

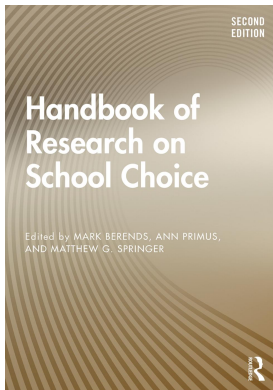
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### **Perspectives on School Vouchers**

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## 13

PERSPECTIVES ON  
SCHOOL VOUCHERS*Samuel E. Abrams*

Few matters of education policy have generated as much disagreement as vouchers. To their most dedicated advocates, vouchers represent a panacea: Parents gain the freedom to opt out of the public system and, at no cost or with a subsidy, choose private schools that better suit the needs of their children; poor families, in particular, benefit by winning access to schools outside of neglected neighborhoods; schools throughout improve to attract and retain students along with the voucher dollars they bring; teachers earn higher salaries through competition among schools for their services.

To their most dedicated opponents, vouchers represent a wrecking ball: Parents with navigational know-how pull their children from neighborhood public schools and send them to private schools; members of the same social circles follow suit; the children of parents lacking such savvy or networks remain behind; school segregation by race and class mounts; with or without explicit control over admissions, private schools screen out underperforming students; the concentration of underperforming students in neighborhood public schools makes teaching and learning there more difficult; neighborhood public schools shed their identities as community hubs; neighborhoods themselves lose vitality; under pressure to convey excellence and attract more students, private schools inflate grades; unless bound by national curricula, religious private schools subordinate science to theology; unless party to the same contract, teachers in private schools earn less than their public school peers and thus put downward pressure on salaries across the board.

Between these two camps is a middle ground vast and varied. To policymakers in such rural states as Vermont and Maine, vouchers serve the practical purpose of funding the education of children living in areas too remote to support schools. To policymakers in such countries as Belgium, France, and the Netherlands with Catholic or Protestant schools going back centuries, vouchers serve the practical purpose of capitalizing on extensive educational infrastructure. To progressives committed to integration and equity, income-pegged vouchers constitute a redistributive vehicle in the name of social justice. To other progressives, such vouchers at once serve too few students to be meaningful and obscure the effectiveness of such interventions as high-quality preschool, smaller classes, and better teacher preparation and pay. To some scholars sympathetic to parental choice, the costs of administration, adjudication, and transportation necessitated by a voucher system outweigh the benefits.

**Origins**

Vermont and Maine introduced vouchers in the United States in 1869 and 1873, respectively, to permit students in remote areas without schools to attend either public or nonsectarian private

schools in neighboring communities within state or across the state border. According to a formula devised by each state, the cost of tuition was and has been covered by the sending district. By contrast, the Netherlands introduced a voucher plan in 1917 that made school choice available to residents throughout the country—whether urban, suburban, or rural—and included religious as well as nonsectarian private schools as state-supported options. Yet, the country mandated uniformity in three central areas: All schools had to comport with national curricula established by the Dutch Inspectorate of Education, use the same teacher salary schedules, and operate according to the same per-pupil budget. By the 1980s, the provision for funding was amended to allocate more money per pupil to schools with more underprivileged students (Ladd, Fiske, & Ruijs, 2011; Verger, Fontdevila, & Zancajo, 2016).

In laying the foundation for the contemporary argument for vouchers with his 1955 essay “The Role of Government in Education,” the economist Milton Friedman went far beyond the precedents set by Vermont, Maine, and the Netherlands. In contrast to the model established by Vermont and Maine, Friedman contended that vouchers should be made available to parents everywhere and should be accepted at schools everywhere that met “certain minimum standards” (Friedman, 1955, p. 127). For Friedman, this meant vouchers would be accepted at not only religious and nonsectarian private schools but also proprietary schools (Friedman, 1955, p. 129). In this latter regard, Friedman deviated from the Dutch model, which did not (and does not) permit the use of vouchers at schools run for profit.

In three additional respects, Friedman also strayed from the Dutch model. First, private schools could charge more than the value of the voucher. In such cases, parents would be obliged to pay the difference or students would have to win scholarships. Second, teacher salaries would not be fixed according to schedules across public and private sectors but would rather respond to the market to reward better teachers with better compensation. Third, Friedman’s bar of “certain minimum standards” allowed schools far more curricular latitude than the Dutch model (Friedman, 1955).

What would over time further distinguish Friedman’s endorsement of vouchers was his conviction that they represented the most compelling means to addressing the dismal state of educational opportunity suffered by inner-city children. On this count, Friedman found allies across the political spectrum. As early as 1955, Friedman argued that vouchers would provide students with a way out of residentially segregated neighborhoods. Friedman was later more explicit about how vouchers would mean greater opportunity for inner-city children.

