

EDUCATION -  
Scholar Choice

## MEMO

TO: Paul Dimond  
FROM: Bill Kincaid (205-0704)  
Jon Schnur (401-3598)  
DATE: March 14, 1996  
RE: Summit Speech: Vouchers

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Following up on our conversation last night, attached are some materials on vouchers. The first is a possible insert for the summit speech, which we have briefly discussed with Mike Smith and Terry Peterson. The second is an attachment that walks through some of the additional arguments against vouchers. Both, especially the attachment, need a lot more work, but could be helpful as a starting point.

We will talk with you soon.

## Summit Speech: Possible Language on Private School Vouchers

### **Possible Speech Excerpt:**

"We are all here at this summit because we agree on some critical steps that this generation must take in order to leave our next generation with better schools: raise standards, strengthen accountability, provide more choices and encourage parental involvement, support innovative technology, and guarantee safe places for our children to learn. We know these steps will work, if we all do our part.

"But one approach would sidetrack progress toward real reform: the divisive strategy of private school vouchers.

"Controversy over vouchers polarizes communities when they should be coming together to do the hard work of improving our public schools. In fact, local and state disputes over vouchers have divided citizens, rather than unifying them around standards, technology and other basic strategies we know can work. Voucher disputes rob us of the time, energy and common purpose that we need to put effective reforms into action.

"Moreover, vouchers would undermine two of America's most fundamental institutions: public and private schooling. Just when a new baby boom is bringing record numbers of students into our nation's classrooms, vouchers would drain money from the wellspring of our American democracy, the public schools that educate and pass on our common democratic values to almost ninety percent of the nation's students.

"Meanwhile, if public funds are used to support the basic costs of private schools, we will see increased calls for private schools to become more directly accountable to the public. That would forever alter the nature of private schooling.

"I deeply respect the vital role of public and private education in America; private school vouchers would jeopardize both."

## Attachment: Additional Background on Vouchers

Public education is a cornerstone of our American democracy and way of life. American children are born into one of the most diverse populations in the world. In our public schools, children from all walks of life play together, grow up together, and learn common values together. It is this unique blend of unity and diversity, made possible by our public schools, that sets our nation apart from countries where differences have devolved into ethnic conflicts and wars. Private school vouchers could well result in the disintegration of our public education system, and ultimately the fragmentation of our society.

Vouchers would drain enormous amounts of money away from public schools just when investments in public schools becomes more critical than ever, and when Americans are saying the improvement of public schools is their number one priority. Institution of vouchers nationwide would drain billions of dollars from public schools -- just at a time when the Administration and Congress have finally agreed to preserve funding for education.

Studies of voucher experiments in Milwaukee and in England show no evidence that vouchers improve student performance. In Milwaukee, students who participate in private school choice programs do no better academically than comparable students in public schools. In England, studies have shown that the best students do get "skimmed" from the public schools.

Vouchers would undermine private education. Inevitable abuses -- or even concerns about potential abuses -- under a voucher program would incite efforts to bring private schools under public regulation. This would effectively end the independence of this important alternative to public education in American life. Last year, even Pat Buchanan warned against the negative effect of vouchers on private schools. Problems with voucher schools in Milwaukee have already led to calls for increased public regulation of private schools there.

Another serious risk of private school voucher plans is the ease with which mismanaged, financially troubled, ineffective, and even fraudulent private schools can receive substantial amounts of public funds with little or no public accountability. Indeed, the results of the nation's first experiment with publicly funded private school vouchers have been disturbing, but consistent with tough lessons learned from experiences with proprietary schools in higher education. Last month, 2 private schools in the Milwaukee voucher program closed, one after its founder was charged with writing \$47,000 in bad checks. While hundreds of families have been trying to figure out where to send their children in the middle of the year, 2 other voucher schools are reporting financial problems may drive them out of business.

Voucher supporters argue that these closures show the market is working and weeding out bad schools; opponents suggest the price for children and taxpayers is too high. Four of 17 Milwaukee voucher schools have reported financial problems, and two have closed and the other two may close soon. Opponents suggest that the price -- forcing children to switch schools in the middle of a semester, jeopardizing their academic progress, and in the case of two closed schools, \$600,000 of public funds this year alone -- is too high.

Due to these problems and others, vouchers polarize and politicize the public discussion about improving schools, draining away the time, energies, and hard work we all need to put into improving schools. Indeed, voucher proposals have prevented and delayed the enactment of promising and otherwise popular education reform measures.

Even if vouchers did work for the students who received them, voucher plans would essentially provide a lifeboat for a small minority of students, and drain support from a sinking boat where most of the students are left behind. This is a dark vision for the future of American children, and I refuse to support it. I think we can fix our public schools, and so do you. Otherwise, you wouldn't be at this summit.

Standards, assessments, information to parents, public charter schools and public school choice are much better ways to expand choice and accountability. Public charter schools are formed only after their applications have been reviewed for quality and financial viability; moreover, they are accountable to public institutions. Charter schools and public school choice can expand options for students and families, while avoiding the damaging consequences of private school vouchers.

EDGE - SCHOOL CHOICE

OUT WEST: RANCHERS AS ENVIRONMENTALISTS / TRAVEL: GENOA

# The Atlantic Monthly

JULY 1999

**A BOLD  
PROPOSAL TO  
FIX CITY  
SCHOOLS**

A VOUCHER  
PROGRAM  
EVEN LIBERALS  
CAN EMBRACE.

**THE FALSE  
PROMISE OF  
SLAVE  
REDEMPTION**

A REPORT FROM  
SUDAN

BY **STEPHEN  
BUDIANSKY**

THE NEW  
GENETICS OF  
DOG BEHAVIOR

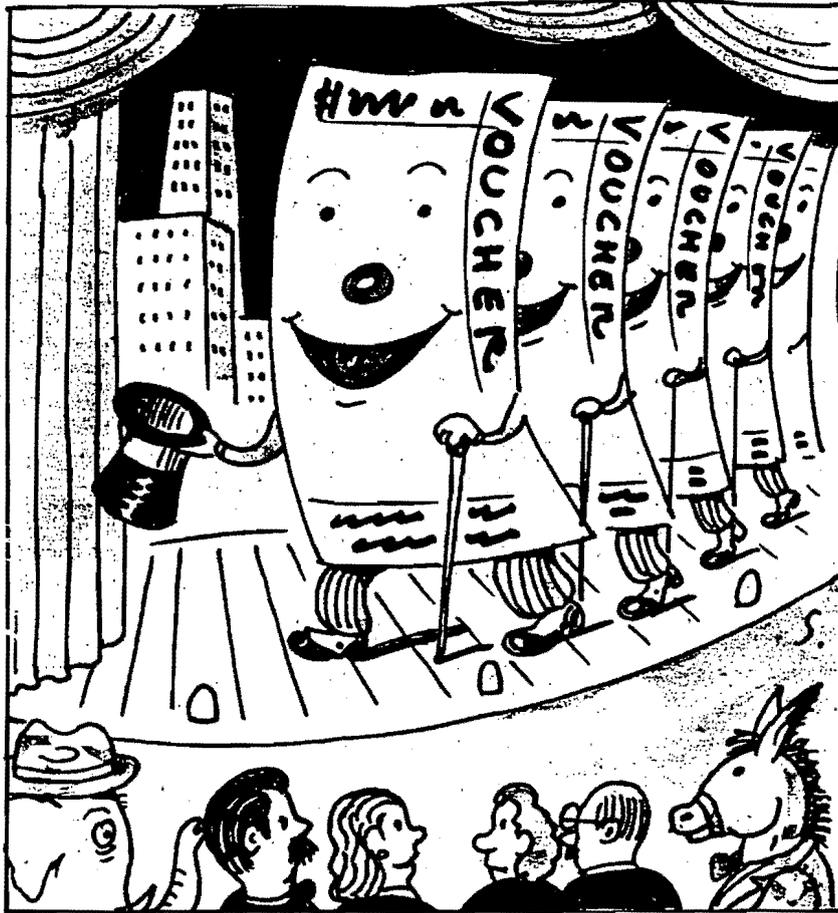
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## A Bold Experiment to Fix City Schools

