



Making Schools Work Better for All Children

September 2000

Nine Lies About School Choice: Answering the Critics

Introduction

When *Nine Lies* first came out in 1993, little concrete evidence existed about school choice. Proponents at the time were forced to defend school choice against a barrage of arguments armed with little more than analogies, assumptions and economic principles. In the debates of a decade ago, choice proponents would often point to Federal Express and its salutary effects on the Post Office as the example of how competition from school choice would improve the public schools. Opponents of choice had merely to conjure up hypothetical threats such as witches schools, segregation, and the demise of democracy to scare parents and voters into giving the public school monopoly yet another chance.

A lot has changed. Today, with a number of tax programs that support choice and 79 privately-funded voucher programs up and running, critics of choice are not only being answered, but proven wrong. With every new program, public support for school choice grows stronger.

Choice proponents can now present empirical and anecdotal evidence showing that school choice is equitable, is wanted and it works. We now know, for example, that the competition generated by school choice improves public schools as shown in studies conducted by Harvard researcher Caroline Hoxby. We also know that choice leads to test score improvements, thanks to nearly a decade of research on the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program. Constitutional questions — while far from being resolved in all cases — are being favorably decided by the highest courts in Wisconsin, and Arizona. From experience with programs in Texas, Florida, and Wisconsin we can show that choice doesn't "cream" the best and brightest students, rather it attracts the struggling student who has not done well in a traditional school. And the list of "answers" goes on and on.

Gradually, the case against school choice is unraveling as once formidable critics have been grudgingly forced to acknowledge the truth. Test results from school choice are "ambiguous" says President Clinton evasively.^[i] Do students receive a better education in Milwaukee's choice program? "Not necessarily," is the most scathing response National Education Association (NEA) president Bob Chase can muster.^[ii]

For their part, defenders of the status quo have yet to demonstrate that their idea of "reform"— more money, more staff, more time — has produced any positive results whatsoever. Instead of concrete facts and demonstrated outcomes, they continue to voice such meaningless platitudes as this from school-choice opponent Al Gore, "[W]e need an ambitious program of...

reform that would allow us to have world-class schools in the 21st century.^[iii] Meanwhile, during the past decade, overall literacy and numeracy as measured by National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has not increased, graduation rates have not improved, and employment prospects are no brighter, particularly for disadvantaged children. The only *rising* indicator seems to be public school spending. That, on its face, is not a bad thing, except that spending is often recommended by opponents of choice in lieu of any other effort to improve student performance.

Information is Power

Advocates of school choice can also claim another victory in the education debate: a number of arguments against choice have disappeared altogether. No longer do we hear the once common assertion that low-income parents are too ignorant or too lazy to make good choices for their children. Countless surveys of how and why disadvantaged parents choose show that they are gaining access to information and that they do make responsible choices. In fact, the top reason cited for selecting a school is education quality. We no longer hear that school choice is impractical due to transportation difficulties. Every day some 74,000 children now participating in choice programs around the U.S. manage to get to their chosen schools proving the critics wrong once again.^[iv]

Opposition to school choice, however, remains strong among some special-interest groups, notably the teachers unions, the NEA and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), as well as the National Schools Board Association. Their leaders consistently block efforts to expand or establish school choice programs. While other education and policy leaders, confronted with the evidence that choice works, are coming around and supporting school choice, the unions and their allies have accelerated their attacks. In fact, delegates at the “2000 NEA Representative Assembly” voted to raise members’ dues in order to fund an aggressive campaign against vouchers. Armed with the facts, choice supporters can refute their false and misleading statements broadening support for choice even further.

1. The “Undermining-America” Argument: Choice will destroy the American public school Tradition

Choice will siphon off needed funds from public schools and, as a result, the quality of public education in the United States will suffer.

Say the critics:

“Funneling public moneys into private schools will unravel the financial underpinnings of the public school system.”^[v] The National Parent-Teachers Association (PTA)

“Like a low-grade virus, vouchers will only drain energy and resources from the public schools.”^[vi] Bob Chase, president, NEA

“What [vouchers] mean is a radical abandonment of public schools and public education.”^[vii] Sandra Feldman, President, AFT

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The Reality: Numerous examples exist showing how competition created by choice can motivate public schools to improve.

Parent Power!

