

Keep Public Education Public

Why Vouchers Are a Bad Idea

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National School Boards Association
Alexandria, Virginia



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Contents

INTRODUCTION —Anne L. Bryant	1
CHAPTER 1: A Voucher Backgrounder.....	3
CHAPTER 2: The Trouble with Vouchers.....	15
CHAPTER 3: Setting the Record Straight	27
CHAPTER 4: Special Issues	37
CHAPTER 5: Vouchers Via the Tax Code	51
CHAPTER 6: What You Can Do: Your Campaign to Defeat Vouchers.....	61
APPENDICES	
Appendix 1: NSBA/Zobgy International Poll on School Vouchers	69
Appendix 2: NSBA Print Ads	79
Appendix 3: NSBA Voucher Briefs: Sample Op-Eds.....	83
Appendix 4: Talking About Vouchers: Voucher Comments from Some Surprising Sources	89
Appendix 5: Editorial Pages Have Their Say on School Vouchers.....	97
Appendix 6: National Organizations Opposed to Vouchers	101
Appendix 7: National Organizations Supportive of Vouchers.....	105
Appendix 8: The Voters' Choice: History of State Referenda on Vouchers and Tuition Tax Credits.....	109
Appendix 9: How Vouchers Have Failed Students and Taxpayers	111
Appendix 10: Public School Facts: Dispelling Some Common Myths.....	115
Appendix 11: Constitutional Issues: Key Court Decisions on Vouchers and Tuition Tax Credits	121

Introduction

Imagine for a moment a nameless proposal challenging the very basis of public education in America. This proposal is first floated in 1955, and during the next half-century, American voters reject this scheme and variations of it every single time it is proposed. Nearly 80 percent of the nation's state legislatures reject it. The United States Senate and House of Representatives reject it a number of times. In the few locations that experiment with it, credible research to determine whether it raises student achievement is inconclusive, at best.

Although that is the unimpressive tale of an education concept we all know as “school vouchers,” the idea continues to spark fierce debate among lawmakers. This is due, in no small measure, to a tiny, but well-funded and vocal, group of advocates.

In 1998, the National School Boards Association (NSBA) published a “voucher toolkit” called *Why Vouchers Won't Work*. At that time, only two tax-funded voucher programs existed—in Cleveland and Milwaukee. By early 2003, the voucher map had changed slightly, with Florida enacting a statewide program in 1999 and Colorado enacting one in 2003. The voucher movement received a boost in June 2002, however, when the U.S. Supreme Court, in a 5-4 decision in *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*, ruled that the Cleveland program does not violate the U.S. Constitution's Establishment Clause. This ruling does not eliminate any of the practical and policy flaws that routinely lead legislators and the public to reject vouchers, but it does add fuel to the voucher debate, and we can now expect it to grow even more intense.

Although vouchers have spread slowly, tuition tax credits, a variation on vouchers in which parents are allowed a tax break for private school expenses, have fared slightly better in recent years. By early 2003, six states were operating tuition tax credits or similar programs. In addition, the enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2002 puts a spotlight on the performance of every public school across the country, mandates public school choice in some instances, and adds another dimension to this debate.

NSBA opposes school vouchers and other plans to divert public dollars from the public schools to private and religious ones. This is nothing new. For years, school board delegates from across the nation have regularly passed strong resolutions declaring NSBA's opposition.

To counter efforts by voucher advocates, NSBA launched the Voucher Strategy Center in 2000. This information clearinghouse, which includes a detailed Web site (www.nsba.org/novouchers), provides current information, such as the status of legislation, research findings, and other developments regarding vouchers, tuition tax credits, and similar measures. It also provides advice about strategies that will help state school boards associations and local school boards defeat measures that undermine public education.

About This Book

Keep Public Education Public, which was written by Marcus Egan, director of NSBA's Voucher Strategy Center, is another resource designed to help local school leaders, state school boards associations, and anyone else interested in defeating vouchers make their case accurately and effectively. Building on the 1998 toolkit by NSBA Associate Executive Director Michael A. Resnick, this book summarizes the many lessons learned and resources collected through years of studying vouchers and presents an overview of the rise of tuition tax credits.

In recognition of the speed with which the education landscape is changing, this new toolkit is intended to be a dynamic, living document that will frequently direct readers to NSBA's Voucher Strategy Center Web site for the most current information.

