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Why Vouchers Aren't Good for the (Re)Public

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Politics has become a negative word. When thinking of politics, some of us may have a mental image of that one relative or friend, who goes on and on at the dinner table about something, to the point that it becomes uncomfortable. Or the TV news that we turn off.

But politics is actually a good word. It comes from the Greek word politikos, which means politēs 'citizen,' and polis 'city.' If interpreted freely, these words basically suggest that people who live in the same area—be it a town or a village—share something in common. They have to interact to make decisions, through some collective process, on what life in the city should look like (Stone, 2011).

Public Schools

Take any public school as an example of politikos: Schools are located in some geographical area. People living in that area elect people onto a school board (assuming there is at least one school in the area), to represent them to make decisions. The local school board decides things like the direction of what is taught in schools in that district by, for example, adopting a curriculum (California School Boards Association, 2007). This is essentially politikos in action – citizens elect fellow citizens to make decisions about schools for the town's children.

Public schools then are pillars of democracy. Schools educate the public through collective decision making so that children become literate, responsible, contributing, civic minded members of their communities.

What Does This Have To Do With Vouchers?

Vouchers refer to parents being given money toward tuition at a private school. (Vouchers are not the same as charter schools which are public schools, but which parents get to choose for their children.) Arguments in favor of vouchers claim that they promote parental school choice, allow for competition that improves public schools, or that private school education is simply superior (e.g., Suarez, 1998).

Regarding the superiority claim, one of the recent main arguments for vouchers has been that if low-income parents send their children to a private school, the children will learn more (Dynarski, 2016). But studies have yielded mixed results on how voucher programs affect student achievement (Center on Education Policy, 2011; Chingos & Peterson, 2015). In Milwaukee, where these programs originated in

the nineties, there was no evidence for higher reading scores (Rouse, 1998), but a longitudinal study found that students who had attended a private school were more likely to graduate from high school and attend college (Wolf et al., 2013). In a New York City study, the results showed that the vouchers had positive impacts on test scores for African American students, but no impacts on test scores for Latino students (Bitler et al., 2015). One explanation for these mixed results, besides technical criticism on how the various studies were conducted (Kruger & Zhu, 2004), is that they may actually reflect whether or not the research was funded and conducted by voucher advocates (Lublenski & Brewer, 2016).

But more recent studies from Louisiana (Abdulkadiroglu, Parthak, & Walters 2015; Mills & Wolf, 2016), and Ohio, and Indiana (Figlio & Karbownik, 2016) actually have shown negative effects on learning for voucher students. Students' achievement, which was considered "average," actually fell from 50th to 34th percentile in math in Louisiana after the first year in a voucher program. In April of this year, a large-scale report from the Institute of Education Sciences (2017) found that D.C. students' achievement was likewise harmed by participation in a voucher program.

These new findings (some of which were done by voucher-friendly organizations themselves) raise some questions on vouchers' effectiveness. Dynarski (2016) suggested one explanation is that public schools have gotten better over time. Since No Child Left Behind, they have been under heavy pressure to improve test scores across a variety of students, while private schools have not been under similar accountability requirements. Hence, randomized group studies of students with similar backgrounds, after two decades of public school accountability policies, suggest that public schools actually fare quite well.

Why Is This Important?

Despite sound research reporting that the achievement gap is narrowing between public and private schools, including for low-income students – in some instances public students even scored above the states' private school students (e.g., Indiana's 4th graders in reading [Dynarski, 2016]) – vouchers remain a favorite policy with the current administration. The President's proposed budget includes a $250 million voucher-grant program, and Secretary of education Betsy DeVos is a long-time proponent and enthusiast of school choice and religious private school vouchers.

Voucher opponents have cited the conflict between separation of church and state, in that public tax payer funds should not go into funding private education. Vouchers have not been an option in California because our state's constitution prevents any public body, from state down to the local school board, to use public money to go to a religious or private school.

The Supreme Court ruled in 2002 that vouchers do not violate the Constitution, since parents (not the school) make the choice on how to use the money given to them. But this may change soon, as the Supreme Court was about to hear another case on the matter. This case before the Court was different, because an elected school board actually created the nation's first school board-approved school voucher program. Students in that district in Colorado could apply for a tuition scholarship to attend a private school of their choice. This case could have overturned the so called "Blaine Amendments" in our state's and many others' constitutions, and pave the way for school boards to pass voucher

programs in all 50 states (Komer & Neily, 2007). In other words, make vouchers possible if a school board so decided.