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- When philanthropist Virginia Gilder offered vouchers of up to \$2,000 to disadvantaged children at Albany, New York's Giffen Elementary School, 20 percent opted for private schools. In response, superintendent Lonnie Palmer instituted needed improvements at the public school, hiring a new principal, replacing a fifth of its teachers, and adopting "*Success for All*," a curriculum with proven results for disadvantaged students. [viii]
- Sometimes just the mere prospect of school choice sparks the deregulation and improvement of public schools. Such was the case in Arizona when voucher legislation was narrowly defeated, but a compromise produced the nation's most ambitious charter-school legislation.
- Using Department of Education data, Harvard researcher Caroline Hoxby studied school choice programs in urban areas and found that choice between public and private schools increased the academic achievement and graduation rates of students in both types of schools. In areas where public and private schools compete for the same students, Hoxby found a 12 percent increase in the probability of college graduation for students transferring from public to private school and an 8 percent increase in the test scores for students who remained in the public schools. These increases are in comparison to students attending schools in areas where such a school choice program was absent. [ix]
- CER's Charter Schools Today: Changing the Face of American Education compiles information in 15 states on how charter schools – a form of public school choice – are improving all public schools by making traditional schools view parents and the community as consumers of education. For example, Gregory Riccio, assistant to the superintendent for strategic planning in the Phoenix High School District, believes the extrinsic incentives that charter schools instill make the district more consumer-oriented:

"I've been here for seven years and we pretty much look today as we did seven years ago, as we did several years before that. But I can guarantee that next fall, schools will look different...I think the whole product – the results-driven effort to redesign the schools – was heightened and then moved more quickly because of the competition from charter schools." [x]

Critics worry that choice will take money away from public schools, but they fail to acknowledge that a school that "loses" a student is also relieved of the cost of educating that student. Under well-designed programs of choice or charter, money follows the child to the school of his or her choice. Schools receive the funding that their enrollment merits. This is accountability in action. Moreover, a student should not be forced to remain in an unsatisfactory school merely to provide financial support to the school. This is not, and never has been, the purpose of public education.

Implicit in the statement that school choice would drain the public schools of resources is the assumption that given a choice, students would flee the public schools in droves — a most damning indictment coming from the defenders of the current system. But such a scenario is unlikely. The public schools educate 89 percent of American students and by virtue of their current market share they will continue to provide the majority of education — and receive the majority of education funding — even under a widespread system of school choice. In fact, evidence suggests the per-pupil funding in public schools may actually increase under school choice.

- In Milwaukee, both per-pupil funding and overall funding for the public schools increased significantly under school choice. Total Milwaukee Public Schools spending increased from \$629 million to \$972 million between 1990-91 and 2000-2001 during the expansion of school choice.[\[xi\]](#)
- In most cases, the charter or voucher amount is less than what the public school spends to educate a child. Usually the difference stays behind with the public school. For charter schools, all but a few states allow money to follow the child.

School choice will ultimately make the public schools better by injecting them with a healthy dose of competition. Under the existing monopolistic system, public schools have no incentive to embark on substantial reforms or make major improvements because no matter how badly they perform, their budgets won't be cut; their enrollment won't decline; the school won't close down. But if parents were allowed to remove their children — and the money that comes with them — from failing schools, public schools would be forced to respond. Under Florida's *A-Plus Program*, children in failing schools are offered the choice to leave with Opportunity Scholarships or remain in a school that is eligible under the same program for increased funding from the state. The opportunity for students to take their business someplace else is a powerful incentive to improve. If students have choice, schools will begin treating them like customers instead of taking their enrollment for granted.

Choice will undermine democratic values and lead to segregation and division.

Say the critics:

“(V)ouchers would be absolutely destructive to us as a community and a society.”[\[xii\]](#) Randi Weingarten, president, United Federation of Teachers

“‘Opportunity Scholarships’ sounds terrific, until you understand its Orwellian meaning: Give up on public education in America; stop investing in it; siphon off as much of its funding as you can to enable a few ‘deserving poor’ to go to private (mostly religious) schools, and to hell with all the kids left behind.”[\[xiii\]](#) Sandra Feldman, President, AFT

The Reality: Democracy is at the very heart of school choice, which grants the power to make educational choices directly to the people as opposed to the state.

The current system of public education, where the quality of public schooling varies according to the quality of the neighborhood, is far from democratic. Writes University of California professor John E. Coons,

“This socialism for the rich we blithely call ‘public,’ though no other public service entails such financial exclusivity. Whether the library, the swimming pool, the highway or the hospital — if it is ‘public,’ it is accessible. But admission to the government school comes only with the price of the house. If the school is in Beverly Hills or Scarsdale, the poor need not apply.”[\[xiv\]](#)

School choice gives the poor and minorities the opportunity to escape under-performing or unsafe public schools. So it is no surprise that support for school choice is strongest among disadvantaged parents.

- One recent poll indicated that 70.4 percent of African-American parents making below \$15,000 a year support school choice.[\[xv\]](#)

There is no evidence that private or charter schools would undermine democratic values or increase social fragmentation and segregation. In fact, numerous studies show that school choice actually enhances integration.