*A proposal for school vouchers on which Milton Friedman, Lamar Alexander, and Kweisi Mfume, the president of the NAACP, all agree*

**W**HEN Maria Neri's daughter Tina finished eighth grade, two years ago, her scholarship at a Catholic elementary school in south-central Los Angeles ended.

The parochial high school in which Neri (not her real name) hoped to enroll Tina charges \$3,500 a year—a third less than

by **Matthew Miller**

the \$5,400 Los Angeles would spend to educate Tina in public school. Neri, thirty-three, earns \$600 a month as a part-time teacher's aide; she's looking for a second, and perhaps a third, job. Her husband, from whom she is separated, earns \$1,200 a month as a laborer in a glass factory. He pays his

wife's monthly rent of \$340, but offers no support beyond that. After paying for food, a phone, gas, and other expenses, Neri had no money left to put toward private school for Tina. Yet she was afraid to send Tina to the neighborhood public school, where the walls were covered with graffiti, and "cholos," or gang members, had been involved in shootings that brought police helicopters to the campus. So Neri used her sister's address to enroll Tina at another public school, which, though twenty minutes away, at least seemed safer. But it is far from ideal. Classrooms each have forty to forty-five children belonging to several different grades. Tina, sixteen, says the teachers often have the students watch movies. Her math teacher was so confused about who Tina was that he gave her an F for not completing many assignments—a grade he changed, with embarrassment and an apology, after Neri confronted him with Tina's completed workbook. "I can see the difference," Neri says. "She's going down." Tina says she would go back to Catholic school if they could afford it. "I talk to my daughter," Neri explains, "and say, 'I'm sorry.'"

Neri's desire to send Tina to a better school is at the heart of one of the nation's most important and most demagogic debates. Through vouchers, often touted as an answer to Neri's problem, the government would give parents some or all of the money it now spends educating their children to use at a school of their choice. Depending on whom you listen to, vouchers are either a lifeline or a death knell. "It is quite simply an issue of survival for our nation's poorest students," says Dan Coats, a Republican and a former senator from Indiana. But Kweisi Mfume, the president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, calls vouchers a "terrible threat," and Sandra Feldman, the president of the American Federation of Teachers, says they mean "a radical abandonment of public schools and public education."

These are heated claims, especially given the relatively small number of students who are involved in voucher programs today. Just over 52 million students attend grades K through 12 in the

United States: Only two cities offer publicly funded vouchers: in Milwaukee (whose breakthrough program was begun in 1990) roughly 6,000 of 107,000 students get vouchers; in Cleveland about 4,000 of 77,000 do. In May, Florida approved a plan under which students at the poorest-performing schools would get vouchers. Four schools are expected to be eligible this year, and 12,000 of the state's 2.3 million K-12 kids are expected to use vouchers over the next four years. Privately funded voucher programs in thirty-one cities served roughly 12,000 children last year; ten new such programs came into being for the 1998-1999 school year. Two wealthy investors, Ted Forstmann and John Walton, recently announced a plan to fund (along with other donors) \$170 million in vouchers, which will reach 40,000 new students over the next four years.

Add these numbers up and you get 74,000 children—about 0.1 percent of students. Add 200,000 for those students in the 1,200 charter schools around the country (which also give parents a choice), and the proportion comes to only 0.5 percent of schoolchildren. In other words, the school-choice debate is

*Where is the "voucher left"? Vouchers have a long but unappreciated pedigree among progressive reformers.*



taking place utterly at the margins. At this rate, for all the fuss, it's hard to imagine that any impact could be made on the skills and life chances of students stuck in our worst public schools in time to prevent what the Reverend Floyd Flake, a voucher advocate and a former Democratic congressman from New York, calls "educational genocide."

This tragedy is most pronounced in big cities, whose public schools together

serve six million children. Despite heroic local efforts and pockets of success, depressing evidence mounts of an achievement gap between students in cities and those in suburbs, where, school-watchers say, most schools are doing fine, largely because they're safer, better funded, and less prone to the social ills that plague cities. Of Detroit's eleventh-graders 8.5 percent were deemed "proficient" in science on Michigan's 1997 statewide exam. Fourth-graders in Hartford were a tenth as likely as Connecticut students overall to show proficiency on the state's three achievement tests in 1996. Only two percent of Cleveland's minority tenth-graders have taken algebra. "The numbers tell a sad and alarming story," a special report in *Education Week* concluded last January. "Most 4th graders who live in U.S. cities can't read and understand a simple children's book, and most 8th graders can't use arithmetic to solve a practical problem." As polls prove, increasing numbers of urban parents like Maria Neri want a way out. It seems immoral to argue that they must wait for the day when urban public schools are somehow "fixed." It's even harder to argue that bigger voucher programs could make things worse.

Yet a political standoff has kept vouchers unavailable to nearly 99 percent of urban schoolchildren. Bill Clinton and most leading Democrats oppose them, saying we should fix existing public schools, not drain money from the system. Teachers' unions, the staunchest foes of vouchers, are among the party's biggest donors, and sent more delegates to the 1996 Democratic National Convention than did the state of California. Republicans endorse vouchers as a market-based way to shake up calcified bureaucracies, but they generally push plans that affect only a few students. The distrust that has led to today's gridlock is profound. Republicans view Democrats as union pawns defending a failed status quo; Democrats think Republicans want to use urban woes as justification for scrapping public education and the taxes that fund it.

**M**ISSING entirely from the debate is the progressive pro-voucher perspective. To listen to the unions and the NAACP, one would think that vouchers were the evil brainchild of the economist Milton Friedman and his conservative devotees, lately joined by a handful of

desperate but misguided urban blacks. In fact vouchers have a long but unappreciated intellectual pedigree among reformers who have sought to help poor children and to equalize funding in rich and poor districts. This "voucher left" has always had less cash and political power than its conservative counterpart or its union foes. It has been ignored by the press and trounced in internecine wars. But if urban children are to have any hope, the voucher left's best days must lie ahead.