In a column for *Newsweek* in 1967 on the state of Black America, Friedman bemoaned the condition of “slum schools” and asserted that vouchers would at once provide Black children an educational alternative and, in generating competition, “force improvement in public schools” (Friedman, 1967). In response to the crisis surrounding mandated busing, Friedman five years later opined in another column for *Newsweek* that vouchers stood to be a far more effective means of helping students living in the nation’s slums (Friedman, 1972). In a column for *The Washington Post* in 1995, Friedman cited the significant deterioration in the quality of urban schooling in the 40 years since he had written his initial essay on vouchers as the pressing justification for a voucher system (Friedman, 1995). Finally, in reflecting on New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina in a column for the *Wall Street Journal* in 2005, Friedman described the devastation as a tragedy but also an opportunity to implement vouchers to radically improve a failed school system (Friedman, 2005).

## Modifications

### *Progressive Endorsement*

Friedman’s case for vouchers as a remedy for underperforming school districts resonated with an array of scholars. Vouchers, in fact, found substantial support from liberals (Henig, 1994; Viteritti,

1999; Forman, 2005). The sociologist David Rogers cited Friedman's argument as a sensible strategy for combatting the bureaucratic pathology of big-city education departments in *110 Livingston Street*, his detailed 1968 critique of the New York City school system (Rogers, 1968). In an essay the same year in the *Harvard Educational Review*, the psychologist Kenneth Clark went further. Clark, a civil rights leader whose research with his wife, Mamie, into children's perceptions of race proved central to the case for school desegregation in the 1950s, wrote: "The rigidity of present patterns of public school organization—and the concomitant stagnation in quality of education and academic performance of children—may not be amenable to any attempts at change working through and within the present system" (Clark, 1968, p. 108).

While Clark did not endorse vouchers per se, he did anticipate the development of charter schools in calling for "parallel systems of public schools, organized and operated on a quasi-private level, and with quality control and professional accountability maintained and determined by Federal and State educational standards and supervision" (Clark, 1968, p. 113). Moreover, in hailing the virtues of competition, Clark allied himself with Friedman and later school choice advocates. Clark was in this regard blunt: "American industrial and material wealth was made possible through industrial competition. America's educational health may be made possible through educational competition" (Clark, 1968, p. 113).

Also on the left at the same time in condemning the rigidity and ineffectiveness of urban public school systems and in embracing choice and competition as remedies were the sociologist Christopher Jencks and the historian Ted Sizer. Like Clark, Jencks and Sizer belonged to the vanguard of progressive educators battling for the rights of poor children and their families. In an essay for the *New York Times Magazine* in 1968, Jencks went so far as to call inner-city schools "little more than custodial institutions for keeping children off the street" (Jencks, 1968, p. 30).

Unlike Clark, Jencks and Sizer called specifically for a system of vouchers and made explicit room in this system for religious schools. Yet, in contrast to Friedman, Jencks and Sizer proposed a highly regulated system that favored poor children with more valuable vouchers and barred for-profit schools from participation. Moreover, Jencks and Sizer did not see vouchers as a panacea. They rather saw vouchers as a tool to be complemented by better health care and welfare services (Jencks, 1968, 1970; Sizer & Whitten, 1968; Sizer, 1969).

Both Jencks and Sizer were responding to calls of decentralization of big-city public systems and both used the term "Balkanization" in concluding that decentralization would merely cement differences among neighborhoods and thus undermine the potential for integration (Jencks, 1968; Sizer, 1969). Vouchers constituted an end run. In a 1969 essay for the *Saturday Review*, Sizer wrote:

This approach would decentralize by persuasion rather than geography. An area with a mixed population could have, cheek by jowl, several public schools—for example, one run by the city (P.S. 121), one by the Catholic Church (St. Mary's School), and one by the black community (the Martin Luther King Freedom School). (1969, p. 36)

Much like Rogers, Jencks faulted public school systems in general for inertia in a 1970 article for the *New Republic* and ascribed their dysfunctionality to "monopolistic privileges" as well as myriad demands, leading schools to please no one on account of "trying to please everyone" (Jencks, 1970, p. 19). In writing this article, Jencks was synthesizing a long feasibility study of vouchers he had co-authored for the federal government's Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) (Jencks et al., 1970). In particular, Jencks, in sync with Friedman, described vouchers as a ticket out of segregated schools and neighborhoods, meaning "no child could be excluded from any participating school simply because his family was not rich enough or white enough to buy a house near the school" (Jencks, 1970, p. 20).