- According to a recent study based on data from the U.S. Department of Education, private schools are more racially integrated than neighboring public schools, and their students enjoy more cross-racial friendships and engage in fewer race-related fights.[\[xvi\]](#)
- An extensive state audit of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, which serves 8,000 students and includes 90 participating private schools, found that the racial composition of the choice program is almost identical to that of the Milwaukee Public Schools. The report found that 62.4 percent of choice students were African-American, compared with 61.4 percent in MPS.[\[xvii\]](#)
- Moreover, the bottom line is not racial composition but quality education. “You cannot have a democracy unless you have an educated populace.”[\[xviii\]](#) Howard Fuller, former superintendent Milwaukee Public Schools.

2. The “Creaming” Argument: Choice will leave the poor behind in the worst schools.

Say the critics:

“Public schools take all students, while private schools choose students based on their own criteria.”[\[xix\]](#) The National PTA

“At best, vouchers offer increased opportunity for a relative handful of children who will be carefully selected by the private schools that have the luxury of deciding whom they want to admit.”[\[xx\]](#) Steven R. Shapiro, legal director, American Civil Liberties Union

“Private schools don’t want deeply troubled, failing children...”

Public schools have to take all comers, which means the kids no private school wants or has to accept.” The late Albert Shanker, former president of the AFT

The Reality: Public schools are not as open and accommodating, and private schools are not as selective, as critics suggest.

- Public schools turn away many children with severe disabilities or behavioral programs, out-placing them to private schools at public expense. More than 3,000 private schools in the U.S. enroll over 100,000 children with disabilities. Far from being enclaves of privilege, private schools extend opportunity to some of America’s most disadvantaged students.[xxi]
- Private schools offer an array of specialized alternatives serving just about every kind of student from teen mothers to recovering alcoholics to chronic truants. In fact, school districts in over a dozen states contract with private alternative schools to educate at-risk youth.[xxii]
- The “best” students are the most likely to remain in the school that helped them to succeed while the students most in need of help are one who tend to leave. According to the state-selected evaluator of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, John Witte:

“The students in the Choice program were not the best, or even average students from the Milwaukee [public] system... Rather than skimming off the best students, the program seems to provide an alternative education environment for students who are not doing particularly well in the public school system.”[xxiii]

Annual evaluations of the Milwaukee program show that it is not the “best” students who exercise choice, but rather the struggling students are most likely to switch to a different school. The state-sponsored evaluation of the program found that students applying to the choice program performed *below* their public school peers on tests of academic achievement. [xxiv] In other words, it was not the “A” and “B” students who opted for choice, but the “C” and “D” students.

- A study by the Escambia County School District in Florida found that over 2/3 of the students participating in the first year of the state’s new choice program scored *below* district and national averages on standardized tests of math and reading. The district study concluded, “departure of these students will have no significant impact upon the average scores of the remaining students (in the public schools).”[xxv]
- Studies conducted in 1999 of school choice programs in San Antonio, Texas and Escambia, Florida found that students applying for choice programs performed no better academically than students staying behind in the public schools.[xxvi]
- Says Lydia Harris, reading specialist at Hope Academy in Cleveland, OH, “We make our own cream.” In other words, her private school, which serves disadvantaged students under Cleveland’s choice

program, doesn't make the distinction between the "best" and "worst" students. Hope Academy educators believe that all children are capable of excelling given the right learning environment.

Public school enrollments in many areas are clearly comprised of the "cream of the crop" but these public schools are not criticized for what allegedly happens under school choice programs. Upper and middle-class parents have already removed their children from poorly performing public schools moving to affluent neighborhoods with better public schools or enrolling their children in private schools. Low-income parents are the ones left behind by the current system. It is this inequity that school choice seeks to address.

3. The "Radical Schools" Scare: Extremists such as the KKK, religious cults, or other radical groups will start schools.

Say the critics:

"Can you imagine a KKK group, Skinheads, witches or other cult groups setting up schools to teach their philosophy and using taxpayers' dollars to do so? This country has a history of blocking religious and dangerous cult groups from using public funds which must be continued." [xxvii] Former California Assembly Speaker Willie Brown

"The current war in Kosovo is a graphic example of what happens in a society that separates its people and fosters elitism. Public education is the cornerstone of our democratic society... The democratic principles that our society must preserve if it is to flourish are weakened by voucher plans that undermine the public good, and in time, if adopted, may lead to the Balkanization of our society." [xxviii] Letter signed by 14 Pennsylvania Public School Superintendents

"The voucher movement will fractionalize society... We don't need to be a Northern Ireland. We don't need to be a Bosnia. We don't need people to divide into groups. One thing that keeps them from doing that now is a strong public school system." [xxix] Bob Harris, Spokesman for the Michigan Education Association

The Reality: Parents find this argument offensive, and it's typically used by critics of school choice when they have run out of facts and reasoned arguments to support their perspective.