Finding a productive compromise means recalling the role of progressives in the history of the voucher movement and exposing the political charades that poison debate. It means finding a way for unorthodox new leaders to build a coalition—of liberals for whom the moral urgency of helping city children trumps ancient union ties, and of conservatives who reject a laissez-faire approach to life's unfairness. The goal of such a coalition should be a "grand bargain" for urban schools: a major multi-year test of vouchers that touches not 5,000 but 500,000 children, and eventually five million—and *increases* school spending in the process. The conventional wisdom says that today's whittled-down pilot programs are all that is politically achievable. The paradox is that only through bigger thinking about how vouchers might help can a durable coalition emerge.

**I**N 1962 John E. "Jack" Coons, an idealistic thirty-two-year-old law professor at Northwestern University, was asked by the U.S. Civil Rights Commission to study whether Chicago schools were complying with desegregation orders. Coons soon found that what really interested him was a different question: Why were suburban schools so much better than those downtown? Over the next few years Coons, eventually joined by two law students, Stephen Sugarman and William Clune, found one answer in what would become a source of enduring outrage: America's property-tax-based system of public-school finance created dramatic disparities in the resources available to educate children.

This financial aspect of education's vaunted tradition of "local control" is rarely the subject of national controversy. In part that is because it gives the nation's most powerful citizens both lower taxes and better schools. Imagine two towns, Slumville and Suburbia. Slumville has

\$100,000 in taxable property per pupil; Suburbia has \$300,000. If Slumville votes to tax its property at four percent, it raises \$4,000 per pupil. But Suburbia can tax itself at two percent and raise \$6,000 per pupil. Suburbia's tax rate is half as high, but its public schools enjoy 50 percent more resources per student.

In the 1960s affluent districts routinely spent twice what nearby poorer ones did, and sometimes four or five times as much. To Coons and his colleagues, such inequity in a public service was indefensible. Beginning with *Private Wealth and Public Education*, a book that he, Sugarman, and Clune published in 1970, Coons has denounced the system eloquently. It's worth sampling his arguments, because the left's case for choice is usually drowned out by the right's cheerleading for markets, or by urban blacks' cry for help. In a 1992 essay, "School Choice as Simple Justice," Coons wrote,

This socialism for the rich we blithely call "public," though no other public service entails such financial exclusivity. Whether the library, the swimming pool, the highway or the hospital—if it is "public," it is accessible. But admission to the government school comes only with the price of the house. If the school is in Beverly Hills or Scarsdale, the poor need not apply.

Coons's point was simple: the quality of public education should not depend on local wealth—unless it is the wealth of a state as a whole. "Everyone ought to be put in a roughly equivalent position with regard to what the state will do," Coons, now an emeritus law professor at Berkeley, says.

Coons and Sugarman made a successful case for the unconstitutionality of the school-finance system in California's famous *Serrano* case in 1971, beginning a national movement to litigate for school equity. Although it was little noticed then, they cited vouchers as a potential remedy. The idea was to give courts a way to instruct legislatures to fix things without having to mess with local control. Asking legislatures to centralize school funding at the state level was a political nonstarter. But through various formulas, Coons and Sugarman argued, the state could give families in poorer districts enough cash in the form of vouchers to bring education spending in those districts up to that of better-off districts. And what could be

more "local," they reasoned, than giving families direct control over the cash to use at schools as they chose?

COONS and Sugarman, focusing on school equity, thus arrived at a policy that Milton Friedman had been urging through a principled commitment to liberty and to its embodiment, the market. Friedman's 1955 essay "The Role of Government in Education" is viewed as the fountainhead of the voucher movement. In an ideal world, the future Nobel laureate reasoned, the government might have no role in schooling at all; yet a minimum required level of education and its financing by the state could be justified.

A stable and democratic society is impossible without widespread acceptance of some common set of values and without a minimum degree of literacy and knowledge on the part of most citizens . . . the gain from the education of a child accrues not only to the child or to his parents but to other members of the society. . . . Yet it is not feasible to identify the particular individuals (or families) benefitted or the money value of the benefit and so to charge for the services rendered.

However, Friedman said, if this "neighborhood effect" meant that the government was warranted in paying for K-12 education, another question remained: Should the government run the schools as well? Friedman's view was that schools could be just as "public" if the government financed but didn't administer them. That notion remains virtually unintelligible to leaders in public education, perhaps because it is so threatening.

Friedman's analogy (adopted by every voucher proponent since) was to the G.I. Bill, which gave veterans a maximum sum per year to spend at the institution of their choice, provided that it met certain minimum standards. Likewise, for elementary and secondary schooling Friedman envisioned a universal voucher scheme that would give parents a fixed sum per child, redeemable at an "approved" school of their choice. Such a school might be nonprofit or for profit, religious or secular. Parents could add to the sum if they wished. The role of government would be limited to assuring that "approved" schools included some common content in their programs, "much as it now inspects restaurants to assure that

they maintain minimum sanitary standards." In Friedman's view, market-style competition for students would spur the development of schools that were better tailored to families' needs and cost less than those run by notoriously inefficient public bureaucracies.

Friedman's and Coons's different angles of vision represent the ancient tug between liberty and equality within the pro-voucher camp—a debate the two have waged since Friedman was an occasional guest on Coons's Chicago radio show, *Problems of the City*, in the 1960s. Friedman today isn't bothered by issues of school-finance equity. "What's your view of inequity in clothing and food?" he snapped when asked recently, saying that such concerns reflect Coons's "socialistic approach." And even if public schools were making every child an Einstein, Friedman says, he would still want vouchers. "Private enterprise as opposed to collectivism," he says, "would always be better."

Coons is less ideological. In his view, choice would improve the public schools, which he believes would always be chosen by the majority, even with a full-blown voucher system. The prospect of losing students (and thus funding) would force improvements faster than today's seemingly endless rounds of ineffectual education fads. If poor children got a decent education under the current system, he adds, he probably wouldn't have devoted his life to these issues.

The fate of disadvantaged children under a voucher regime is where the Coons-Friedman clash is sharpest. Coons would be glad to offer vouchers to all low-income students and to no one else if such a step were necessary for consensus. He fears that under a universal voucher system they could get left behind, as schools competed to recruit better-off, smarter, healthier (nondisabled) students. The incentives are plain: such children would be easier to teach, and schools could charge wealthy families far more than the voucher amount to maximize profit. Coons and the voucher left therefore insist that any universal scheme should include protections for low-income and disabled children. Examples would be increasing the voucher amount for those children to make them more attractive to schools, and letting schools redeem their vouchers only if, say, 15

(Continued on page 26)



(Continued from page 18)

percent of new places were reserved for such children, for whom the voucher would cover tuition. To Friedman, these are unacceptable intrusions on schools' freedom to operate as they like, turning vouchers into "a welfare program, not an education program."

