



Vouchers: “School Choice” Trap

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The money should follow the child, they said in the early 1990s. That way, they said, parents will have “school choice.” Fund students, not systems, went the common refrain. This will introduce more “competition” in the quasi-monopoly education sector, they said. And it will give parents the ability to choose the education that best aligns with their priorities.

It all sounded so great that parties from across the political spectrum agreed to give it a try. Even conservative-leaning American think tanks such as Heritage were impressed, trumpeting the policy as a model. But then, in an instant, all genuine choice was abolished with one “education reform” law fewer than two decades after “school choice” was approved.

Suddenly, private schools taking public money were ordered to teach the radical government curriculum, including the gender-bending extremism. All had to participate in national testing, too, ensuring that all schools taught what the government wanted taught. With public money there must be “accountability,” they said.

Perhaps even more troubling, supposedly Christian private schools were ordered to stop all Bible reading and prayer during school hours. In the same legislation, homeschooling was banned. Homeschoolers were forced to flee the nation, with armed police grabbing some children, such as Domenic Johansson, as families desperately tried to escape “school choice” to freer nations.

In short, all genuine and meaningful “choice” was abolished in one fell swoop — all under the seductive guise of “choice.” Somewhat ironically, perhaps, the alleged effort to offer alternatives to government schools ended up turning all schools into government schools.

Thankfully, this all happened in Sweden, not America. It began in 1992 with the passage of universal “school choice,” and ended two decades later with a comprehensive education reform law that, while preserving the tax funding for private schools, basically nationalized the entire system and ended all meaningful choice to ensure “accountability” and to protect what the United Nations and the Swedish government describe as the “human right” to a government-approved “education.”

A similar tragedy occurred in Australia. Attorney Chris Klicka, who has successfully represented thousands of families in his role as senior counsel for the Home School Legal Defense Association, explained in a 2001 piece for *Practical Homeschooling Magazine* that over 10

years, private and Christian schools took more and more tax funding. “The regulations gradually increased until the difference between public schools and private schools is non-existent,” he said.

The same thing happened in South Africa, when the “National Education Act” officially transformed all publicly funded private schools into government schools, Klicka warned. And this writer has documented how public funding of private schools — Catholic and Protestant — across Canada has resulted in all sorts of abuses, including mandatory LGBT indoctrination of all children.

This same nightmare scenario can and will happen in America if conservatives and Republicans are not careful. In fact, in some key ways, it already is happening. In New York, pointing to government funding for Jewish “yeshiva” schools, authorities are trying to force the traditional religious schools to offer education that is “substantially equivalent” to that provided in government schools.

Meanwhile, charter schools and various tax-funded options are displacing genuinely independent private and home education. Increasingly, once-private educational institutions are becoming more and more intertwined with — and dependent on — government funding. This will inevitably lead to disaster, experts and even numerous former top education officials have warned.

“You have to be accountable with public tax dollars ... when it comes to taking federal tax dollars and giving those to parents and then having the absence of accountability as far as their children’s education.... If you have accountability, then you lose the private and parochial nature of those schools,” said former U.S. Education Secretary Richard Riley. “It’s bad, we think, for private schools and parochial schools. It takes away from them the private and parochial strength, which is being totally free from any federal regulations. [Vouchers] threaten the very nature of private and parochial schools. It makes them less private and less parochial.”

Just think of the “free” government money as the cheese in the mousetrap. It works because the free cheese is appealing and the mouse does not understand that the decision to take the bait will have serious negative repercussions.

UNESCO Strategy

This strategy is actually laid out — not in those words, but nonetheless with remarkable clarity — in a recent Global Education Monitor report commissioned by the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). According to the report, governments should use tax subsidies for private schools to bring them under government control and impose regulations mandating “equity” and other goals.

This can be done by forcing entities taking public funds to use certain standards and enforce “centralization and control of the school choice and admissions procedures.” Perhaps even more alarming, under the banner of “autonomy, evaluation, and accountability,” the report proposes “integration of private subsidized schools into the monitoring and evaluation framework in place for the public sector.”