At the end of certain chapters, you will find a reference to the Web site, where you can access updated information. For example, while the arguments against vouchers today have changed little over the years, evidence to bolster those points grows as existing programs develop and new proposals are made. Having current facts will strengthen your case.

The book closes with several appendices that contain pertinent and more detailed information to supplement your overall campaign.

While the noise surrounding vouchers and tuition tax credits has increased, the public—as is clear from the fate of various voucher campaigns—remains largely opposed to diverting public dollars from its public schools. Public school leaders know the vital role public education plays in the success of our democracy, and they remain vigilant to “keep public education public.”

Anne L. Bryant
Executive Director
National School Boards Association

A Voucher Backgrounder

Few discussions of American K-12 education can get very far today without a mention of the “V” word, *vouchers*. Yet many Americans know little, if anything, about vouchers.¹ Evidence from ballot initiatives and public opinion polls strongly suggests that the *more* the public learns about vouchers, the *less* it likes them. That makes it incumbent on public school leaders to educate the public and elected officials about the issue. Besides knowing the arguments for and against vouchers, public school leaders should be familiar with how voucher programs work and the history of the voucher movement. This section of the toolkit is a voucher primer, and it answers the following questions:

- What are vouchers and who is eligible for them?
- What is the origin of the voucher movement?
- Who supports vouchers and why?
- What do recent trends in the voucher movement suggest about the direction in which it is heading?

What Are Vouchers and Who Is Eligible for Them?

A school voucher is taxpayer money, typically earmarked for public education, that is diverted to pay for part or all of a child’s tuition at a parochial or other private school. For example, the original Florida voucher program called for the state to transfer the basic per-student allocation (a combination of state and local funds) from a student’s public school district to the private school attended by the student.

Tax-funded voucher programs can be established either through an act of a state legislature or the U.S. Congress or by a public referendum. As of early 2003, all the nation’s existing voucher programs had been enacted by state legislatures. (See also Chapter 4.) Voters, on the other hand, have soundly rejected *every* voucher proposal that has appeared on a public ballot, with the margins of defeat expanding over the years. (See also Chapter 2 and Appendix 8.)

How much is a voucher worth? The dollar amount of a school voucher varies according to the program. It can equal the per-pupil state and/or local funding for public school students, but it may be less. For example, in 2002, Cleveland’s vouchers ranged from about \$1,875 to \$2,250 per student per year, depending on family income. Milwaukee’s vouchers are worth significantly more— \$5,783 in 2002-03.

Who is eligible to receive a voucher? Again, voucher eligibility depends on how the program is structured. Voucher traditionalists, such as Milton Friedman, who, in fact, originated the idea, are strong supporters of *universal vouchers*. This means that any child—regardless of

family income, residency, or the school currently attended—would be eligible for a tax-funded voucher. In other words, a child from a family of multimillionaires who is a student at an elite prep school would be just as eligible for a voucher (if the school participated in the program) as a child from a family with an income below the federal poverty level.

None of the existing voucher programs is a universal program. However, universal voucher programs have been proposed, most notably in California in 2000. The California ballot initiative, known as Proposition 38, would have granted a voucher worth \$4,000 a year to any K-12 student in the state, including students already attending private schools. Voters soundly rejected the proposal, with 71 percent casting a “no” vote.

On the other hand, some voucher advocates push for *targeted voucher* programs. These programs limit—or prioritize—student eligibility on the basis of factors such as family income, residency, or the performance of the public school the child attends. For example, the Milwaukee voucher program requires that a child be a resident of the city and that the child’s family’s income not exceed 175 percent of the federal poverty level. Vouchers can go to students who leave a Milwaukee public school for a private school that accepts vouchers or to students who already attend a participating private school.

Cleveland’s program is similar. It, too, is open only to Cleveland residents, with priority going to students from low-income families (less than 200 percent of the federal poverty level), although children from families with higher incomes can—and do—receive vouchers. As in Milwaukee, current private school students also are eligible for vouchers.

Although eligibility for Florida’s statewide voucher program is not based on family income, this program also can be considered a targeted program. Students who attend a public school that receives a grade of “F” on state assessments twice in a four-year period are eligible to receive a voucher. Since the program began in 1999, only 12 schools have scored poorly enough to qualify their students for vouchers, and, of the qualified students, very few have claimed their vouchers and transferred to private schools. (For more information on the Cleveland, Milwaukee, and Florida programs, see Chapter 4.)