**W**ITHOUT a link to unions—which, despite the waning of their influence, remain one of the few sources of progressive ideas in American public

*A "grand bargain":  
combine a bigger road  
test for vouchers with  
increased per-pupil  
spending.*



life—liberal pro-voucher champions have had little political impact. The muting of their voice, combined with the ease of legislating pilot programs, explains why few urban children have a choice today. What's more, deceptive arguments by both teachers' unions and conservative activists keep the broader public confused.

Teachers' unions (and voucher foes generally) rely on five dubious arguments.

*There's no evidence that vouchers work.* The trials have been so isolated, unions say, that their results are unproved. That's a nervy case to make when it is union opposition that has kept the trials small. Pro- and anti-voucher forces have funded research in Milwaukee and Cleveland that purports to show why Johnny is doing demonstrably better or worse under vouchers. It is impossible to make sense of these dueling studies, whose sample sizes are so small that results seem to turn on whether, say, three children in Cleveland handed in their homework on time. Wealthy conservatives are now offering vouchers to all 14,000 at-risk children in a poor San Antonio district in part so as to compile a

broader database from which to judge the impact of voucher systems. (In the first semester of the program 566 children taking vouchers left district schools.) For now the "no evidence" argument says more about union chutzpah than about voucher performance.

*Vouchers drain money from public schools.* Sandra Feldman, of the American Federation of Teachers, says that the \$10 million Cleveland uses to give vouchers to 4,000 children would be better spent on measures that would benefit every child, such as shrinking class sizes and launching proven reading programs. But this is disingenuous. Cleveland provided the \$10 million in addition to more than \$600 million in existing school spending in order to mollify unions, which insisted that vouchers not "come out of the hide" of public schools. It's unfair for unions to turn around and complain that the extra cash they insisted on should have gone elsewhere. The truth is that public schools are free to fund such measures now by shifting priorities within their budgets. And when broader voucher plans let the amount that public schools receive per student follow students who leave the system, the public-school coffers are not drained—schools receive the resources their enrollment merits.

*Vouchers are unconstitutional.* Some critics say that voucher use at religious schools violates the Constitution's ban on "establishment of religion," but the better view of the Supreme Court's confusing jurisprudence here suggests that's wrong. After all, no one thinks that federal student loans are unconstitutional when they are used by students to attend Notre Dame. Last June, Wisconsin's highest court upheld Milwaukee's plan, because the voucher goes to parents to use where they like, not to any particular type of school. In union hands, moreover, this legal complaint seems suspiciously tactical. It can't be that we are constitutionally obligated to imprison urban children in failing schools.

*The capacity isn't there.* Public schools serve 46 million K-12 children, private schools six million. Since private schools can't accommodate more than a fraction of today's students, opponents say, vouchers can't be a meaningful part of school reform. "Where are these schools going to come from?" Sandra Feldman repeatedly asked during an interview with me.

The first response to this argument is to ask, Then what's the problem? If as a practical matter unions feel that most children with vouchers will remain where they are, it's hard to see what the harm is in trying them. A second response is that even relatively few defections from public schools may spur efforts to improve them. Districts with innovative charter schools have reported such a reaction.

The larger answer, however, is that broader voucher schemes would prompt many institutions and entrepreneurs to add schools and spaces to the "market." This would happen not overnight but over a number of years. The initial spaces would be likely to come from Catholic schools, which account for half the private-school slots in the country. Jerome Porath, the schools chief for the Los Angeles archdiocese, says that if every student got a voucher worth an amount close to the current per-pupil expenditure in California, over several years enough facilities could be built or rented "to accommodate everybody who wanted to come." "We'll get out our spreadsheets and figure it out," he says. Milton Friedman adds, "You can't think of it in terms of the existing stock of schools. There will be a flood of new schools started."

*Profit is bad.* Voucher foes act as if there were something venal about the profit motive when applied to schools. But public education is already big business. The \$320 billion spent last year on K-12 schooling is lusted after by textbook publishers, test designers, building contractors, food and janitorial services, and software companies, to name only a few examples. This largesse inevitably brings scandals—for example, the California flap in 1996 over whether campaign contributions influenced a big textbook purchase. Like health care, defense, and other major public services, schools will always be partly about business; vouchers would simply change who controls the flow of cash. There's no reason to think that the abuses under a voucher system would be worse than abuses today.

Voucher foes make other unpersuasive claims. They say that vouchers will cream off the most-talented children and the most-active parents—a worry that seems acute primarily because today's voucher plans remain tiny. They say that private schools will unfairly be able to avoid troublemaking kids by not admitting them—ignoring the fact that public

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districts themselves often send such kids to special schools of "last resort." They say the oversight that will follow public money will make private schools resemble public bureaucracies—ignoring the greater flexibility that most analysts say such schools will retain in hiring and firing, resource allocation, and curriculum design. Finally, they argue that it is crazy to subsidize more-affluent parents who already pay for private school—a seemingly powerful charge until one recalls that such families are now paying twice for schools, and that vouchers offered only to poor families would avoid the problem entirely.

For their part, conservative voucher fans peddle one big misconception: vouchers can save lots of money because per-pupil spending in private schools is typically less than half that in public schools today. It is true that religious schools have fewer administrators and lower-paid teachers, and invest less in such amenities as theaters, labs, and gymnasiums. But private schools don't have to take costly disabled and "special education" children; and often public schools

must offer extras such as English as a Second Language, breakfast and lunch programs, and transportation. When such differences are taken into account, and hidden subsidies for church space and staff in religious schools are counted, the gap shrinks. Coons says that a voucher's value needs to be no lower than 85 percent of total per-pupil spending in order to stimulate capital investment in new schools. Set it too low, and the result will be simply to fill the handful of empty Catholic-school seats.

The right's claim that vouchers will deliver big savings also ignores the case for spending more in many big cities, where dilapidated buildings may collectively require as much as \$50 billion in repairs. Some public school bureaucracies—Washington, D.C., and St. Louis come to mind—seem so hopeless that it would be senseless to pour new money in until management has improved. But despite run-down buildings and higher proportions of special-needs students, cities such as Philadelphia and Baltimore spend substantially less per pupil than do their states overall.

**D**ISINGENUOUS rhetoric, visceral distrust, maximal posturing, minimal progress. Political debates escape this kind of dead end when grassroots pressure makes the status quo untenable, or when leaders emerge with fresh ways of framing the issues. It's possible that urban schools will fall so far that the poor revolt; or crime, bred by ignorance, might worsen in ways that force society to act. There's a better path to hope for, however, if new leaders can teach us to think differently about today's predicament.

