

June 9, 2005

COMMENTARY

## Free to Choose

By **MILTON FRIEDMAN**  
*June 9, 2005; Page A16*

Little did I know when I published an article in 1955 on "The Role of Government in Education" that it would lead to my becoming an activist for a major reform in the organization of schooling, and indeed that my wife and I would be led to establish a foundation to promote parental choice. The original article was not a reaction to a perceived deficiency in schooling. The quality of schooling in the United States then was far better than it is now, and both my wife and I were satisfied with the public schools we had attended. My interest was in the philosophy of a free society. Education was the area that I happened to write on early. I then went on to consider other areas as well. The end result was "Capitalism and Freedom," published seven years later with the education article as one chapter.

With respect to education, I pointed out that government was playing three major roles: (1) legislating compulsory schooling, (2) financing schooling, (3) administering schools. I concluded that there was some justification for compulsory schooling and the financing of schooling, but "the actual administration of educational institutions by the government, the 'nationalization,' as it were, of the bulk of the 'education industry' is much more difficult to justify on [free market] or, so far as I can see, on any other grounds." Yet finance and administration "could readily be separated. Governments could require a minimum of schooling financed by giving the parents vouchers redeemable for a given sum per child per year to be spent on purely educational services. . . . Denationalizing schooling," I went on, "would widen the range of choice available to parents. . . . If present public expenditure were made available to parents regardless of where they send their children, a wide variety of schools would spring up to meet the demand. . . . Here, as in other fields, competitive enterprise is likely to be far more efficient in meeting consumer demand than either nationalized enterprises or enterprises run to serve other purposes."

Though the article, and then "Capitalism and Freedom," generated some academic and popular attention at the time, so far as we know no attempts were made to introduce a system of educational vouchers until the Nixon administration, when the Office of Economic Opportunity took up the idea and offered to finance the actual experiments. One result of that initiative was an ambitious attempt to introduce vouchers in the large cities of New

Hampshire, which appeared to be headed for success until it was aborted by the opposition of the teachers unions and the educational administrators – one of the first instances of the oppositional role they were destined to play in subsequent decades. Another result was an experiment in California's Alum Rock school system involving a choice of schools within a public system.

What really led to increased interest in vouchers was the deterioration of schooling, dating in particular from 1965 when the National Education Association converted itself from a professional association to a trade union. Concern about the quality of education led to the establishment of the National Commission of Excellence in Education, whose final report, "A Nation at Risk," was published in 1983. It used the following quote from Paul Copperman to dramatize its own conclusion:

"Each generation of Americans has outstripped its parents in education, in literacy, and in economic attainment. For the first time in the history of our country, the educational skills of one generation will not surpass, will not equal, will not even approach, those of their parents."

"A Nation at Risk" stimulated much soul-searching and a whole series of major attempts to reform the government educational system. These reforms, however extensive or bold, have, it is widely agreed, had negligible effect on the quality of the public school system. Though spending per pupil has more than doubled since 1970 after allowing for inflation, students continue to rank low in international comparisons; dropout rates are high; scores on SATs and the like have fallen and remain flat. Simple literacy, let alone functional literacy, in the United States is almost surely lower at the beginning of the 21st century than it was a century earlier. And all this is despite a major increase in real spending per student since "A Nation at Risk" was published.

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One result has been experimentation with such alternatives as vouchers, tax credits, and charter schools. Government voucher programs are in effect in a few places (Wisconsin, Ohio, Florida, the District of Columbia); private voucher programs are widespread; tax credits for educational expenses have been adopted in at least three states and tax credit vouchers (tax credits for gifts to scholarship-granting organizations) in three states. In addition, a major legal obstacle to the adoption of vouchers was removed when the Supreme Court affirmed the legality of the Cleveland voucher in 2002. However, all of these programs are limited; taken together they cover only a small fraction of all children in the country.

Throughout this long period, we have been repeatedly frustrated by the gulf between the clear and present need, the burning desire of parents to have more control over the schooling of their children, on the one hand, and the adamant and effective opposition of trade union leaders and

educational administrators to any change that would in any way reduce their control of the educational system.

We have been involved in two initiatives in California to enact a statewide voucher system (in 1993 and 2000). In both cases, the initiatives were carefully drawn up, and the voucher sums moderate. In both cases, nine months or so before the election, public opinion polls recorded a sizable majority in favor of the initiative. In addition, of course, there was a sizable group of fervent supporters, whose hopes ran high of finally getting control of their children's schooling. In each case, about six months before the election, the voucher opponents launched a well-financed and thoroughly unscrupulous campaign against the initiative. Television ads blared that vouchers would break the budget, whereas in fact they would reduce spending since the proposed voucher was to be only a fraction of what government was spending per student. Teachers were induced to send home with their students misleading propaganda against the initiative. Dirty tricks of every variety were financed from a very deep purse. The result was to convert the initial majority into a landslide defeat. This has also occurred in Washington state, Colorado and Michigan. Opposition like this explains why progress has been so slow in such a good cause.

The good news is that, despite these setbacks, public interest in and support for vouchers and tax credits continues to grow. Legislative proposals to channel government funds directly to students rather than to schools are under consideration in something like 20 states. Sooner or later there will be a breakthrough; we shall get a universal voucher plan in one or more states. When we do, a competitive private educational market serving parents who are free to choose the school they believe best for each child will demonstrate how it can revolutionize schooling.

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