- Existing federal and state laws already prohibit private and charter schools from unlawful discrimination and illegal activities. Most school choice proposals include strong anti-discrimination provisions and basic accountability requirements such as requiring participating schools to meet minimum academic standards.
- Survey after survey shows that the number one reason parents choose a school is academics. An extensive state audit of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, the nation's oldest government funded voucher program of its kind, found that 71.1 percent of parents chose their private school because it provided higher educational standards. Other top reasons for choosing included good teachers (70.4 percent)

and safe and orderly classrooms (67.8 percent)[xxx]

- Approximately 96 percent of private school children attend schools that are accredited or evaluated by national, regional or state private school organizations, according to Dr. Charles O'Malley, who handled private education issues for three U.S. Secretaries of Education. These organizations maintain standards that have been accepted or recognized by federal, state and local education agencies, as well as by foundations and corporations.[xxxi] Those schools that are not accredited are typically affiliated with an established institution, such as Catholic or Protestant churches. Among the few private schools that are entirely independent of both accreditation and other established entities, they still have one main and very important degree of accountability — to parents, whose hard-earned money funds the tuition.

The Radical Schools Scare needlessly distracts people from focusing their attention on the issue that matters: improving education for all children. Choice necessarily includes oversight. Schools that participate in voucher programs are subject to parental oversight and must meet state-drafted criteria to assure equality of opportunity and the academic quality of the program.

4. The “Church-State” Argument: Allowing public funds to be used for tuition at religious schools is unconstitutional.

Say the critics:

“Taxpayers must never be forced to pay for religion.” [xxxii]
Rev. Barry W. Lynn, Executive Director, Americans United for Separation of Church and State

“[T]he religious schools now receiving vouchers...describe their goal as instilling in children the tenets of their Faith. Though this goal is entirely appropriate for a private religious school, it is entirely inappropriate for government to support this goal with taxpayer dollars.” [xxxiii] Ralph G. Neas, President, People For the American Way Foundation

The Reality: “The First Amendment does not require discrimination against religion; it simply bars laws ‘respecting an establishment of religion.’ Equal treatment of everyone, without regard to religion, does not constitute an establishment of religion...So long as the government doesn’t specifically favor religion, none of us has any constitutional grounds for complaint.” [xxxiv] Clint Bolick, Institute for Justice attorney who has successfully defended numerous school choice programs.

- Legal experts who have argued school choice cases in front of courts, and many other legal scholars, say that vouchers do not violate the Constitution because the funds are directed by the parents of students, not the private schools. The use of money by a parent to select the school that is best for his/her child is akin to any sort of state or federal aid that is distributed to citizens for everything from food, health, housing, or job training.

In fact, the federal and state governments already provide billions of dollars in support to religiously affiliated organizations such as hospitals,

universities, and social service providers. Government vouchers for low-income parents exist to help fund daycare at private and parochial facilities. Thousands of students in higher education use federally funded Pell grants, National Direct Student Loans, and GI benefits to attend religious colleges and universities. In Florida alone, where the Opportunity Scholarships program is being litigated by the courts, the Florida Department of Children and Family Services will spend \$46 million this year for social work performed by Catholic, Baptist, Jewish, Lutheran and other faith-based organizations. The state also funds religious institutions to administer juvenile justice programs.

- As long as the law does not aid or establish one religion in favor of another, the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled in recent years that the law is constitutional. This legal standard is known as the Establishment Clause test or the Lemon Test (*Lemon v. Kurtzman*, 403 U.S. 602 (1971)). To avoid violating the Establishment Clause of the Constitution, the school choice program must:
 - Have a non-religious purpose;
 - Have a primary effect neither to advance nor inhibit religion; and
 - Avoid excessive entanglement of government and religion.

School choice litigation generally involves the last two criteria.

- Well-designed voucher plans are neutral with respect to all parental choices and are therefore defensible. Vouchers can be used at out-of-district public schools, secular private schools, or religious schools. Where vouchers are used depends solely on parental choices.
- The first three state supreme courts to consider the constitutionality of school choice have upheld the programs under the First Amendment.
- In *Jackson v. Benson*, the Wisconsin Supreme Court in 1998 upheld the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, which provides publicly funded vouchers to low-income families to use in private or religious schools.
- In *Simmons-Harris v. Goff*, the Ohio Supreme Court in 1999 upheld a similar program for low-income families in Cleveland because parents, not the state, choose the schools.
- In *Kotterman v. Killian*, the Arizona Supreme Court sustained a state income tax credit for donations to private scholarship funds.
- In a related case, the Vermont Supreme Court upheld, then five years later invalidated a religious school tuition program. It is true that some state constitutions, such as Vermont's, contain language that may be interpreted as being more restrictive than the U.S. Constitution on matters of public funding for religious organizations. These laws must be interpreted on a state-by-state basis.