Sounds of rethinking and compromise are in the air. Arthur Levine, the president of Columbia University's Teachers College, is a lifelong liberal and a voucher foe. Yet, frustrated by the seemingly hopeless troubles of inner cities, Levine called last June for a "rescue operation" that would give vouchers to two to three million poor children at the worst urban public schools. "For me," Levine says, "it's the equivalent of Schindler's list." Lisa Graham Keegan, Arizona's superintendent of public instruction and a rising Republican star, calls the property-tax base for school fi-

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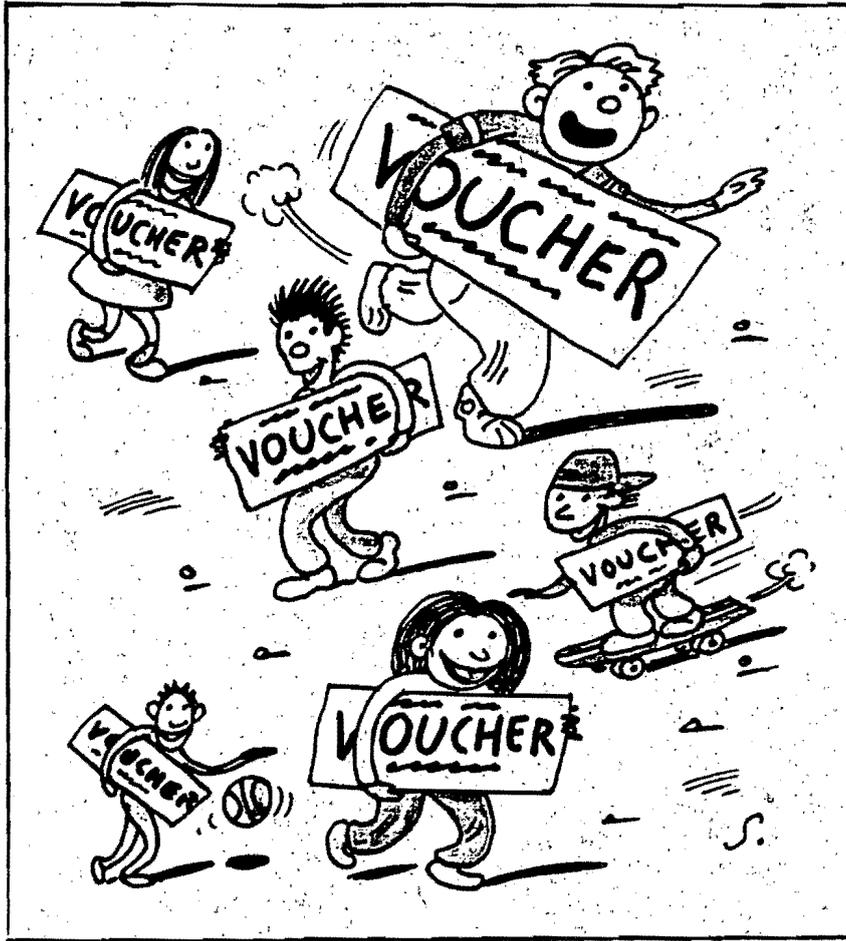
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nance "pernicious" and "wholly unfair." She wants a system of "student-centered funding," in which revenues from a source other than property taxes would be distributed by the state on an equal per-pupil basis through vouchers.

If leading liberals are willing to question the public school monopoly, and prominent conservatives hear the call of justice, the voucher debate has a chance to move forward. The sensible first step would be a much bigger road test. Here's the idea I have put to various players in the debate: Suppose everyone came together and said, Let's take three or four big cities where we agree the public schools are failing. (Leave out dens of mismanagement like Newark and Washington, where spending is high but ineffective.) In these cities we'll raise per-pupil spending by 20 percent, giving urban schools the resources the left says they need, and thus going far to achieve the Coons vision of funding equity. But we'll implement this increase by way of a universal voucher system that finally gives every child a choice. So, for example, in a city that now spends \$5,000 per

pupil, every child would get a \$6,000 voucher.

Such a proposal, serving half a million children, would cost \$660 million a year. If the voucher system were then extended to all six million big-city children (a logical step if results of the trial were promising), the price tag would be \$8 billion a year, or 0.4 percent of federal spending. (For purposes of discussion, I left aside the question of who outside the district would fund the 20 percent increase, though the surplus-rich federal government comes readily to mind.) The responses to this idea suggest how quickly the scale of today's debate could change—and who is responsible if it doesn't.

Jack Coons, the "egalitarian," said it sounds great. Clint Bolick, a conservative lawyer who is active in the voucher movement, also thought it could work—though, he said, the spending increase would mean that "some of my fellow conservatives would have apoplexy." Polly Williams, who led the drive to enact vouchers in Milwaukee, was anxious about extending them to students who

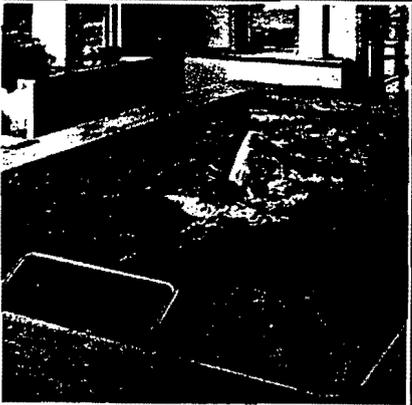
aren't poor, so we agreed to give them only to children eligible for the federal school-lunch program. This would still get vouchers to 78,000 children in Milwaukee instead of the current 6,000, and to four million city children nationwide. We would move pretty far toward universal coverage this way, since, sadly, two out of three city children qualify for school-lunch assistance.

What about the NAACP? To date the organization has welcomed philanthropic efforts, but when public funds are at issue, it stands by the unions. Julian Bond, the chairman of the NAACP, recently called vouchers "pork for private schools." Yet when I asked Kweisi Mfume, the NAACP president, about this proposal, he didn't hesitate. "I don't have a problem with that at all," he said. Mfume says that NAACP opposition has been not ideological but based on three concerns: the association doesn't want programs that leave nearly every child out; it wants accountability to the public on student performance; and it wants an honest approach to higher costs—such as those for transportation—that must be paid to make the system work for poor children. The pilot programs in Milwaukee and Cleveland fail especially on grounds one and three; the bargain I sketched addresses them. Mfume said he was open to the proposal as long as the NAACP's concerns were met, even if that meant taking a stance different from the unions'.

"It's a bad idea," Milton Friedman said at first, arguing that any increase in spending would "fuel the racketeers in the education business." Friedman's point is that raising spending could create further opportunities for profit-hungry operators to take the vouchers and run schools much more efficiently—not to their benefit. Owing to systematic federal overpayments, Medicare HMOs face just such scams in many places today.

But outliers like Washington, D.C., aside, it's not clear that urban schools are overspending. Given that, isn't it worth running a little risk to get a substantial voucher test under way? It seemed that Friedman wouldn't sign on, but toward the end of our discussion he relented. "I'll tell you what I would go for," he said. Friedman has always believed that so many families would flee public schools if given a voucher worth even half what is now spent per pupil that resources for

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each child remaining in the system would rise. (If ten public school children have \$5,000 spent on each of them, and three leave taking \$2,500 each, spending on the seven remaining would rise about 20 percent, to just under \$6,100.) So he would approve of a 20 percent increase in per-pupil spending for those who remained, as long as the voucher was worth only half that. Since Friedman thinks that this 20 percent increase will come over time anyway, he's not compromising his ideals. His principled accommodation is to put his money where his beliefs are and increase spending up front as part of the deal.