The little-noticed report argues in favor of, among other policies, the supposed “need to establish appropriate governance and regulatory frameworks” over private schools funded by government. The alleged “need” to regulate private education providers is taken for granted. “Regulatory reforms must clearly define what public interest in education is and fix the rules under which private providers may participate,” states the report, dubbed “Regulating Public-Private Partnerships, governing non-state schools: An equity perspective.”

Even more alarming, the report starts with the premise that the government — not the parents — is primarily responsible for the education of children. Citing the UN’s so-called Sustainable Development Goals, known as UN Agenda 2030 and described by UN bosses as the “master plan for humanity,” the UN education report claims that “the State remains the duty bearer of education as a public good.” Incredibly, parents are described variously in the report commissioned by UNESCO as “stakeholders” and even “vested interests” to be overcome by the government.

From there, the UN report proceeds to argue that any “collaboration” with the private sector on education “requires regulatory and accountability measures to ensure it is in line with the principle of education as a public good.” Of course, education does not fit the traditional economic definition of a “public good” — think of a lighthouse, for instance — because it is neither non-rival (one person consuming it does not affect the ability of others to enjoy it) nor non-excludable (non-payers can be excluded with relative ease here).

Because there are already so many non-governmental alternatives to government schools, the report trumpets the “Public-Private Partnership” model, often known as PPP, to bring all options under state control. The PPPs still allow profit to flow to private interests, as long as those interests do what the government wants. According to the report, PPP schools are not “exempt from complying with centrally defined curricula, learning standards or student admissions criteria, among other public regulations,” the report says, ominously.

Critics have regularly derided the approach — widely supported among global elites at the World Economic Forum — as state socialism, corporatism, and fascism. Nazi Germany, which criminalized homeschooling, is a good example: Companies could remain in private hands, as long as they served the state. The UN report makes clear that this is the vision for education. Government testing requirements, it says, “play a strategic role in promoting that all publicly-funded schools, independently of their ownership, are correctly aligned with quality standards and also with the equity goals and objectives set by the government.”

In other words, “private” schools will become government schools once they take government money — regardless of “their ownership.”

The UNESCO document goes on to cite another group, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), that is taking a similar approach, calling for all “private” schools on the public dole to follow “clear guidelines and goals” imposed by government. And across Europe and beyond, more and more governments are opening up the spigots of public funding to private education under the guise of “choice” while using the public funding to actually eliminate real choice.

The UN has long been scheming to undermine genuine education choice. In 2015, the UN “Human Rights Council,” a dictator-dominated body that is practically a caricature of a genuine human-rights outfit, passed a resolution demanding that governments regulate all education. Multiple international agreements over a period of decades have also made that clear. In fact, even the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights claims children have a “right” to an education that “shall further the activities of the United Nations.” The globalization of education is real, and it is happening fast. (See “Education’s Future: Globalization of Indoctrination” in *TNA*’s February 4, 2019, Special Report on education for more details.)

Options, Players, and Programs

Across the United States, governments are already following the strategy described in the UNESCO report of using public funding to impose restrictions, regulations, and other requirements on formerly independent private schools. A 2016 investigation by the Government Accountability Office found this to be the case. “Voucher and ESA programs generally placed some requirements on participating private schools, according to GAO’s review of program documents, survey responses, and interviews with program officials,” the agency said, pointing to mandatory government testing requirements and other demands that come with taking government money. And those are just the camel’s nose under the tent.

There are several different terms used to describe the overall vision: education vouchers, education-funding backpacks for all children, Educational Savings Accounts (ESAs), Empowerment Scholarship Accounts (ESAs), and more. Dozens of such programs are operating across America, and many more states are considering adopting the ideas. Ultimately, while there are variations in the different proposals, they all aim at the same ultimate objective: giving parents and families tax money to pursue their education.

For years, the so-called Blaine Amendments adopted by 37 states in their constitutions represented a formidable obstacle to such schemes. The amendments, originally aimed at blocking state funds for Catholic parochial schools, have long served as a bulwark against tax funding for Christian schools of any kind. But with the U.S. Supreme Court’s 2020 ruling in the *Espinoza* case limiting the application somewhat in a case involving a Christian school in Montana, it is possible the dam may be about to break.