5. .The “Lack of Accountability” Argument: Private schools are largely unregulated and therefore not accountable to the public..

Say the critics:

“What’s happened in Cleveland is symptomatic of the lack of oversight and financial drain caused by the whole voucher experiment.” NEA President Bob Chase.[\[xxxv\]](#)

“Voucher schools are not accountable to the public. The voucher schools argue that because they are private, they get to play by different rules than the public schools.”[\[xxxvi\]](#) Barbara Miner, The Nation

The Reality: Unlike public schools, schools of choice are directly accountable to parents, who have the power to take their child, and the associated funding, someplace else. Importantly, private schools must comply with existing state and federal laws regarding nondiscrimination and financial reporting.

The “lack of accountability” argument ignores the current state of public education. Even when a public school consistently produces dismal results, it continues to be propped up by enrollment and continues to receive taxpayer funding. Rarely does anyone lose a job; rarely is anyone called to account for failure.

In many places, public schools aren’t accountable to parents or taxpayers. Countless examples exist showing high levels of public school spending corresponding with low or declining levels of student achievement. In Kansas City, Missouri, for example, a multi-million dollar funding increase amounting to more than \$36,000 per student was followed by a decline in achievement scores. Similarly, the schools of Jersey City have been put into receivership (state control) and have received an additional \$100 million infusion of funds — with no positive results to show for it. Clearly limiting the use of public funds to public schools is no guarantee of accountability. [\[xxxvii\]](#) By contrast, private schools are accountable to their customers — the parents and students who can choose to go elsewhere and take their tuition money with them.

Policy makers often confuse regulation with accountability. But the two are not the same. Charter schools are a good example of this. Charter schools are accountable directly to parents, who voluntarily choose whether or not to enroll their children in them. The idea behind charter schools is increased accountability in exchange for fewer regulations. When allowed to create their own measures of accountability, private schools and charter schools generally set high standards for themselves.

- Private schools do, in fact, have to comply with some basic regulations. State and federal laws already exist to ensure that private schools meet anti-discrimination laws, and health and safety requirements. And private schools, like any other business, must adhere to laws pertaining to tax reporting, accounting, truth in advertising, employment, zoning, and the like.
- A state audit of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program found that most private schools participating used some form of standardized testing or are independently accredited. The audit found that 76 of the 86 schools participating, enrolling 93 percent of the students in the choice program, either administered a standardized test and/or earned accreditation from an independent accrediting authority.

Accreditation requires schools to have a valid curriculum and materials, and a qualified teaching staff.[xxxviii]

6. The “Big Brother” Argument: Accepting public funds would make private schools vulnerable to intrusive government regulation.

Say the critics:

“Private school vouchers would make parochial schools less parochial and private schools less private, subjecting them to public supervision and compromising their independence.” [xxxix] Richard Riley, Secretary of Education

“Yes, competition is desperately needed to improve public schools by eroding the monolithic control of government and unions. Yes, inner-city youths desperately need educational options. But the full price for these solutions, if private schools are included, is the virtual abolition of private education through government or judicial control.” Ronald Trowbridge, vice president for external programs and communications at Hillsdale College. [xl]

The Reality: This is a legitimate concern often raised by free-market advocates and private schools (opponents raise it too, though not necessarily with the same sincerity). Fears about excessive regulation, however, may be allayed by well-designed choice programs that protect private schools from intrusive regulations and by a thoughtful review of the facts.

The most compelling evidence comes from the Milwaukee experience. The longest running school choice program of its kind, the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program has not led to excessive or intrusive regulations on private schools. In fact, with every passing year, more private schools have opted to participate in the program — proof that the private schools like what they see.

Sound choice plans include provisions to protect the independence of private schools. One model might be a provision of the failed 1993 California initiative. This provision would have created a regulatory firewall to clarify in law what regulations currently apply to private schools; codified the process for adding new regulations or prohibiting new regulations altogether; and required a super-majority to approve any new regulation of private schools.

Private schools still wary of government-sponsored choice programs need to remember that their participation is optional. As free-market economist and school-choice proponent Milton Friedman points out, there will always be a group of fiercely independent private schools, which for philosophical reasons, will not participate in government school choice programs.

However, even the most stalwart defenders of free markets must concede that the libertarian utopia of private schooling simply doesn't exist. Private schools are already subject to basic regulations concerning health and safety, nondiscrimination, etc. In some states, regulations also pertain to curriculum content, length of the school year, and teacher qualifications. If anything, school choice would bolster the number and strength of private

schools making them more effective in resisting excessive regulation. (See Appendix for a more detailed discussion of this issue.)