But look where we are. Baltimore spends \$6,400 per pupil today—versus \$6,800 spent by Maryland overall. According to Mfume's reasoning, the NAACP would accept a citywide voucher at roughly \$7,600. Friedman could live with \$7,600 for current public school pupils but would want a voucher for departing students at \$3,800. Surely there's a deal to be made here—and a chance, therefore, to help millions of children while meaningfully evaluating voucher efficacy, addressing questions about everything from student achievement to private profiteering.

What about the politicians? Lamar Alexander seems the likeliest to raise these issues thoughtfully in the 2000 election campaign; as a former Tennessee governor and the Secretary of Education under George Bush, he knows more about schooling than any other presidential aspirant. He has also been down this road before. Alexander bears scars from his ill-fated 1992 struggle to enact a voucher test at the federal level. Called the G.I. Bill for Kids, the plan would have spent \$500 million in new federal dollars to give the parents of half a million low- and middle-income children each a \$1,000 voucher to use at the schools of their choice. Alexander wagered (correctly) that conservative groups would be content with tiny sums of new money to get their foot in the door, and (incorrectly) that new cash for schools would be something the unions couldn't be seen opposing. In a Democratic Congress the bill went nowhere. Today Alexander says he would urge states to shift toward child-centered funding. And he'd go to Congress with an updated version of Bush's 1992 bill, featuring \$1,500 per voucher and an overall \$1 billion price tag.

I asked Alexander if he wasn't thinking too small: \$1,500 vouchers would be nowhere near sufficient to spark the creation of new schools. And with vouchers spread thin across the country, he would get no trial of how broad-based choice can improve schooling in a community. Why not try the 20 percent spending boost in exchange for universal vouchers in a few cities?

The voluble Alexander went silent for perhaps fifteen seconds as he considered whether to go on record in favor of a policy that would raise spending substantially—something that conservative primary voters would reject.

At length he said yes. Higher per-pupil spending wouldn't be his preferred solution, of course, but if that's what it took to get a bold voucher plan into failing cities, he'd live with it. "I would go high because the stakes are high," he explained, "and to expose the hypocrisy of the unions. If I told the National Education Association that we'd double it in the five largest cities, they wouldn't take it."

Was he right? I met with Bob Chase, the president of the National Education Association, in the union's headquarters in Washington. He made the familiar case

*Democrats should see large-scale urban voucher programs as an opportunity, not a threat.*



for why vouchers are ineffectual today and would be a threatening distraction for public schools if tried more broadly. Only 25 percent of the adult population has children in the schools, he explained. We need to help the other 75 percent understand why financial support of schools is important. In this regard I sketched the deal: a handful of cities, higher spending, but only through vouchers. My tape recorder captured the staccato response.

"Is there any circumstance under which that would be something that..."

"No."

"... you guys could live with? Why?"

"No."

"Double school spending..."

"No."

"... in inner cities?"

"No."

"Triple it..."

"No."

"... but give them a voucher?"

"Cause, one, that's not going to happen. I'm not going to answer a hypothetical [question] when nothing like that is ever possible."

"But teachers use hypotheticals every day."

"Not in arguments like this we don't. ... It's pure and simply not going to happen. I'm not even going to use the intellectual processes to see if in fact that could work or not work, because it's not going to happen. That's a fact."

Sandra Feldman was similarly unwilling to consider such a plan. If new money is available for cities, both said, it should be spent to improve the existing system. They would fund pay raises to attract teachers to work downtown, turnaround programs for troubled schools, and general urban programs for health, nutrition, and parenting skills. Of course, pay raises—or smaller class sizes, or any specific reform—could happen under vouchers, if that's what schools felt was needed to attract students.

**I**F one believes that urban education won't improve under the same approach that has failed for years, the path to progress through vouchers follows a simple logic. A progressive hand is needed to pursue the benefits of vouchers without risk to the poor. A number of conservatives are open to such efforts if they make possible larger voucher trials. Given the disastrous state of many urban schools, the Democratic Party should be the natural home of this progressive influence. It is not, because teachers' unions loom large in Democratic fundraising and campaigns. Yet the Republicans' commitment to minorities will probably never be trusted to carry this issue alone. And, not unreasonably, Republicans are unlikely to increase spending for urban schools without ensuring that such increases are tied to system-wide reform.

Changing the Democratic Party's approach to vouchers is therefore the only way to do something serious for urban children anytime soon. This conclusion begets another political syllogism, and an opportunity. Most observers believe that if the NAACP embraced vouchers, it would force the unions to reassess their opposition. Teacher intransigence is sustainable only as long as minority leaders support it, because the children whose future is being blighted are mostly black and Hispanic. Yet as Kweisi Mfume makes clear, getting the NAACP to change its stance would require voucher plans much bolder and more comprehensive than today's pilots.

Thus thinking bigger makes progress likelier. "That's why I've taken the more radical side," explains Floyd Flake, who quit Congress to run his church school and pursue these issues. "It's the only way to force the debate."

At some level even the unions know that their stonewalling is indefensible. "I would never argue with an individual parent who wanted to figure out a way to get his or her child into a better situation," Sandra Feldman says. "But to me, as a matter of public policy, that's not a good argument. The objective is to make the schools good—not to escape them."

But what if the ability to escape might help to make the schools better? And what if testing this proposition can't make anyone worse off? Yes, big voucher plans may require an act of faith, but it wouldn't be the first gamble in American education to work. A much smaller federal government rolled the dice on land-grant colleges in the 1860s with only a notion of what would happen; the research they sparked made U.S. agriculture the world's most productive. The G.I. Bill helped to spawn the postwar middle class. The moral urgency of today's voucher gamble is much greater. For all these reasons, Democrats should see large-scale urban voucher programs as an opportunity, not a threat. After all, once they embraced such a grand bargain, Democrats would be in the driver's seat. They retain, at least for now, the moral authority to speak in behalf of the disadvantaged, and Republicans would not be able to shrink from solutions they have long sought. The alternative is a Democratic Party that favors its funders at the expense of its constituents. ☉

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# D.C.'s Schools: Under the Gunderson

## *A Plan for Reforming a System That Seems to Think Poor Kids Can't Learn*

By Diane Ravitch

**L**AST SPRING, when the Department of Education released state and national reading scores, the District of Columbia insisted on keeping its results secret. The city's reading scores, we may safely assume, were bad news.

Over the past decade, the District's public schools have compiled a discouraging record on all kinds of performance measures—from a low graduation rate (fewer than 60 percent of 10th-graders complete high school) to falling enrollments and poor achievement levels. There is broad consensus that something must be done, and soon, but little consensus about what.