What makes a school eligible to accept voucher students? This depends on the structure of the program. And, since private schools are not required to take part, student eligibility is not the only issue: Participation also depends on a school’s willingness to accept voucher students. In addition, lawmakers may place some restrictions on school eligibility. Only nonsectarian private schools were allowed to participate in Milwaukee’s original voucher program. The state legislature later dropped that requirement, and religious schools joined the program in 1998, significantly boosting the program’s enrollment.

Both the Cleveland and Florida programs allow religious and nonsectarian private schools to participate, provided they meet certain minimal requirements. They also permit public schools to accept vouchers. In Cleveland, public schools in districts adjacent to the city are

eligible, although none has chosen to participate. Undoubtedly this is due, at least in part, to the fact that each of the nearby districts spends, on average, more than \$9,000 per student, whereas the maximum voucher is \$2,250.² Furthermore, the state requires public schools to charge tuition to nonresident students, which is, on average, more than three times the amount of the voucher.³

Florida, which also allows public schools to accept voucher students, requires that these schools meet a state standard of “C” or better. Ironically, there is no such requirement for private schools that wish to participate in the voucher program.

What Is the Origin of the Voucher Movement?

The father of the voucher movement, free-market economist Milton Friedman, first proposed the idea in 1955.⁴ Friedman suggested that the government give parents who sent their child to a private school the same amount of money as that spent on a public school student. Friedman, like some current voucher proponents, believes that the best way of improving American K-12 education is to make the nation’s education system into an education marketplace. In this marketplace, tax dollars would be permitted to flow into religious and other private schools, as well as public schools, and the power to direct these dollars would be in the hands of parents alone. Such an approach would, of course, significantly reduce the role of government in K-12 education and limit the public oversight.

At about the time Friedman unveiled his proposal to change the shape of public education, the nation was wrestling with the most significant education-related decision the U.S. Supreme Court had ever made. The high court’s unanimous 1954 ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* aimed to redress the inequalities brought about by school segregation. Following the *Brown* decision, some communities began subsidizing—with tax dollars—private academies to which some whites had fled in defiance of court-mandated integration. One of the most extreme cases involved the closing down of public schools in Prince Edward County, Virginia, where public funds were used to support “whites only” schools.⁵

Generally, Friedman’s voucher idea did not catch on and, for the most part, it lay dormant until the 1980s, when the U.S. Department of Education released a report, ominously entitled *A Nation At Risk*. According to this report, America’s public schools had so deteriorated that the country’s economic, industrial, and technological future was in jeopardy. The report concluded with the dramatic words, “the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and a people,” and it added a bit of war rhetoric for a final flourish: “We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament.”⁶

Over the next decade, *A Nation At Risk* led to a national push for raising education standards in public schools, with the result that 49 states adopted new and more rigorous standards for

student achievement. At the same time, the report provided ammunition for a political attack on public schools and their perceived failures. In fact, just days after the report's release, advocates of federal tuition tax credits, testifying before a Congressional committee, used the report to support their call for a voucher-like plan.⁷ Their proposal, like so many after it, failed, but a revived voucher movement initiated an all-out assault on public schools that continues to this day. (See Appendix 10.)

Who Supports Vouchers and Why?

Individuals may differ in their reasons for supporting vouchers, but the voucher lobby largely consists of four key groups: funders, think tanks, researchers, and organizations that seek to build grassroots support. Those four groups, in combination, maintain the seemingly constant drumbeat of support for vouchers and seek to influence a fifth—clearly the most crucial—group: parents.

The people with the money. A small group of exceptionally wealthy individuals has helped to bankroll the voucher movement, spending hundreds of millions of dollars on ad campaigns, studies, and privately funded voucher programs and providing financial support to many of the advocacy groups that preach the voucher gospel. In some instances, these multimillionaires have bypassed state legislatures and taken their cause straight to the voters.