7. The “Choice is Expensive” Argument: Vouchers don’t cover the cost of private schools. Poor families will be left behind.>

Say the critics:

“A voucher rarely covers the cost of tuition. The losers will be the minorities and the low-income students.” [xli] Representative Robert Scott, D-Virginia

The Reality: Private schools, especially private religious schools, are a lot more affordable than is widely believed. To date, voucher programs have been oversubscribed proving that vouchers cover enough, or all, of the tuition cost to help low-income families get into private schools.

Specifically, every privately sponsored choice program, which provides scholarships ranging from \$1,000 to \$4,000 to low-income families who are also required to contribute toward the cost of tuition, is oversubscribed (has a waiting list). Obviously there are plenty of low-income families who are finding affordable private schools with the help of these scholarships.

- In 1999, roughly 74,000 low-income children used vouchers (from 3 publicly funded programs and 79 privately funded programs) to attend private schools. [xlii] More proof that vouchers make private schools affordable to low-income families.
- While it is true that a few private schools charge high tuition, most private schools are affordable. According to a 1996 Cato Institute study, 67 percent of all private elementary and secondary schools charged tuition of \$2,500 or less while the average private school tuition nationwide was \$3,116. By way of comparison, the average expenditure per public school student was \$6,857—more than double the private school tuition rate [xliii]

8. The “Choice Is Limited” Argument: There are neither enough tuition scholarships nor enough seats in private schools for more students.

Say the critics:

“A simple mathematical exercise will immediately point out that the numbers don’t work. A voucher system, regardless of the amount of money provided, can only accommodate a minimal number of public school students.” [xliv] Gerald Tirozzi, Assistant Secretary of Education

“In Chicago, for example, there’re 500,000 students in the school system. Suppose 10 percent got vouchers. That would be 50,000... and there’s no place for them to go. But even if there were, what about the 450,000 who are left behind?...It seems to me that vouchers become a cop-out for a few at the expense of the masses.” [xlv] Jesse Jackson, President Rainbow/Push Coalition

The Reality: The supply of private schools is elastic and responds to demand. As policy leaders make more tuition scholarships available through expanded choice programs, the number of seats in private schools will increase accordingly. It is a simple case of supply and demand.

Such simplistic statements by people like Gerald Tirozzi reveal a total ignorance of basic economic principles. The supply of private schools is not fixed. As demand for private schools increases, so too will their supply. Entrepreneurial firms, philanthropic individuals, and even existing schools will establish new schools and many existing private schools will expand.

- We need only look to the experience of charter schools to see the large number of schools that have been created in response to demand for more and better choices in schooling. As of Fall 2000 **2,069** charter schools are open in the U.S., all of which have been started in just the past **8** years, (Minnesota passed the first charter school law in 1991). Of that number, about 77 percent are “start-ups”— entirely new schools with added capacity.[\[xlvi\]](#)
- In the cities with large-scale choice programs, new private schools have been founded directly in response to the demand generated by choice. This is not to say the process is easy — it is not, we are talking about starting a small business — but the number of new schools is growing. These include two Hope Academies in Cleveland; about 20 schools in Milwaukee;[\[xlvii\]](#) and 12 in San Antonio.[\[xlviii\]](#) School choice turns the static education monopoly into a marketplace that is responsive to consumer demand.

Private schools don't have a lot of empty seats because private schools are efficient; they maintain enough seats for the number of students they believe will enroll. With 87 percent of all students now enrolled in public schools, it would be ridiculous for private schools to run classrooms with nine empty desks for every one occupied desk. No school could afford to operate that way.

9. The “Failed Experiment” Argument: There is no evidence that school choice works.

Say the critics:

“There is no compelling case to be made for vouchers based on achievement data.”[\[xlix\]](#) Alex Molnar, professor, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee

“Vouchers do not necessarily foster improved academic achievement. While vouchers have been presented as a way to help provide educational opportunities for African-Americans, the reality is that no one really knows how students in the private voucher schools are performing academically.”[\[l\]](#) Barbara Miner, [The Nation](#)

The Reality: School choice gives more students access to private schools and access to a better education. Numerous studies confirm that students enrolled in private schools, either through choice programs or independently do better academically compared to their peers in the public schools.

