

Research Briefs

Title

Vouchers and School Choice

Background

“Across the globe, school vouchers come in many forms, but essentially, a school voucher constitutes a certificate of public funding of a specific amount that parents of students are being offered to use in any school – usually private – of the parents’ choosing” (Sorenson 2017, 3). Vouchers in their pure form are an amount of public money allocated to parents to send their children to schools of choice.

Vouchers are an idea first advanced in the 1950s by Milton Friedman, an American economist who believed that public schools had a monopoly on American education that needed to be broken. Friedman’s view, which has been promulgated by various think tanks over time, was that if parents had the choice to send their children to private schools using vouchers then competition would force improvement in public schools because “administrators of these schools will improve their schools in an effort to attract students back from private or charter schools or at the very least avoid losing them” (Gray, Merrifield and Adzima 2016, 321). In practice, voucher systems provide a mechanism for public dollars to be shifted to private schools who hold none of the same accountability for the money or results as public schools do. In an era of limited public resources, opponents to school vouchers “fear that such programs will drain public schools of vital federal and state dollars and only further exacerbate the education gap between ‘halves’ and ‘have nots’” (Raj 2019, 1038).

Since the 1980s, voucher systems have been implemented in many countries and in parts of the United States with detrimental effects. Sorenson (2017) pointed out that “there is no clear evidence concerning positive links between the introduction of school voucher systems and student learning outcomes. In fact, studies have also found negative effects” (p 15). For example, a meta-analysis of studies from Chile, which has a national voucher system, found that after “30 years of school choice through vouchers and privatization, Chile has developed a finely stratified and segregated education system that has deepened social fractures based on social class ethnicity, religion, and immigration, and that has neutralized integrative mechanisms of citizenship and public trust imbued in public education” (Trevino et al 2018, 16). The authors state that the societal class separations which developed in Chile stemmed, in part, from private schools’ ability to select which students they accepted by imposing tuition in addition to the vouchers leaving “the very poorest families lacking such resources have no other option than the local public school—the default for those who have nothing to offer but their vouchers” (Trevino et al 2018, 5). The Chilean public school system is funded exclusively by vouchers and therefore lacks the funding enjoyed by private schools. The consequence of underfunding public schools is that poor students fall behind their wealthier peers, creating and reinforcing class divisions. Segmentation based on economic standing is only one way vouchers institutionalize discriminatory practices.

2019/20



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COOR-141-3, 2019 12

A specific example of the damage vouchers can do is found in the United States. Raj (2019) reports that parents of disabled children are being forced to sign waivers of their rights in order to access vouchers and once they do if the students “enroll in a private school that fails to meet their needs, they are left with few, if any, options. They cannot sue the private school or state for better services” (p 1045).

Ultimately, vouchers and privatization are inextricably linked and it is important to consider that private interests are not public interests. Private schools are not accountable to the public, but under voucher systems they receive public monies. The segmentation caused by voucher systems is problematic and runs counter to “the longstanding responsibility of public schools to knit together a diverse public by providing common educational experience across class, ethnicity, or religious affiliation remains as important—perhaps more important—than ever” (Trevino et al 2018, 19).

Keywords

Vouchers, privatization, Friedman, competition, public schools, private schools

Key strategic considerations

Public education serves the needs of society and the literature affirms that vouchers, which emphasize individual gain, are a threat to this notion. It is important for teachers and parents to advocate for a strong public education system that meets the needs of all students regardless of their race, ability, socioeconomic status, and/or religion.

Sources and further reading

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2019/20



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COOR-141-3, 2019 12