Two such individuals are Tim Draper and Dick DeVos. Draper, a multimillionaire venture capitalist, successfully placed a universal voucher proposal on California's ballot in 2000. Proposition 38, which soon became known as the Draper Initiative, proposed offering a tuition voucher worth \$4,000 a year to any student in the state. Draper boasted that he would match or outspend the well-financed voucher opponents—chiefly the teachers' unions—and he made good on the promise, spending more than \$23 million of his own fortune, along with some \$2 million from his father, also a venture capitalist. In addition, the Draper Initiative received more than \$1 million from Jerry Perenchio, the CEO and chairman of the board of Univision, a Hispanic media company.⁸

All told, the Draper campaign spent more than \$30 million—a figure matched by voucher opponents.⁹ When the ballots were counted, however, it turned out that voters had rejected the proposition 71 percent to 29 percent. Vouchers had garnered only 1 percent of the votes for every million dollars its supporters had spent. Despite the clear message sent by voters, Draper has hinted that he may push for another voucher referendum—in California or elsewhere—down the line.

Meanwhile, halfway across the nation, Dick DeVos, former president of the direct-marketing firm Amway, succeeded in placing a voucher initiative on Michigan's 2000 ballot and was the chief financial supporter of that campaign. Unlike California's Proposition 38, the Michigan voucher plan, known as Proposal 1, was initially targeted at "failing" school districts.

However, the proposal allowed for vouchers to be expanded statewide, depending on the support in local communities. DeVos spent \$4.75 million on the campaign, and his contribution was augmented by \$2 million from another prominent voucher advocate, John Walton, heir to the Wal-Mart fortune.¹⁰

In all, the Michigan pro-voucher campaign spent nearly \$13 million, more than twice what voucher opponents spent.¹¹ But, despite the fact that it proposed targeted vouchers rather than the more radical, and expensive, universal vouchers—and despite the fact that it dramatically outspent opponents—DeVos’s voucher plan suffered a fate nearly identical to Draper’s, losing 69 percent to 31 percent. Like Draper, DeVos has pledged to continue working for vouchers.

DeVos’s wife, Betsy, head of the Michigan Republican Party, was an important figure in the 2000 campaign for vouchers and subsequently launched a pair of pro-voucher, pro-tuition tax credit organizations. She chairs one of them, Choices for Children, which she describes as an “education reform think-tank” that promotes school privatization issues.¹² When the organization was created in 2001, it expected to operate with about a \$1 million budget.¹³ The other organization, the Great Lakes Educational Project, is a political action committee aimed at recruiting and electing pro-voucher, pro-tuition tax credit candidates to political office in Michigan. In 2002, this committee endorsed candidates for governor, the state legislature, and even an appeals court judgeship. Although Dick and Betsy DeVos are based in Michigan, they are among the nation’s leading voucher advocates.

One of the voucher movement’s most generous financial supporters is Wal-Mart heir John Walton. In addition to contributing to ballot initiatives, such as the Michigan proposal, Walton has donated to the political campaigns of voucher advocates, even including a candidate for the Denver school board in 2001. The candidate lost by a wide margin.¹⁴

In 1998, Walton and Wall Street financier Ted Forstmann approached voucher advocacy from a slightly different angle when they founded the Children’s Scholarship Fund. A national program with operations in 43 cities, this organization offers vouchers that are *privately* funded. Thus far, it has awarded approximately \$165 million in vouchers to 34,000 students so they can attend private and religious schools.¹⁵ The Walton Family Foundation has also contributed generously to two nationwide, privately financed voucher programs. Supporters believe these privately funded voucher programs will help to convince the public about the soundness of the voucher approach and increase the likelihood that publicly funded vouchers will become acceptable to voters.

Ted Forstmann also engages in out-and-out advocacy. His Campaign for America’s Children spent \$20 million on a series of television and print advertisements in numerous states preceding and following the 2000 elections.¹⁶ The ads were sharply critical of U.S. public schools and promoted vouchers, although they used the more broadly acceptable term

“parental choice.” One ad came under attack for using unsubstantiated information about America’s public schools.¹⁷

Other foundations that contribute substantial sums of money to voucher advocacy groups and pro-voucher researchers include the Milton and Rose D. Friedman Foundation, the Bradley Foundation, and the Scaife Family Foundation. The Friedman Foundation continues Milton Friedman’s voucher advocacy work, while the Milwaukee-based Bradley Foundation helps to fund think tanks and other voucher advocacy groups. The Scaife Family Foundation—headed by Richard Mellon Scaife, heir to the Mellon family fortune—also helps fund think tanks that support vouchers, as well as the Institute for Justice, a law firm known for pro-voucher litigation.