Proponents of vouchers point to a variety of studies — no doubt some of them at least are legitimate — that show students perform somewhat better academically when using vouchers. They also use slick arguments that, at first glance, sound very appealing. Corey DeAngelis, who was until recently listed as a UNESCO “expert” on the controversial UN agency’s website, is one of the key advocates of the “fund students, not systems” approach, and the slogan is catching on, backed by big bucks.

This writer has no reason to doubt self-proclaimed “school choice evangelist” DeAngelis’ sincerity. But his chief patron, former U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, has made a number of public comments that are serious red flags at the very least. For instance, she publicly declared that because “every place a student learns is ultimately of benefit to the public,” all education should be considered “public education.” She also falsely claimed Common Core was “dead” even as her department continued to mandate it nationwide.



Strings attached: Former U.S. Education Secretary Betsy DeVos and her billionaire family are among the leading proponents of tax funding for private education. (AP Images)

As head of the Department of Education, DeVos also signed a global declaration with other G20 governments calling for, among other absurdities, using education to indoctrinate children to believe in “sustainable development.” The G20 Education Working Group agreement also called for embedding “socio-emotional skills across the curriculum” and the ongoing “internationalization of education.”

The dangers of the approach advocated by DeVos and DeAngelis become obvious merely by examining the programs. This year, powerful lobbyists and Florida Republicans introduced House Bill 1 to open up the floodgates of government funding to homeschoolers and private schools. The original draft of the bill would have made tax-funded “Family Empowerment Scholarships” available to basically all students in Florida, including homeschoolers and those attending private schools.

But, as always, there was a big catch: In exchange for government money, the students receiving it would be required to take government-mandated tests aligned with Common Core, with results reported to authorities. The families would also be required to meet each year with a “choice navigator” to determine the educational “needs” of their tax-funded child. The aid was to be distributed by a government-aligned “non-profit” organization that received grants from Florida’s leading LGBT extremist group even as it was seeking to impose its “woke” agenda on Christian schools.

Thanks to enormous pressure from the homeschooling community and other grassroots forces, some of the worst elements of the bill were removed, and the “choice navigator” meetings were made optional. But the danger remains. In fact, similar bills have proliferated in Republican legislatures nationwide. Virtually all of them impose new reporting, testing, and regulatory requirements on recipients of public funding.

Arizona's new universal ESAs to "fund students, not systems," being touted by "school choice" advocates nationwide as the best program since sliced bread, offers a cautionary tale. First of all, it does not really "fund students, not systems," explained former Arizona Superintendent of Public Instruction Diane Douglas. "Only students whose parents choose to apply for an ESA are directly funded," she told *The New American*. "Otherwise 'the system' is still being funded; traditional and charter districts will continue to receive their funding from the state based on enrollment."

Much more concerning, though, have been the effects. "Unfortunately I doubt that the legislators who passed this expansion, intending to offer parents greater choice, realize that they are just in fact ensnaring these children in a different form of government-controlled education and potentially endangering the autonomy of our private schools," continued Douglas, who has held almost every position in the state and local education system.

In Arizona, the state had no control of private schools, she said. But under the ESA program, government can impose requirements on the parents, and the control exercised over the parents can ultimately flow through them to the schools.

Even more alarming, homeschool families who take the government money are no longer even considered homeschoolers under state law, as those who reach for the money surrender their educational liberty and independence. Already, around 10 percent of homeschoolers in Maricopa County — a rough estimate so far — have been converted to government-funded "ESA" students under state law.

Adding insult to injury, the program hardly seems to have moved the needle in terms of getting children out of traditional government schools so far, but it is ensnaring thousands of former homeschool families in the government trap.

Charter schools are another example of the problems inherent with "school choice" schemes. While most data on charters do show slightly better academics, charter schools are still government schools, because they are funded by government. That means they generally must use Common Core and teach the same godless worldview that all other government schools teach.

Furthermore, data and research show that charter schools crowd out genuinely independent private schools. In fact, a study from the Cato Institute found that about one third of students entering charters in urban areas came from private schools. That type of loss can and does lead to private schools having to shut their doors; a Lutheran pastor in the New Orleans area told this writer he was forced to shutter his Christian school after a nearby charter pulled too many students away.

