. How quickly the three districts will move now toward the field testing of the voucher plan is questionable. Some believe that the initial enthusiasm in evidence during the preplanning stages may have cooled off. It has recently been reported that the Gary school district has withdrawn from the OEO demonstration project.

OEO's intention had been to have at least one demonstration project under way by the fall of 1971; but once the feasibility studies were under way, it was realized that this date was quite unrealistic. Any hopes for the operation of a demonstration project have had to be postponed for at least a year.

## Political Concerns

The education voucher is viewed as a vehicle for increasing the educational alternatives available to students, through greater involvement of parents in the decision-making process. Before any voucher plan becomes a reality in any state, enabling

legislation must be passed to overcome many of the existing regulations related to the allocation of funds, curriculum standards of schools, certification of teachers, and allocation of power. This will not be an easy process, nor will it be a speedy one. While efforts have been made to introduce enabling legislation, no state legislature at present is on the verge of passing such legislation. The Center for the Study of Public Policy at Cambridge has been studying this issue for some time and has made available, to the school districts participating in the OEO's feasibility studies, legal assistance for drawing up draft legislation and for development of initial efforts to lobby support for the plan. All of this activity, however, is still in the early stages of development.

Of crucial concern is the question of the role of the local board of education and its relationship to the EVA. The EVA must be recognized as a legitimate authority, which means it needs to have "grass-roots" support. If the EVA becomes too concerned with regulations, it will be immersed in a bureaucratic tangle and be subject to charges of conforming to existing educational systems. Without regulations and safeguards, however, the voucher plan could lead to a system of greater segregation and exclusiveness, with a smaller relative share of the available educational resources going to the poor.

In the course of implementing the Seattle feasibility study, in which this author was associated, we identified six political concerns which, while not perceived as insurmountable, certainly will necessitate careful study. They included:

1. One of the initial resistance forces to the education voucher nationally has been the professional education associations. Without the support of the professional educators, the voucher plan is in serious jeopardy. Concerns of educators include the issue of tenure, the quality of education that students will receive in voucher schools, and teachers' involvement in the decision-making process. Teachers perceive themselves as the professionals who rightly have a role in the decision-making process. Serious questions are being raised as to what the teachers' decision-making base would be in a voucher

plan. Voucher proponents stress greater involvement in decisions by parent and community, not by the professional educator. Professional educators are a strong lobbyist group and cannot be discounted.

2. A second major resistance force comes from those opposed to the public support of parochial education. This resistance will appear if the voucher plan includes parochial schools as one of the alternatives available to students. At present, parochial schools are the single largest group of alternative schools in existence. If the decision is made to include parochial schools in a voucher plan, then all of the traditional arguments regarding the use of public monies to support religious education will be used. The church-state issue involves a constitutional or legal consideration which will have to be settled in the courts prior to implementation of a voucher plan.

3. Strong resistance forces will appear from that segment of the population which feels that the voucher plan is yet another attempt by those in our society who wish to divide us further. This group will advance the argument that our public schools have been successful in the past and that any plan to provide alternatives for education stressing diverse goals will lead to further splitting of society. It can be expected that this group will undoubtedly become more vocal as the alternatives for education become more diverse.

4. With the implementation of a voucher plan, there would have to be a decentralization of the present educational system. This movement to decentralize would be consistent with the trend in many large cities, but the degree of decentralization needed would be much greater than what is perceived at the present time. Predicting the value and outcomes of greater parent involvement in decision making in the existing structure of control in public education is largely a matter of speculation.

5. While the voucher plan need not work at cross-purposes with racial integration, it does pose questions as to its effect upon any school board's present plans for integrating schools. Student applications to voucher schools would have to be carefully reviewed to ensure that a cross section of the population was applying to all schools and that no schools were predominantly black or white or excluding either group. It is also possible that if application patterns indicated that integration was not being

achieved, then a quota system would have to be included. Paramount is the issue of devising a plan of action which ensures that the voucher demonstration plan can operate in conjunction with other efforts being made to implement racial integration. If such a plan cannot be developed, there would be no real justification for continuing the planning of the voucher model as a viable educational alternative.

6. In implementing a voucher plan, all participating schools would be open to all applicants, with a selection process that suggests a random selection or lottery process for determining admissions. This process does not give any priority to parents living in that attendance area. This raises a serious question for parents to consider. Do parents have greater control in the decision-making process when they cannot have their children placed in the school of their choice? This situation can, and most likely will, occur under the voucher plan. There may be some animosity from parents who support the neighborhood school concept and find the voucher plan removes their power of school selection. Supporters of the voucher plan operate on the assumption that many parents will select schools because of geographical location and that some parents will choose alternatives outside of the public schools—which means that the probability is high that children will be admitted to their neighborhood public school. It does not, however, assure this choice.