Building on the ideas ofSizer, Jencks articulated a voucher system with sharp boundaries in service of specifically progressive ideals: “Participating schools would have to accept every child’s voucher as full payment for his education, regardless of its value”; “[v]ouchers for children from low-income families would have a somewhat higher redemption value” to “help discourage schools from trying to attract exclusively middle-class parents”; and “[i]f there were more applicants than places, the school would have to fill at least half its places by lottery among applicants,” with the additional provision that the school “would also have to show that it had accepted at least as high a proportion of minority group students as had applied” so that no school “would be able to cream off the most easily educated children or dump all the problem children elsewhere” (Jencks, 1970, p. 20).

Although amply backed by the OEO, Jencks’s proposal found no takers. Recommendations for Gary, New Rochelle, San Francisco, and Seattle went nowhere (Mecklenburger, 1972). School boards and teacher unions united in opposition to the redirection of public funding to private schools, while civil rights organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) raised worries that parental choice would undermine racial integration. Private schools regardless stood to balk at surrendering substantial control over admissions (Bulman & Kirp, 1999). Only a watered-down version of Jencks’s proposal took hold in 1972 in the Alum Rock School District of San Jose, California. Private schools were barred from participation, and parents could merely choose among programs within schools, not schools themselves (Mecklenburger, 1972). After five years, federal funding ran out, and local support did not suffice to keep the experiment going (Bulman & Kirp, 1999).

The legal scholars John Coons and Stephen Sugarman simultaneously developed a similar equity-driven voucher plan for the state as a whole but to no avail (see Coons & Sugarman, 1978). Coons and Sugarman titled their plan the California Initiative for Family Choice in Education and sought in 1979 to get it on the state ballot for a referendum vote, yet their petition drive fell far short of collecting the number of signatures necessary to place the initiative on the ballot. In fact, despite much publicity, their effort attracted only a small group of volunteers and not one endorsement from a state interest group, whether that of parents or private schools (Catterall, 1984; Moe, 2001).

Even tuition tax credits—involving no need-based formulas—failed to win popular approval at this time. While proposals for such subsidies to parents sending their children to private school did make it onto referenda in 11 states and the District of Columbia from 1966 to 1981, voters rejected the initiatives by significant margins in all cases (Catterall, 1984).

### *Conservative Adoption*

The concept of markets in education—whether facilitated by tuition tax credits or vouchers—had yet to gain traction. The prevailing model for school reform was rooted in government action, via desegregation as well as such supplementary programs as Head Start and Job Corps launched by the War on Poverty under President Lyndon B. Johnson. Yet, the tide turned in the 1980s, as frustration with these initiatives mounted (Henig, 1989; Moe, 2001).

In particular, busing as a means to improving the educational outcomes of inner-city minority students had generated fierce resistance (Lukas, 1985; Viteritti, 1999; Patterson, 2001; Caldas & Bankston, 2005; Garland, 2013). One consequence was substantial white flight from cities. Another was significant minority opposition to long commutes for children to unwelcoming neighborhoods. A third consequence was minority opposition to the very notion that integrated classrooms were necessary for better educational outcomes. The publication in 1983 of the report *A Nation at Risk* by President Ronald Reagan’s National Commission on Excellence in Education compounded concern that education policymakers were on the wrong path (Moe, 2001). With the claim that “a rising tide of mediocrity” was overtaking the nation’s schools and posing a threat to “our very future

as a Nation and a people,” the authors of the report cleared the way for substantial reform (NCEE, 1983, p. 5). Finally, the rise of Margaret Thatcher as well as Reagan and the fall of the Berlin Wall spelled confidence in market-based solutions (Fukuyama, 1992; Stanislaw & Yergin, 1998; Abrams, 2016; Michaels, 2017). Support for a market-driven approach to education naturally followed such confidence.

No book captured this support as well as John Chubb and Terry Moe’s *Politics, Markets, and America’s Schools* (1990). Building on Reagan’s contention in his first inaugural address that “government is not the solution to our problem” but rather the problem itself, Chubb and Moe argued that school autonomy constituted the most important prerequisite for effective school systems, while bureaucracy and the “direct democratic control” behind it amounted to the most significant impediments (pp. 183–184). To Chubb and Moe, the answer was a system of choice amounting to a muted version of Friedman’s proposal. As such, it was, in their opinion, a cure-all:

Without being too literal about it, we think reformers would do well to entertain the notion that choice *is* a panacea. This is our way of saying that choice is not like the other reforms and should not be combined with them as part of a reformist strategy for improving America’s schools. Choice is a self-contained reform with its own rationale and justification. It has the capacity *all by itself* to bring about the kind of transformation that, for years, reformers have been seeking to engineer in myriad other ways. (p. 217)

In keeping with Friedman, Chubb and Moe granted parents and schools substantial latitude. Schools would be in control of admission and retention of students. Schools could be private, either parochial or nonsectarian, as well as public. And schools would be held primarily accountable through parental choice, not government, which would be relegated to “a supporting role” limited to determining requirements for health and safety, graduation, and teacher certification; enforcing nondiscrimination in admissions; and “monitoring the full and honest disclosure of information by the schools” (Chubb & Moe, 1990, p. 225).