Follow the money: The toxic, federally backed Common Core standards have invaded many Christian and parochial schools, partly thanks to tax funding. (AP Images)



Government Takeover

Even in those systems that do not yet include broad reporting, testing, hiring, and curricular mandates on voucher recipients, one bad court ruling could jeopardize the entire community operating independently of government's "education" system. And American courts have ruled that government has not just the authority to regulate and oversee what it funds, but the responsibility to do so. Public money requires "accountability," after all.

"This is an historic Trojan Horse-type situation for K-12 private education," explained Lieutenant Colonel E. Ray Moore (Ret.), founder of the Exodus Mandate ministry to get Christian families to abandon government schools. "From Greek mythology the Trojan Horse was brought into the city of Troy to save the city, but it proved to be the cause of their destruction. When we reach for the money, the handcuffs go on. The danger to private education is incontrovertible."

Moore, who also chairs an alliance of dozens of ministries dubbed the Christian Education Initiative, warned that "Vouchers must be aggressively resisted by informed conservatives and Christians as an existential threat to the wellbeing of private education." "Even now K-12 private and Christian and home education is on the cusp of a major breakthrough, a tipping point, where we could experience a sudden rush into the new free-market and K-12 Christian education paradigm," he added.

Pointing to the millions of families who have fled the government system in recent years, Moore sounded optimistic about the future — if conservatives can prevent a government takeover of all education via government funding. "We could see the demise of Marxist state-sponsored K-12 public education in the next decade if we stay true and continue to drain the K-12 public education swamp and grow new K-12 Christian and home schools," he said. "Let's not snatch defeat from the jaws of victory by accepting the nostrums of tax-funded vouchers."

The problem is hardly a hypothetical future issue. In numerous states across the country, government-funded scholarships may only be used at institutions that prohibit "discrimination" in hiring and admissions. Because those anti-discrimination schemes require Christian schools to

hire open homosexuals and gender-confused individuals impersonating the opposite sex, there has already been litigation, and there will be much more.

Milwaukee, Wisconsin, offered vouchers for Christian and private schools. However, they came with hundreds of regulations attached, including a prohibition on requiring Bible classes or chapel for voucher students. Similarly, Alaska introduced a program to offer financial assistance to homeschooling families that ended up being used by most homeschool families in the state. The only catch: No religious material or curricula allowed.

Prominent conservative attorney William Olson was recently commissioned by Moore's organization to write a legal report on this issue. Headlined "Government-Funded Vouchers Endanger Biblically Faithful Christian Education," the report cites a "long trail of cases" in which the U.S. Supreme Court found that even where government could not directly regulate private institutions, it could do so by imposing requirements and "strings" attached to public funding.

Olson first fell in love with the voucher idea after reading Milton Friedman in college. Working in the Nixon administration, he was enthusiastic about trying it out in New Hampshire, only to have the plan quashed by government-school forces, he explained to *The New American*. Then he read *Education, Christianity and the State* by J. Gresham Machen and spoke with prominent conservatives, and radically changed his view.

"I came to be more concerned about protecting Christian education from the control of the state, than getting a piece of the pie for Christian schools," Olson said. "While there may have been a time when those controlling the purse strings of government funds would not abuse that power to undermine the Christian education they were funding, that time is past. I would rather have the Christian schools and home schools we have now, not required to bow at the altar of homosexual and transgender rights, than to have ten times as many such schools which were morally and biblically compromised."

Rick Boyer, an attorney who co-wrote the paper with Olson, pointed to Alberta's experiences in the 1990s as a cautionary tale. After the government began handing out \$500 "scholarships" to homeschool families, draconian regulations followed the very next year under the guise of "accountability" for the public money being spent. "The lessons of history are too clear," he said. "You can have freedom, or you can accept government handouts. You cannot have both."

Other Problems

Another major concern with voucher and school-choice programs is that they are essentially welfare, promoting government dependence even for middle class, independent families.

Even buying the obviously phony assumption that those who created and built the system have good intentions and wish to educate children well, government-run education fails for the same reasons that collective farming and state-owned industries fail. Advocates of vouchers have correctly pointed out that it would be absurd to have the government run all grocery stores merely because some people cannot afford groceries.