- A study conducted by researchers from the University of Wisconsin, Georgetown, and Harvard found that black students participating in privately funded voucher programs in Dayton, Ohio, New York City, and Washington, DC performed significantly better on tests after two years in private school than did the students who remained in public school. In addition, the participating students narrowed the gap between their scores and those of white students by one-third.[\[li\]](#)
- In a similar study conducted by Jay Greene in Charlotte, North Carolina, children from low-income families who participated in the privately funded Children’s Scholarship Fund (CSF) improved their performance on standardized math tests significantly. Participating children and their parents both give their schools higher marks than do the children who remained in public school. Also, the children in the private schools are almost three times more likely to want to go to school and feel safer in school than their public school peers.[\[lii\]](#)
- Results from the 10-year-old Milwaukee Parental Choice Program show that low-income students in the school choice program made significant gains in math and reading after three years. Researchers from Harvard University and the University of Houston found that students gained 6.8 percentage points in math and 4.9 percentage points in reading on standardized tests. A separate Princeton University study of math scores found similar results.[\[liii\]](#)
- A study commissioned by the Ohio State Department of Education found small but significant gains for students in the Cleveland program.[\[liv\]](#) A separate study by Jay Greene, William Howell, and Paul Peterson on the same program found that the parents of children accepted for the choice program were more satisfied with their school than the parents of public school children denied participation in the choice program. And program students made large improvements in their math and reading test scores.[\[lv\]](#)
- Research studies consistently find that private schools, even after adjusting for the socio-economic backgrounds of their students, do a better job overall at educating students than the public schools.[\[lvi\]](#) School choice gives more students access to private schools and access to a better education.

Moreover, surveys of families participating in school choice programs show high levels of parental satisfaction with both the choice program and the school they chose for their child. As Jay Greene observed in “*A Survey of Results from Voucher Experiments: Where We Are and What We Know*,”

“[T]he evidence in support of school choice is unambiguous and overwhelmingly positive. One of the evaluators in Milwaukee, John Witte, reported that ‘satisfaction of Choice parents with private schools was just as dramatic as dissatisfaction was with prior public schools.’ In Cleveland evaluator, Kim Metcalf found, ‘Across the range of school elements, parents of scholarship students tend to be much more satisfied with their child’s school than other parents...[S]cholarship recipient parents are more satisfied with the child’s teachers, more satisfied with the academic standards at the child’s school, more satisfied with order and discipline, [and]

more satisfied with social activities at the school...’ Also in Cleveland Paul Peterson, William Howell, and I found that after two years of the program choice parents were significantly more satisfied with almost all aspects of their children’s education than were the parents of a random sample of Cleveland public school parents. Nearly 50 percent of choice parents reported being very satisfied with the academic program, safety, discipline, and teaching of moral values in their private school. Only around 30 percent of Cleveland public school parents report being very satisfied with these aspects of their children’s schools. Very similar results were obtained from the privately funded school choice programs in Washington, D.C., Dayton, New York, and San Antonio.”[\[lvii\]](#)

Parents know what’s best for their children and as these surveys illustrate, they believe their children are better off under school choice.

Conclusion

The tenor of the debate over school choice has changed perceptibly over the years owing to the growing evidence that choice in its many forms is making a positive impact. Meanwhile, the track record for public schools, especially those serving disadvantaged urban youth, show them to be no better than before. In light of these facts, some former foes have reappraised their stance on choice. A few, including columnist William Raspberry and Columbia Teachers College president Arthur Levine, have come to the painful realization that what they once cherished is irreparably broken and what they once fought is now the best hope for American children and America’s future. How their conversions came about is best relayed in their own words.

William Raspberry wrote in the June 26, 1998 edition of *The Washington Post*,

“If I find myself slowly morphing into a supporter of charter schools and vouchers, it isn’t because I harbor any illusions that there’s something magical about these alternatives. It is because I am increasingly doubtful that the public schools can and do (or at any rate will do) what is necessary to educate poor minority children.”

In a similar vein, Arthur Levine, president of Columbia University Teachers College, wrote in the June 15, 1998 edition of *The Wall Street Journal*,

“Throughout my career, I have been an opponent of school voucher programs... However, after much soul-searching, I have recently concluded that a limited school voucher program is now essential for the poorest Americans attending the worst public schools... Today, to force children into inadequate schools is to deny them any chance of success. To do so simply on the basis of their parent’s income is a sin.”

Long-time supporters of school choice will applaud the honesty of Raspberry and Levine, and gratefully welcome their emerging support. They are but two of the thousands of individuals whose support for choice has grown as it’s become clear that there is no one right way to educate all

children, and that many existing systems have long lost the privilege to do so. It's clear that as the facts emerge and the public grows more accepting of alternatives to their traditional public schools, the list of supporters, converts, and choice programs themselves will grow.

AFTERWORD

We know the regulatory threat is serious. But these episodes [where school-choice programs have fought off excessive regulation] suggest caution, not abandonment, of this freedom enterprise. The position of school-choice critics is akin to resisting the demise of communism because the free markets that would emerge might be subjected to government regulation. This is hardly a Hobson's choice.