Among educators, conventional wisdom holds that the District's poor record is caused by the low socio-economic status of its students. Research consistently shows a close correlation between the income level of parents and the educational performance of their children. There is a tendency to use this connection to rationalize poor performance, thus implying that poverty equals destiny and so no one is to blame for failure.

The challenge to public education today is not to reinforce the correlation between achievement and social class, but to sever it. Schools were created to break the cycle of poverty. Today they must find effective ways of motivating children and preparing them for higher education and high-skill jobs in a sophisticated economy. If the current system is successful for only about half the students, then new approaches must be sought to help everyone else.

Under a legislative proposal shaped by Rep. Steve Gunderson (R-Wis.), the D.C. system has a chance to become a trail blazer in urban education. The Gunderson plan, which passed the House on Nov. 2, wisely realizes there are no panaceas, no magic bullets, no one-size-fits-all reforms that will solve all of education's problems. So instead of one solution, Gunderson offers a

*Diane Ravitch, a historian of education, is senior research scholar at New York University and non-resident senior fellow at the Brookings Institution.*

menu of proposals. And unlike many legislative proposals that are often a grab-bag of disparate ideas, the Gunderson plan would create a coherent system that includes a core curriculum and assessments, scholarships for low-income students, training for low-income parents and new kinds of schools.

As has happened elsewhere around the country, reaction to some of these reforms has been heated, with alarmists warning that public education is in peril. Far from being in peril, public education has long proven to be nearly impervious to any significant reform. The issue is not whether public education will survive—it certainly will—but whether those responsible for the schools are willing to try innovative methods that might help students who are now failing.

**T**he three major structural changes under consideration, in the District and other areas around the country, are charter schools, contracting for instruction and school choice. Experience with these innovations has been limited because of intense political opposition, mainly from teachers' unions. Critics say that it is wrong to try a new strategy unless it has a track record of proven success, yet they simultaneously prevent any new ideas from getting a fair trial. That has left us in a Catch-22, with insufficient information about any of these approaches. Here's what we do know:

■ *Charter schools promise more accountability and less bureaucracy.* The Gunderson plan proposes public charter schools for the District, an approach that 19 state legislatures have also approved. The central idea is to allow existing public schools or newly established schools to break free of the bureaucratic system, manage their own budget, create their own program and establish a distinctive mission. The schools use public funds, do not charge tuition, and receive a renewable charter from a public authority, usually for five years. In exchange for meeting specific performance goals, charter schools are relieved of most state and local mandates and regulations,

except those covering health, safety and civil rights.

By adding an element of accountability, public charter schools actually strengthen the hand of local officials. At present, when a public school performs poorly, it gets more funding; a charter school that performs poorly will risk the loss of its charter. That leaves schools answering directly to the local officials who issue the charter, whether it's the state board of education, a school board or a state university. Under the Gunderson plan, charters would be approved either by the D.C. Board of Education or by a new "charter schools commission" nominated by the secretary of education, appointed by the mayor and confirmed by the City Council. The plan also recommends that the Smithsonian and the Library of Congress consider establishing charter schools.

■ *Public contracting is appealing because it offers a fresh alternative to the status quo.* Public contracting is often referred to as "privatization," but that label is misleading. If a school district sold a school outright to a private company, then the school would be privatized. But if the district signs a contract with a private company, supplies public funds and retains the authority to cancel the arrangement, it is merely contracting out the management of a public service.

Contracting is commonplace in public education. All public schools contract with private organizations for supplies and food; many also contract for such services as transportation, maintenance and security. Some districts contract with private organizations to instruct children with special needs, or to teach reading and foreign languages.

What is new—and controversial—is the practice of contracting with private organizations to administer an entire school. The most prominent organization, Education Alternatives Incorporated (EAI), recently lost a contract to administer nine public schools in Baltimore after refusing the city's request for budget cuts. Though EAI was praised for cleaning up shamefully neglected schools, critics claimed the company failed to improve student achievement.

EAI's biggest error was its failure to develop a good working relationship with the teachers' union.

Several other private organizations, most notably the Edison Project, have won contracts from local boards to create new schools or manage existing ones. Like EAI, they will ultimately be judged on whether student achievement improves. Some states, like New York, do not permit instructional contracting, but the District of Columbia faces no such legal barrier. As Baltimore's experience shows, contracting permits greater accountability for public authorities than the present situation because the contract can be canceled if performance fails to match promises. Since the District already has the authority for contracting, the Gunderson plan is silent on this subject.

■ *School choice gives parents more say in their child's education.* Of all the policy innovations under consideration, the most controversial is choice. Many school districts have grudgingly accepted the idea of letting parents choose among public schools, but staunchly oppose choice that includes private institutions. Critics maintain that giving parents vouchers that they could use to put their children in private schools would destroy public education because many students would abandon the public schools. They also claim that vouchers would hurt the poor because private schools would first select middle-class students to fill their classrooms.

But the clamor for choice continues to grow, in large part because many parents want to be treated as consumers with rights. Advocates of choice also argue that competition would improve the quality of public education.

The choice program making the most headway is not a voucher plan for everyone, but a scholarship program limited to low-income students. Milwaukee's program provides scholarships (of about \$3,200) for poor children to enroll in private or sectarian schools. Unless the program is thrown out by the courts (because of the inclusion of sectarian schools), the school district will provide scholarships this year for about 7,000 students (7 percent of the district's enrollment). Next year, the number of pupils will increase to 15,000. Most of the eligible students are poor, black and from female-headed families. Cleveland is supposed to begin a similar program next September.

The Gunderson plan, like those in Milwaukee and Cleveland, does not provide vouchers. Instead, it is a scholarship pro-

gram for low-income children. These, after all, are the students most at risk of failure. The District plan would provide up to \$3,000 on a sliding scale, based on family income; the money for scholarships would be provided by Congress, not by the District.

Choice scholarships for poor kids eliminate any possibility that the program will benefit the well-to-do, because only low-income students will be eligible to participate. And public education would remain intact because funding would be authorized for only about 1,500 poor youngsters in the first year, and not more than 3,000 in the future.

Should scholarship programs include sectarian schools? Ultimately the courts will decide this question, but higher education offers a model in which students are allowed to use public scholarships to attend public, private and sectarian institutions. Head Start is another program in which government funds follow the student even to sectarian institutions. Wherever public funds are used, the role of government is to accredit institutions that receive scholarship students, and government has the power to remove accreditation from schools that practice racial discrimination or otherwise violate the law.

The only part of the Gunderson plan that has not been approved in the House-Senate conference is the scholarship program for poor kids. Participants expect Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole to resolve this issue. That issue will be voted on separately by the House and the Senate this week.

**T**en years from now, we are likely to have school districts in which public officials oversee a diverse system that includes state schools, charter schools, privately managed public schools and a scholarship program for the poorest children. Public authorities will be responsible for setting standards, closing inadequate schools and authorizing new ones. The ultimate goal must be to draw upon the resources of the entire community so that every child is successfully educated.