Rather than have government-owned and -operated grocery stores, the government merely provides food stamps — or vouchers — to those who qualify. The same “food stamp” system could be done for education and schooling. This is a fair argument, of course, and this writer has used the argument many times.

But it rests on a few problematic assumptions. First, it assumes that it is the role of government to provide food (or education) to at least some people. Historically, the church and private charities have handled these sorts of responsibilities, including education, where individuals and families could not — and they did a much better job than the state ever could. Government stepping in has resulted in ever-greater levels of poverty, irresponsibility, and other problems. Secondly, school vouchers are being given to *all* families under this system, not just especially needy ones.

CEO Robert Bortins with Classical Conversations, a prominent organization providing classical Christian education to homeschoolers nationwide, highlighted this argument. “I think it is very basic. Who pays for it? If it’s the government and outside of God’s design it will not yield good outcomes,” he told *The New American*. “We’ve seen this play out in higher education with low quality graduates and out of control student loan debt.”

“What I’ve seen in states that have adopted universal school vouchers or similar programs is increased inflationary pressure and very few people in government schools leaving for a private option,” he said. “It requires more state employees to administrate the programs. It opens the door for government interference into private [schools,] making them extensions of the state. It normalizes welfare for the middle class.”

Citing Jesus’ parable of building on the sand versus building on a rock, Bortins applied it to the current issues. “When we build structures on government funds we build on the sand,” he said. “When we build using free-market principles we build on a rock. ESAs aren’t a free market solution, they are Marxist-lite market manipulation techniques. They will fail and bring down the thriving private alternatives with them.”

Solutions

Of course, there are many organizations opposed to the vouchers and government funding. The Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA), for instance, with its hundreds of thousands of member families, has been the tip of the spear when it comes to protecting homeschooling families from falling into the trap. Organizations representing some of the best Christian schools in the nation — groups such as the Association of Classical Christian Schools — have also been sounding the alarm.

There are many schools that have refused to take government money. FreedomProject Academy, an online K-12 classical school affiliated with this magazine, has vowed from day one never to take a single penny of public funding, for the very reasons outlined above. And so, FPA, as it is known, is free to educate its students using methods that work, with a biblical focus on truth and morality. Like homeschooling families generally, FPA is able to provide a world-class education at a tiny fraction of the cost per pupil of government indoctrination centers.

But the threat of government control is growing with every passing day, as more and more Republican lawmakers, often cooperating with well-funded lobbyists, jump on the “school choice” bandwagon. Most Republican-controlled states currently have legislation being considered to create or expand such schemes, and many will undoubtedly pass them — at least if they do not hear from concerned citizens about the dangers.

Some lawmakers are pursuing non-refundable tax credits as a workable and less-dangerous alternative to tax-funded vouchers. That way, families can avoid having to pay for government schools they do not use while also having to pay for their own child’s private or home education — but without the money ever becoming “public” money. Many churches and private organizations, such as the Good Soil Good Seed Foundation in Illinois, are popping up to offer scholarships, too. Free people can come up with solutions.

Rather than looking to government for help and other people’s money, Americans must return to the biblical principle that children are the God-given responsibility of parents — not Caesar or even one’s neighbors. This is true not just in terms of feeding and clothing, but in education, too. No one should feel entitled to seize money from his neighbor for the “education” of his children. Taking wealth from one’s neighbor by force is wrong, even if it is being spent on an otherwise noble goal.

To the extent that some families might need assistance, Americans are the most generous people on the planet, and there are already countless charities and churches that can and do provide assistance. This was the norm before the advent of government-run “education.” The idea of allowing the current ruling class in America — godless, in favor of tax funding for slaughtering babies, and worse — to “educate” their children today should be unthinkable to Americans.

Millions of families have fled the government’s indoctrination centers in recent years, for obvious reasons. Unfortunately, at least some do not realize that, by taking government money, they are ultimately going to be sucked right back into the cesspool they escaped. Preserving genuine school choice — independent of government money and control — is one of the most important battles in the fight for freedom today. The well-being of the next generation, and therefore the future of America, depends on it.