Virtually all libertarian arguments against parental choice are grounded in hypothetical speculation. And the greatest antidote to speculation is reality. But even the critics' worst case does not trump the value of choice. The critics of choice point to the example of American higher education as the ultimate horror story of government control. In the 1980s, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that post-secondary institutions that accept any federal funds — even student loan guarantees — must also submit to federal regulation. So federal regulators have now ensnared all but a handful of fiercely independent private colleges.

But from the standpoint of our current system of elementary and secondary education, this so-called nightmare looks more like a dream. Libertarian alarmists warn that vouchers will lead to a system of primary and secondary schools under monolithic government control. But that's exactly what we have already! Only 11 percent of America's children attend independent elementary and secondary schools, while 89 percent attend government schools. Moreover, private schools already are subject to regulations concerning health and safety, nondiscrimination, the length of the school year, curriculum content, and the like.

In my view, our overwhelming concern should be for those children who are already captive of the educational standards and ideological dogma of the public-school monolith. Surely any reform that diminishes the near-monopoly status of government schooling — even at the cost of greater regulation of private schools — will still yield a net increase in freedom. We should be particularly confident of that outcome when the mechanisms of reform is transfer of power over educational decisions from bureaucrats to parents.

Moreover, the regulatory threat to private school independence is simply not illuminated by reference to higher education. In that instance, federal oversight entered an arena of vibrant competition between a vigorous and effective public sector and a vigorous and effective private sector. The horizons for elementary and secondary schools, by contrast, are limited by a dominant, over-regulated, and ineffective public sector. The likely main outcome of expanding access to the highly effective, lightly regulated private sector will be to deregulate the public sector.

And that is exactly what we are seeing. The mere prospect of school choice has already sparked deregulation of public schools...

(Excerpted from an article in the May June 1998 issue of *Policy Review* magazine entitled "Blocking the Exits," by Clint Bolick.)

ENDNOTES

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[ii] Bob Chase, "Vouchers Drain Energy from Schools," *The Fresno Bee*, op-ed, December 7, 1997.

[iii] "A First Report Card on Vouchers," *Time*, April 26, 1999.

[iv] "A Bold Experiment to Fix City Schools," *The Atlantic Monthly*, July 1999, p. 16.

[v] "The National PTA Opposes Education Vouchers," The National PTA, February 1996.

[vi] Bob Chase, op-ed, "Vouchers Drain Energy from Schools," *The Fresno Bee*, December 7, 1997.

[vii] Sandra Feldman, "Let's Tell the Truth," American Federation of Teachers, November 1997.

[viii] Deroy Murdock, Commentary, "Voucher Verities," *The Washington Times*, June 18, 1999.

[ix] Nina Shokraii Rees, "Public School Benefits of Private School Vouchers," *Policy Review*, January February 1999, p. 18.

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[xii] "Voucher Verities," *The Washington Times*, June 18, 1999.

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[xxv] "Voucher Opponents Proven Wrong Again," Institute for Justice, September 14, 1999.

[xxvi] "Study: San Antonio Voucher Schools Aren't Creaming," *Education Daily*, September 20, 1999. "Voucher Opponents Proven Wrong Yet Again," Institute for Justice, September 15, 1999.

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[xxviii] *Pennsylvania Reach Alliance, May 1999*, www.schoolchoice.org, visited June 19, 2000. Portion of a letter to Pennsylvania State Legislators from 14 Pennsylvania public school superintendents, outlining their opposition to school choice.

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[xli] “Vouchers Don’t Prove Private is Better, Researcher Says,” *Education Daily*, September 14, 1998.

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[xliii] See The Digest of Education Statistics (Washington, D.C: The Department of Education, January 2000), www.nces.ed.gov/pubs2000/digest99, table 62.

[xliv] “School Choice Debate,” *The Congressional Quarterly Researcher*, July 18, 1997.

[xlv] Excerpted from the transcript of George Will’s interview of Mr. Jackson on ABC’s *This Week*, 9/3/2000.

[xlvi] *Charter Schools Today: Changing the Face of American Education* (Washington, D.C.: The Center for Education Reform, 2000), p, 116. See also, www.edreform.com.

[xlvii] CER telephone interview with PAVE (www.pave.org), June 19, 2000. (About 20 new schools have begun since the choice program began in 1991. The Cierra Travis Academy, Seeds of Health, Grand View High, and the D.L. Hines school are successful examples).

[xlviii] CER email exchange with Teresa Treat, program director for CEO San Antonio’s HORIZON program, June 20, 2000. (Since the HORIZON Program was announced in April 1998, the program is aware of 12 new schools, yet the cause and effect between the program and the schools beginning is not simply linear. The El Sendero Christian Academy and the Emmanuel Christian Academy are successful examples.)

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