It is hoped that the voucher plan would result in improvement in the educational program; however, this is not an inherent outcome of an open market. Competition and greater parental control can provide some incentive for schools to improve their programs. This will require that those responsible for voucher schools have a commitment to positive change and a high quality of educational program. Conceivably, a voucher system could foster the delusion in parents that their child was receiving a better education simply because he was attending a different school.

The OEO is now in the process of evaluating proposals from external agencies for performance of the evaluation system of the voucher demonstration project. Those bidding had to submit proposals based upon rigorous criteria established by OEO, which

include the gathering of a great deal of relevant demographic data in addition to data relative to the specific project and program involved. OEO is interested in obtaining an educational and political history of the project. An account of the political climate and resultant pressures for and against the voucher demonstration project needs to be analyzed. Close examination of the effectiveness of the admissions process must be maintained to provide for suggested changes in the governing policies. Data will also be needed as to the effects, if any, compensatory vouchers and the means of their distribution have, particularly in light of conflicting reports on past compensatory education programs.

The evaluation data must also provide a record of the political consequences that the voucher demonstration brings about, both within the educational system (teacher attitudes, parental involvement, establishment of new schools, student progress, etc.) and in the community (possible changes in voting behavior, political pressure groups, population shifts, etc.). Evaluation of the specific objectives of the voucher plan must be continuous in order to provide the necessary feedback for monitoring the project and for taking appropriate corrective measures.

### **Further Exploration Needed**

While the education voucher concept has gained support in some quarters, several questions have not yet been adequately answered. The very success of any voucher plan may well rest upon these issues:

1. Greater parental involvement is a crucial variable with the voucher model. For discussion purposes, let us say the parents' first choice, school A, is not available due to not being selected via the lottery system. The child then moves to the list for second choice, school B. The question now becomes, "Where does this child's name enter the list for this school?" Many parents may have selected school B as their first choice. This process could continue until the child is far removed from the parents' first, second, third, etc., choice schools, and may enter the list of a school which the parent did

not want at all. There also will be the parents who do not care to participate in the voucher plan, yet whose child is enrolled in a school selected as one of the voucher demonstration schools. By reason of a random selection, this child is transferred from that school to some other building despite the objections of the parents. Is this considered greater parental involvement? Policy still must be developed for transferring and possible expelling of students within the voucher plan.

2. Success of the voucher plan depends upon the availability of alternatives. What we are doing, then, is putting great faith in an unknown quantity and quality of schools to be established after the voucher plan becomes operational.

3. Also to be considered is what happens to those alternative schools which will emerge based upon some specific educational need or focus. Is it possible to maintain their focus when they cannot control up to 50 percent of their clientele? A school designed for students who are interested in a nonstructured curriculum may find that many of the students admitted because of the lottery system do not have the intellectual capacity or psychological orientation that meets the alternative school's needs and expectations.

4. During the OEO demonstration project, any financial loss incurred by the public school district's participation will be absorbed by OEO. Transportation costs are also to be covered. Is this a realistic pattern for a demonstration project? If the trial is declared successful and results in mass implementation of the voucher plan, will anyone be around to absorb the possible financial deficits the school districts may suffer?

5. There seems to be some tendency on the part of those advocating the education voucher to brush over the administrative details needed to implement the plan successfully.

6. A process for accreditation of schools in the voucher plan must be developed, particularly in view of past court decisions dealing with religious and political considerations.

7. The working relationship between the Office of Economic Opportunity and the U.S. Office of Education plus the education profession must be clarified.

In summary, a dangerous pattern is developing in American society, in which

pessimism is being so reinforced that our negativism may turn out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Failure of some teachers and some schools becomes generalized to "the Educational Establishment has failed." Public education is written off as ineffectual and as bureaucratically mired down. Granted, many improvements are needed and large numbers of youths are being shortchanged, but necessary changes are occurring within the system. Paramount, of course, is faith by the American people that the so-called "Educational Establishment" has the capacity to change and seek alternative forms of education to better meet the needs of students.

The concept of the education voucher has met with some enthusiasm. Receiving strong financial backing from the Office of Economic Opportunity, the voucher model conceived by Jencks has a moderate chance of being implemented on a trial basis in one or more of three communities selected by OEO for their demonstration project. Many problems still remain unresolved, such as the legality of the plan; action on the part of state legislators in enacting enabling legislation for allocation of funds, both local and state, to parents; support of the plan by professional educators, students, and parents; and what effect the voucher plan will have upon the possible demise of our public school system.

The voucher plan warrants consideration as a potentially exciting innovation for making alternative forms of education available to children. The success or failure of the plan is largely dependent upon the soundness of the voucher models being planned for the OEO demonstration project presently under way. Some doubt still remains as to whether the demonstration projects will become fully operational. The hope is that they will, in order that the necessary data can be collected, analyzed, and then utilized to guide future action. The education voucher must be further developed conceptually, field tested, redesigned, mass tested, and evaluated prior to passing judgment on its merits as a viable alternative for *some* students, *some* teachers, and *some* parents in *some* communities. □

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