

A P P E N D I X 9

**How Vouchers Have Failed Students
and Taxpayers**

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Although only four publicly funded voucher programs with about 25,000 students currently exist in the United States, instances of fraud, safety violations, and lack of educational services in voucher schools are both plentiful and shocking. Up to half a dozen voucher schools have gone out of business, some in the middle of a school year, costing about 600 students lost education time and taxpayers millions of dollars.

Cleveland

- The Islamic Academy School of Arts and Sciences employed a teacher convicted of murder and operated in a dangerous run-down building. The school enrolled 100 students and claimed \$268,000 in taxpayer money. The 110-year-old building had no fire alarm, no sprinkler system, broken windows, lead paint flaking off the walls at dangerous levels, and little, if any, heat in the winter. Academically, two-thirds of the school's teachers were unlicensed, including one who had been convicted of first-degree murder for a barroom shooting. The school's superintendent said she knew of the teacher's murder and drug convictions but was satisfied that he had rehabilitated himself. "I trust him," she said. (*"Murderer on Staff of State-Funded Private School,"* Cleveland Plain Dealer, July 1, 1999.)
- The Golden Christian Academy, which operated for two years and received \$150,000 for 83 students, relied on education videos as its method of classroom instruction. It also lacked fire safety certificates, student immunization records, and tests for lead-based paint. The school's director boasted, "We're the only video school in Cleveland." (*"Voucher School Relies on Videos as Teachers,"* Cleveland Plain Dealer, July 10, 1999.)

Milwaukee

- The Juanita Virgil Academy went bankrupt and closed in the middle of a school year. Most of the school's 71 students then enrolled in the Milwaukee Public Schools. Parents complained about food service, lack of textbooks and materials, overcrowded classrooms, and a major lack of discipline. (*John F. Witte, The Market Approach to Education: An Analysis of America's First Voucher Program, 2000.*)
- Two other Milwaukee voucher schools, enrolling 356 students, closed in the middle of a school year while their directors faced criminal charges. The head of Exito High School was charged on several criminal counts, including drug charges and embezzling funds. He fled the state but was later caught, and found guilty of falsifying enrollment figures to receive more tax dollars from the state. The founder and direc-

tor of Milwaukee Preparatory was charged with mishandling public funds and fraud. He, too, fled the state but was later arrested. He later was found innocent in a fraud trial. Wisconsin taxpayers paid the two schools an estimated \$390,000 for education services never provided. (*John F. Witte, The Market Approach to Education: An Analysis of America's First Voucher Program, 2000; "Playing by Different Rules," Church & State, Nov. 1, 2001.*)

- The chief executive officer of Alex's Academics of Excellence was convicted of tax fraud. During his trial, the public learned he also had been convicted of raping a woman at knifepoint and of burglary. When asked if a convicted rapist should be near schoolchildren, the school's principal replied, "Let me get back to you on that one." The judge who presided over the fraud trial said, "It seems that [the voucher program] is easy pickings for people who are not inclined to be honest." (*"Voucher Programs Pose Unique Set of Challenges," Education Week, May 17, 2000; "Judge Sentences Choice School's CEO, a Convicted Rapist, for Tax Fraud," Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, May 4, 2000.*)
- A former teacher at the Woodson Academy voucher school came within days of receiving \$141,800 (he would have pocketed more than a half million dollars for the entire school year) from the state for his own voucher school, the Sensas-Utcha Institute for Holistic Learning. The man boasts that he speaks 28 languages, can read books simply by laying his hands on them, and has a doctorate in metaphysics from a Minnesota college that advertises its \$199 Ph.D. program online. His application to the state indicated 131 students had applied. He told one parent that children could stay at home and not attend class but he would mark them "present" anyway. The Institute was to operate out of the man's three-bedroom 1903 house, which had no heat or electricity, but ultimately failed to open when the city refused to grant him a building occupancy permit. The city permit only became a minimal requirement in 2000—nine years after the voucher program began. (*"Choice School Found to be Empty Promise," Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, Sept. 22, 2000; "State Taking a Harder Line on Milwaukee Choice Schools," Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, Sept. 20, 2000.*)

Florida

- Despite a laundry list of problems, the W.J. Redmond Christian Academy in Palm Beach collected \$424,000 in tax money from the state's voucher program for students with disabilities. The state sent voucher checks to five different addresses, including the school owner's home, a motel, and an empty church hall. It continued to send voucher checks even though many students' records were incomplete and some were not even qualified to be in the program. The state had trouble locating children who were listed as students in the school, possibly because as many as a third of the students returned to public schools. A grocery store clerk even complained to the state that the school's principal was trying to cash voucher checks. Parents repeatedly told state officials the school had no textbooks and that all the children, from kindergartners to 12th-graders, were lumped in one classroom. (*"Control Limited in State Voucher Program," Sun-Sentinel, Oct. 14, 2001.*)

- The state has sent millions of tax dollars to a management company that operates up to six voucher schools despite numerous complaints from parents, teachers, principals, and even the pastor of the church that houses one school. The pastor of Bethel Metropolitan Christian Academy in St. Petersburg was fired as dean of the school when he questioned why students had no textbooks and were not receiving special education services. He says teachers were paid as little as \$10.50 an hour even though the school received up to \$500,000 in tax money. Some students have had seven different teachers in just seven months. Elsewhere, employees and the former executive director of Bellview Junction and S.L. Jones Academy in Pensacola have gone public and notified the Florida Department of Law Enforcement of countless allegations. The allegations include spending tax dollars for special education services that were never provided; falsifying applications for state funding; reprimanding employees for notifying police of possible child abuse; and paying parents in cash to silence their complaints.

The state Department of Education has not publicly addressed the problems, but the director of its school choice office has testified before Congress on the merits of the program. Under questioning from a House subcommittee, she said she had not heard any complaints. (*“DOE Looks the Other Way,” Oct. 7, 2001, “A Voucher Marketplace,” April 14, 2002, “An Educational Fraud,” Oct. 11, 2001, “Disabled Voucher Program,” March 24, 2002, and “Parents Rue Their School Choice,” Oct. 3, 2001, St. Petersburg Times; “Florida Voucher Program Raises Concerns Among Democrats,” Education Daily, May 10, 2002.*)