Despite what the critics say, public education is not endangered by any of the proposed changes on the table. The real threat to D.C.'s classrooms is the unwillingness of public officials to aggressively shake up and redesign a system in which nearly half of the children never finish high school. Our failure to provide alternative educational programs for these children should shame us all.

BR. —

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Educ. - School choice

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# Business Daily

ay, November 11, 1997

Los Angeles, California  
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NATIONAL ISSUE

## SCHOOL CHOICE SPAWNS REFORMS

### Some Districts Respond To Threat Of Competition

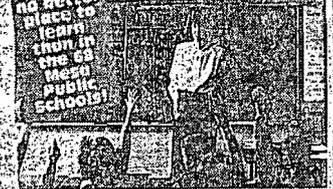
By Laura M. Litvan  
*Investor's Business Daily*

When Mesa, Ariz., residents opened their newspapers one day last summer, they saw something pretty odd—a full-page ad by the local school system touting the benefits of attending the area's public schools.

#### Signs Of Competition

Public schools are advertising for pupils in Mesa, Ariz., where charter schools are attracting students and money

The opportunity for a quality education begins Monday, August 18th. Don't miss out!



Here's what students and parents expect and receive from their public schools.

**MPS**  
MESA PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Source: Mesa Unified School District

"We're not afraid of a little competition," said Judi Willis, a spokeswoman for the Mesa Unified School District. The school system may also put ads on school buses, she says.

Mesa's response is a glimpse of the effects on public schools in places where many charter schools—the most widespread form of school choice—are

now competing for students.

Not only are schools in some areas advertising for students, they are copying popular charter school programs like all-day kindergarten. One Michigan school district has launched broad reforms it says were spawned by rivalry with charter schools.

School-choice fans say these are signs that competition can play a role in improving public schools.

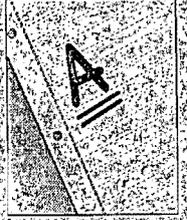
Schools are forced to respond by redesigning programs around what parents want and what kids want, said Bryan Taylor, executive director of the Teach Michigan Education Fund, a research group that backs school choice.

But some school officials argue that competition so far is pushing them away from broad-based reforms and toward specialized programs, splintering resources as they try to mimic the charter schools.

Meanwhile, some education experts say many school systems are already stronger competitors than school-choice advocates like to admit. In recent years, many schools have made key changes, like beefing up math and science classes and adding time to the school day, noted Howard Fuller, director of the Institute for the Transformation of Learning at Marquette University in Milwaukee.

Still, the competition provided by  
*Please flip this section over*

#### WHAT WORKS



No. 24 in an IBD series on education reform

The opportunity for a quality education begins Monday, Aug. 18. Don't miss out! The ad trumpeted: "There's no better place to learn!"

Mesa's 68 public schools, the ad boasted, push basic skills and have the highest SAT scores for college-bound seniors in the region.

Why the ads? The school system has been losing many pupils to 19 local charter schools, which are public schools that run free of school-system red tape.

That means losing money, too. Every student who jumps to a charter school takes \$4,000 in state education money with him.

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PHOTOCOPY PRESERVATION

# NATIONAL ISSUE: School Choice Spawns Reforms

*Continued from front*

charter schools or voucher programs may put schools on notice that they must speed these efforts, Fuller said.

Just the threat of vouchers or charter schools can have some impact on public schools, he said.

So far, some of the biggest changes can be seen in Michigan, where more than 100 charter schools are up and running.

For instance, the public schools in Lansing lost 900 of their students—roughly 5% of the student base—to charter schools last year. Each child took \$6,000 in state funding with him.

The school system countered with a series of reforms, said Rossi Ray Taylor, Lansing's deputy superintendent of instruction.

Months ago, the school district announced tough new goals—like higher test scores and reduced dropout rates—with specific targets in place for the next five years. And it added more all-day kindergarten programs.

General Motors Corp. joined the fray. It offered to give the Lansing schools funding to boost computer and science programs.

The result: The school system lured back 345 students from charter schools this school year.

If we're doing what we need to be doing, parents won't need to look outside of our school district, Taylor said.

In Holland, Mich., school officials sent letters to parents who enrolled their kids in two area charter schools and asked them to rethink their decision.

After losing 100 pupils last year and another 75 this year, the school system also revamped a school-system newsletter to better tout continuing efforts to improve schools.

As a result of charter schools, public schools are having to significantly change the ways they communicate with the public, said Marcia Bishop, Holland schools superintendent.

Meanwhile, Arizona's 200 charter schools are also sparking some change.

Flagstaff's school system last year opened a school within a school for

100 students. They can focus either on performing arts or on math and science. The students have their own areas in a regular school to pursue their specialties.

We did that to stem the flow of students out of the district and to examine what we could do to create alternative settings, said Gary Leatherman, a Flagstaff schools spokesman.

Still, Leatherman says the school system was hurt by the loss of state funds after some 700 kids left to attend eight area charter schools. Last year, the rest of the school system had a \$900,000 budget shortfall.

The school board cut some programs geared toward gifted students and some sports functions.

Leatherman cautions that there's no proof that charter schools are better at teaching kids. And in the meantime, the rivalry is pushing the school system toward specialized approaches, instead of broader reforms, he said.

Some say another type of school choice—voucher programs—sparked action in Milwaukee.

When it became clear that a Milwaukee voucher law would be passed by state lawmakers in April '95, the school system adopted a flurry of reforms, says John Gardner, a school board member there.

It honestly looked to us like we might lose 5,000 to 15,000 students, Gardner said. It shocked us into doing some things we weren't willing to do before.

Among other things, he said, the school board restaffed six poorly performing schools and opened a charter school and eight specialized schools.

The board was helped by language

tacked onto the '96 Wisconsin budget that let Milwaukee make such changes without regard to teacher seniority, as required in a teacher's contract.

But in early '96, a state court stopped the voucher program, pending a challenge from a state teachers union that said the program breached the separation of church and state. The voucher program would let students take taxpayer money to religious schools.

The reform effort has slowed way down since then, Gardner says.

As soon as the threat of actually losing students and money was taken away, we stopped responding, he said. It just proves we need more competition.

Others argue that the delay on vouchers didn't stall the pace of reform. They blame a separate teachers' union suit challenging the Milwaukee school system's use of merit instead of seniority to restructure teaching staffs.

With that legal action hanging over their heads, many board members are wary of pushing more reforms, said Doug Haselow, the school system's lobbyist.

Cleveland also passed a voucher plan. About 3,000 city school students now use vouchers to attend private schools.

But there hasn't been much of a response from the 77,000-pupil public school system.

Rick Ellis, a spokesman for the Cleveland City School District, said the local schools are in the midst of three years of state-ordered reforms. They're so extensive that the voucher program's impact on the city has been overshadowed.

“It honestly looked to us like we might lose 5,000 to 15,000 students. It (school choice) shocked us into doing some things we weren't willing to do before.”

— John Gardner

Board member, Milwaukee public schools

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