

Why I'm Reluctantly Backing Vouchers

By ARTHUR LEVINE

Throughout my career, I have been an opponent of school voucher programs. I disapproved of them because I feared they would undermine public schools. They also threatened to diminish the teaching of universal democratic values by supporting parochial and ideologically based schools. Studies of the limited experiments conducted with vouchers and school choice in the U.S. showed these options were used disproportionately by relatively affluent families, raising the concern that vouchers could turn our public schools into ghettos for the poor. In addition, the research showed vouchers produce little if any improvement in student achievement, but result in higher educational costs.

However, after much soul-searching, I have reluctantly concluded that a limited school voucher program is now essential for the poorest Americans attending the worst public schools.

Despite a 15-year-long national school-improvement movement, many urban public schools are still falling apart physically and produce dismal results when it comes to teaching students. These schools show no signs of improving; some are even deteriorating. They are the worst schools in America. Walking through their halls, one meets students without hope and teachers without expectations. These schools damage children; they rob them of their futures. No parent should be forced to send a child to such a school. No student should be compelled to attend one.

Today these schools are effectively reserved for the urban poor. More-affluent parents have other options—private schools, suburban schools or better public schools. As never before in American history, we live in an age in which the future of our children is inextricably tied to the quality of the education they receive. In the past, a school dropout or a less-educated American could find a job in manufacturing or in one of the service professions, earning wages adequate to support a family. Those jobs have all but disappeared. Today, to force children into inadequate schools is to deny them any chance of success. To do so simply on the basis of their parents' income is a sin.

What I am proposing is a rescue operation aimed at reclaiming the lives of America's most disadvantaged children. This would involve a limited voucher program focusing on poor, urban children attending the bottom 10% of public schools. Their families would be reimbursed an amount equal to the cost per student of public education (a national average of roughly \$6,500) to allow them to attend a better school. These schools could be nonsectarian private schools or better public schools in the suburbs. The money could even be used to create better urban public-school alternatives.

The voucher rescue would aim to accomplish three goals. Most important, it would offer poor children a way out of the worst schools. If the research on vouchers is correct, not nearly as many as one would

hope will choose this option. However, many will—and that is all that matters.

Second, it will become possible to shut down some of the poor schools abandoned by students with vouchers. This will permit urban public school districts to concentrate their resources on more promising and effective schools.

Third, the vouchers could encourage the creation of strong urban schools. This could happen as entrepreneurs and private companies such as the Edison Project follow the dollars and establish private inner-city schools. It could happen if urban public school districts decide to replace old schools with better ones so that they can compete for students. In any case, schools receiving voucher funding should be required to meet serious performance standards. They need to be accountable both fiscally and academically.

This is a painful proposal for me to offer. In making it I am departing from the views of most of my colleagues at Teachers College and of educators across the nation, whom I deeply respect. I do so only in response to a desperate situation. I offer it not as a convert to vouchers, but as an individual who thinks in this one instance they may be the only way to save the most disadvantaged children. I offer this proposal not as a detractor of public schools, but as a champion who wants them to be as strong as they can be.

Mr. Levine is president of Teachers College, Columbia University.

8/5/98