Pro-voucher think tanks. These organizations—which are media-savvy and have important political connections—coordinate and commission research reports; write op-eds, letters to the editor, and policy papers; and host public forums to promote vouchers. They help keep vouchers in the news and are essential to advancing the voucher agenda.

Two of the more influential think tanks are based in Washington, D.C. The Heritage Foundation, just a few blocks from the U.S. Capitol, promotes public policies based on the principles of free enterprise and limited government. On education, it maintains that efforts to raise student achievement will succeed only if they include “school choice,” i.e., vouchers and tuition tax credits. Money from Richard Mellon Scaife helped launch the Heritage Foundation, and he is vice-chairman of its board. The Heritage Foundation also is the beneficiary of grants from the Bradley Foundation and DeVos’s Amway Corp.

Another leading think tank based in D.C. is the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute. A strong proponent of limited government, the Cato Institute is particularly supportive of tuition tax-credits, although it supports tax-funded vouchers as well. Ted Forstmann is a member of Cato’s board of directors.

New York City’s Manhattan Institute supports market-based education reform, including vouchers and tuition tax credits and is the source of many pro-voucher studies. Its board of trustees includes individuals from prominent publications like *Newsweek*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Weekly Standard*.

Chicago’s Heartland Institute, also considered a libertarian-leaning group, conducts and disseminates research on school privatization issues such as vouchers and tuition tax credits. It also publishes a monthly newspaper, *School Reform News*, which provides a forum for pro-voucher articles, editorials, and research. The *News* boasts a circulation of 45,000, which includes, according to its promotional materials, every elected official, both state and national, in the United States.¹⁸ Other voucher-backers that provide grants to the Heartland Institute include the Bradley Foundation and the Sarah Scaife Foundation, which is an offshoot of the Scaife Family Foundation.¹⁹

The Heartland Institute made news in 2001 during the New Jersey governor's race. The losing candidate promoted a tuition tax credit plan that promised billion-dollar savings to state taxpayers because of the predicted flood of students who would be enticed to transfer from public schools to private schools. The plan's numbers were based on a Heartland Institute study, but, when the bipartisan New Jersey Legislative Fiscal Office reviewed the plan, it discovered the study had "dramatically inflated scholarship revenues that would be generated," double-counted the wealthiest taxpayers, overestimated the number of taxpayers who would contribute to the program, and overestimated the number of students who could transfer. In fact, the fiscal office estimated that, instead of saving taxpayers money, the plan's net cost to the state would be \$199 million a year.²⁰

(For a more complete list of organizations that support—or oppose—the voucher movement, see Appendices 6 and 7.)

Pro-voucher research. Voucher advocates produce and disseminate numerous studies that support their contentions about vouchers, but their research methods and conclusions often are challenged by other scholars in the field. Chief among current voucher researchers are Paul Peterson and Jay Greene. Peterson, a Harvard University professor, openly acknowledges his support for school vouchers and has received more than a million dollars from voucher proponents to conduct studies on existing programs.

One of the most prolific writers on the subject of vouchers, Peterson has produced numerous studies and recently coauthored a book, *The Education Gap*, claiming that vouchers might help to close the achievement gap between white and African-American students. Other researchers and nonpartisan organizations, such as the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO), have challenged the validity of Peterson's findings; and his studies on the Milwaukee and Cleveland voucher programs are at odds with the official, state-mandated evaluations that have been conducted on those programs. However, many of the organizations that make up the voucher lobby fund and publish Peterson's work and provide him with forums for discussing his pro-voucher findings.

Another high-profile voucher researcher is Jay Greene, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute. Greene has collaborated with Peterson on some studies, and he led a much-publicized but later much-criticized study of Florida's voucher program. Greene's study claimed that the mere threat of vouchers had motivated public schools to raise test scores and, by implication, to improve student learning. A long line of other researchers discounted Greene's conclusions, noting, for example, that Florida's lowest-performing schools had also made sizeable test score gains in the years before the voucher program even existed.²¹

(For a more in-depth look at research on voucher programs, see Chapter 4.)

Cultivating the grassroots. In recent years, the voucher movement has attempted to reach beyond the boardrooms of think tanks and foundations to create a grassroots network of activists.