Wait…what are Blaine Amendments? For those interested in history: The name Blaine Amendment comes from Congressman James Blaine who, back in 1875, proposed an amendment to the Constitution that would have prevented states from funding any religious education. It did not pass back then, but many states included similar provisions in their state constitutions because they believed that public money is for public purposes.

But then the Supreme Court ruled in June 2017 on another private-public school dispute that a faith-based preschool must be granted publicly funded recycled tires for its playground paving, thus rejecting that it would have violated separation of church and state. The Court ended up not hearing the arguments in the Colorado case on whether a publically-elected school board can actually enact voucher programs (even though it was already on the "docket," or the list of cases the Court had agreed to take). Instead it sent the case back to state courts for reconsideration in light of the playground ruling.

Case not closed, in other words.

So What Does This All Mean?

Besides the fact that the Colorado case will most likely end up back in the Supreme Court, many things. First, public schools are just that – they are public. If you do not like the decisions or directions of a school board, members serve a four-year term and can be elected to continue, or voted out (elections are actually staggered so that there are school board elections every two years). Second, public schools are held accountable. Teachers have to hold proper certifications and go through performance reviews. While many of us do not agree with the culture of testing in schools these days, the fact is that test results, among many other district activities and decisions are also made public. Last, and perhaps most importantly, the purpose of public schools is to educate the polity: to ensure that education is provided for every child regardless of their cultural, linguistic, family, and ability backgrounds. The idea behind public schooling is for each student to have an opportunity to reach their potential for the good of the nation as a whole.

Vouchers challenge this. You have to just flip the previous arguments around to see what hidden consequences there are in a voucher program. Private schools are – well – private. They use public money for private enterprises. They do not have to disclose what they teach and how, or who they admit. They set up their own entrance requirements and policies that keep out students whom they do not want – often the most vulnerable students. They can also set up tuition rates so that a voucher covers just part of the annual cost. This automatically excludes students whose families cannot afford to pay the difference (thus controlling who they let in). Regarding parental rights, there are eight states that offer private school voucher programs for students with disabilities, but the parents must waive their special education due process rights to enroll their child. So private schools can do as they please. As John Suarez (1998) put it, it is really the schools doing the choosing, not the parents, regardless of how much "choice" you put in packaging the argument. The public would simply have no monitoring mechanisms of what students are taught, by whom, and whether students actually learn in those schools. There would be no accountability for your tax dollars. Most importantly, the public would have no say on whether those schools systematically discriminated against some students and their families.

Does This Mean That Public Schools Are Perfect?

No, by all means. But you actually have a say. Interestingly, when asked about their own children's public schools, parents are actually satisfied (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). When asked about public schools in general, the same parents rate them lower (Gallup, 2016). So, the parents actually feel that the schools are doing the job in the politiko – in their own community for their own kids.

Now What?

If you have not been interested in education policy before, this might be a time to check out your own school district's website, what their stated mission is, and who currently sits on the school board (the district website has a link for school board members, meeting dates and locations, and minutes). Many Ventura County school boards also include their member bios. Even if you do not have school-aged children, you can vote; after all, schools are public organizations, it is your taxes, it is your community.

The democratic structure of public education is at the core of American values. According to Larry Cuban, a former social studies teacher, superintendent, and Stanford professor, schools' primary duty is to "…seriously and deliberately educate students to think and act democratically inside and outside of classrooms" (2003, p. 47). In other words, public education and publically elected decision-makers – school boards – are the only way to protect the politiko. Or as George Washington put it: "A primary objective should be the education of our youth…who are to be the future guardians of the liberties of the country."

About the Author

Dr. Tiina Itkonen is an Associate Professor of Education and Political Science with over fifteen years of experience in public schools, having served as a special education teacher and a district specialist. She is experienced in positive behavioral supports, inclusive education, collaboration, teacher education, and systemic change. Dr. Itkonen studies interest group behavior in special education as well as education policy and politics.

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