Among the leaders in this endeavor has been the Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO), established in 2000 by Howard Fuller, a former superintendent of the Milwaukee public schools, with financial backing from groups like the Bradley Foundation, the Walton Family Foundation, and the Milton and Rose D. Friedman Foundation. BAEO has become a top voice for targeted voucher programs and has generated media attention with a series of provocative TV, radio, and print advertisements featuring parents whose children have used vouchers. It is reported that BAEO spent at least \$6 million on advertising in 2001 alone.²² With its name recognition on the rise, BAEO plans to open local chapters in 33 cities in 25 states.²³

Also working to build community-based support for vouchers is Children First America, which is headquartered in Bentonville, Arkansas. Like Forstmann's and Walton's Children's Scholarship Fund, it provides financial and technical assistance to privately funded voucher programs, and it has some 100 programs operating nationwide, often in urban areas. Between 1999 and 2001, Children First America received more than \$15 million from the Walton Family Foundation.²⁴ The organization's board of directors includes John Walton, Betsy DeVos, and David Brennan, one of the chief architects of the Cleveland voucher program. Supporters consider privately funded voucher programs a step toward the goal of tax-funded voucher programs. In fact, Children First America acknowledges that its work in Florida was done with an eye toward creating pressure for a taxpayer-funded program, which the legislature ultimately enacted.²⁵

Spurred by groups such as BAEO, organized voucher advocates have turned up their efforts in recent years to tap into the desires of those parents who, for educational, social, or religious reasons, may want to transfer their children to private schools—or to continue sending them to private schools but to do so with tax dollars.

Divided they fall? While it is clear that a strong voucher lobby exists, it is also clear that the motivations and goals of its various members often diverge. As longtime voucher advocate Myron Lieberman wrote in the spring 2002 issue of *The Public Interest*, the voucher movement remains today as “divided over its goals and strategies” as ever.²⁶

For example, some of the think tanks and key contributors tout vouchers and tuition tax credits as the only way to introduce a free-market dynamic into K-12 education, which, they contend, will lead to better education for all.

For others, the motivation is to reduce, if not completely eliminate, the role of government in education—these are the people who speak derisively of “government schools.” Some would like to abolish the U.S. Department of Education. Others focus on the decrease in

government spending that they insist would come with vouchers and therefore support the movement for its perceived economic benefits to taxpayers.

Many of the groups that beat the drums for vouchers and tuition tax credits are fierce critics of the teachers' unions and the education "establishment." They believe that a proliferation of voucher programs would reduce the political power of teachers' unions by reducing their membership and, thus, their money. The anti-unionists' motivation for supporting vouchers, in other words, may have less to do with helping children than with winning a political battle.

But perhaps the most critical difference of opinion in the voucher movement is about who should be eligible for vouchers. Some people who want universal voucher programs are willing to support—at least in the short-term—targeted programs because they see these programs as a way of moving toward their ultimate goal. Others, like Howard Fuller and BAEQ, say they support only voucher programs targeted to low-income children. The disagreement within the voucher movement about who should be eligible for vouchers is probably one of the largest obstacles to expanding voucher programs. If voucher supporters can't agree among themselves about this central issue, how likely are they to convince an already skeptical public?

What Are the Recent Trends in the Voucher Movement?

There is no question that Milton Friedman's original proposal for vouchers has undergone a number of changes in the years since 1955. Because vouchers are a political issue, the arguments in favor of vouchers and the proposals themselves often are shaped to elicit more support among the public and elected officials. But the track record suggests that voucher advocates still haven't found the right formula.

Talk about vouchers in recent years has centered as much on the perceived failures of public schools as on the perceived advantages of vouchers. The belief seems to be that if enough members of the public—or enough parents—believe that public schools are not getting the job done, they may be willing to try any alternative, even one that remains largely unproven.

That seems to be the strategy voucher supporters count on when they approach the African-American community. But despite the probable appeal of vouchers to a group that has, in fact, often been poorly served by public education, African-American support for vouchers is soft. David Bositis of the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, which conducts an annual survey of African-American opinion, puts it this way: "Black support for vouchers is mainly a rejection of the status quo—that is, poorly performing schools and students—rather than an endorsement of this particular reform."²⁷ And other surveys have shown that African Americans want to see the public schools improved and give stronger support to reform

strategies other than vouchers that are designed to do that. (See also Appendix 1 for more information.)

This continuing preference for public education, despite its frequent bad press, is also evident, with a difference, in the annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools. This representative cross-section of Americans routinely reveals that people have generally positive views about their own public schools—with which they are familiar—while believing that public schools elsewhere—which they've only heard about—may be less satisfactory.

Targeted programs. In the last few years, some 30 state legislatures have entertained voucher bills, and most have been for targeted programs, at least initially. A number of these proposals have used the Florida program, which ties vouchers to poor performance on state assessments, as a model. For example, a bill in Arkansas in 2001 would have authorized vouchers for students in any district identified as low performing. Several bills in Connecticut proposed vouchers for students who attend schools “in need of improvement.” In Washington State, a bill introduced in 2001 proposed a \$4,000-a-year voucher for students enrolled in low-performing public schools.

Many targeted programs are attached to urban and predominantly minority school districts—like Cleveland and Milwaukee—where student achievement lags behind that of other districts around the state. Parents whose children go to these schools may be more likely than middle-class suburbanites to welcome vouchers. And middle-class voters may well be persuaded that by supporting vouchers they are doing something altruistic for families whose children are “stuck” in low-performing schools.

Shhh...don't say “vouchers.” People who oppose vouchers find a rueful humor in the efforts of voucher advocates to introduce voucher legislation without actually using the word “vouchers.” Convinced that the public's opposition and skepticism has more to do with the word than with the concept (or hoping to pull the wool over the eyes of the unwary), recent bills have replaced the word “vouchers” with clever euphemisms.

A favorite replacement is “opportunity scholarship,” which happens to be the official title of Florida's statewide voucher program. Other euphemisms include “child-centered scholarships,” “learning endowments,” “alternative education grants,” “education certificates,” “student improvement tuition scholarships,” and “academic passports.” These terms all focus on the supposed result of the voucher rather than the actual mechanism or the fact that taxpayer money is used to send students to private schools.

Voucher advocates also have tried to muddy the waters by vaguely referring to “school choice” or “parental choice,” either of which can include programs that also are supported by voucher opponents—for example, public school choice or inter- and intra-district transfers, charter schools, or magnet schools. The use of the term “choice” is often misleading because

it implies that parents will be able to enroll their children in whatever school they wish. This ignores the fact that many private schools will not participate in a voucher program, and the ones that do may have limited vacancies and may be free to continue selective admissions policies.

The tuition tax credit bandwagon. Although many voucher supporters also favor tuition tax credits, recently some advocates have been expending more of their energy in pushing the latter. While there are various reasons for this, one clear explanation is that tuition tax credit bills have been more likely to pass. Tuition tax credits are by no means a shoo-in for passage, however, as most lawmakers consider them to be vouchers wrapped in a different package. In fact, in recent years, nearly as many state legislatures have considered—and rejected—tuition tax credit bills as voucher bills. Nonetheless, by early 2003, nearly twice as many states had enacted a tuition tax credit program as a voucher program.

(For a detailed analysis of tuition tax credits, see Chapter 5.)

Endnotes

¹ Public Agenda, *On Thin Ice*, 1999.

² Brief of Amici Curiae, Ohio School Boards Association, et al. to U.S. Supreme Court in *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*, Dec. 14, 2001.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Tamara Henry, "Friedman: 'Father of Vouchers,'" *USA Today*, May 20, 2002.

⁵ Remarks made by Stephen Adams, superintendent of the *Brown v. Board of Education* National Historic Site, May 17, 2001.

⁶ *A Nation at Risk*, National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983.

⁷ "Tax Credit Debate Shaped by Report of Bell Committee," *Education Week*, May 4, 1983.

⁸ "Fund raising for three 2000 school initiatives tops \$116 million," Associated Press, Feb. 6, 2001. Spending totals from "Vouchers: Who's Behind It All?" American Association of School Administrators, report accessed online, www.aasa.org, March 26, 2002.

⁹ "Vouchers: Who's Behind It All?"

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ "Debacle at the Voucher Frontiers," *The Washington Times*, Nov. 10, 2000; "Educators Seek Voucher Backers' Help," *The Detroit News*, Nov. 15, 2000.

¹² "DeVos Gets Ready to Do Political Battle," *The Detroit News*, March 29, 2001.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ "Woodward Returns to DPS Board," *The Denver Post*, Nov. 7, 2001.

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