In parting with Friedman—and siding with Jencks, Sizer, Coons, and Sugarman—Chubb and Moe stipulated that, in the name of equality, states should require wealthy districts to contribute more money than poor districts to fund this system. Moreover, Chubb and Moe parted with Friedman in three additional respects. First, they contended that the vouchers—or “scholarships”—would “at no point . . . go to parents or students” but would rather go directly from “choice offices” in each district to participating schools chosen by parents or students. Second, they advised against allowing parents “to supplement their scholarship amounts with personal funds,” contending that such topping-up would “threaten to produce too many disparities and inequalities” (Chubb & Moe, 1990, p. 220). And finally, they made no mention of for-profit schools playing a role in their market system, though Chubb himself one year later became the chief education officer of the Edison Project, a for-profit school operator whose initial business model hinged on a national system of vouchers (Kozol, 1992; Abrams, 2016).

### Compromise

The country’s first voucher system comprising private schools—setting aside the voucher systems for rural areas established in the 19th century in Vermont and Maine—went into effect a year after the publication of Chubb and Moe’s book. Ratified by the Wisconsin legislature in 1990, the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program comported in part with Chubb and Moe’s recommendations: In granting scholarships to children from families whose income did not surpass 175 percent of the federal poverty level, the program served an egalitarian purpose, but it served only a small portion of poor children through a lottery and excluded all other children; in comprising private schools,



the program distinguished itself from the Alum Rock experiment in the 1970s but did not include religious schools. In time, the program opened up to all children from low-income families, and the income threshold itself climbed to encompass more families. In addition, the prohibition against inclusion of religious schools was nullified by the Wisconsin Supreme Court in 1998 (Viteritti, 1999).

The shepherds and champions of the program, Annette “Polly” Williams and Howard Fuller, echoed Kenneth Clark as leaders in the Black community decrying the condition of largely Black schools and calling for choice as a remedy. Fuller, Milwaukee’s school superintendent, called the city’s schools “a failing system.” Williams, a member of the Wisconsin State Assembly, said, “I came up with choice outside the public school system because I couldn’t get choice inside it” (Viteritti, 1999, p. 100).

Cleveland followed suit in 1995 with a similar choice program and included religious schools from the start. A member of the Cleveland City Council, Fannie Lewis, in turn echoed Williams and Fuller as a leader in the Black community with the same message, declaring that school choice would bring hope (Viteritti, 1999). As in Milwaukee, the choice program in Cleveland, called the Cleveland Scholarship Program, started small and grew considerably. Statewide voucher programs were introduced in Florida in 1999, Louisiana in 2008, Indiana in 2011, Ohio and Wisconsin in 2013, and North Carolina in 2014.

On the right, the support for Fuller, Williams, and Lewis was loud and clear (Moe, 2001). But there was also vigorous support on the left that recalled Jencks’ and Sizer’s as well as Clark’s arguments. In a 1998 *Wall Street Journal* op-ed entitled “Why I’m Reluctantly Backing Vouchers,” Arthur Levine, then-president of Teachers College, Columbia University, wrote that he had long been an opponent of vouchers but “after much soul-searching” concluded they were “essential for the poorest Americans attending the worst public schools.” Levine continued, “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.” Instead, Levine proposed, vouchers should be made available to “poor, urban children attending the bottom 10% of public schools” so they could attend either “nonsectarian private schools or better public schools in the suburbs” (A. Levine, 1998, p. A28).

Joining Levine on the left with a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed in 2000 entitled “The Case for ‘Progressive’ Vouchers” was Robert Reich, the former labor secretary under President Bill Clinton. Reich wrote, “The only way to begin to decouple poor kids from lousy schools is to give poor kids additional resources, along with vouchers enabling them and their parents to choose how to use them” (Reich, 2000, p. A26).

Two years later, the Supreme Court addressed the question of whether the Cleveland Scholarship Program violated the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment, which separates church and state by barring Congress from making any law “respecting an establishment of religion.” In *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*, the Court prefaced its determination by remarking upon the same dire educational situation of inner-city youth that Levine and Reich, as well as Clark, Jencks, and Sizer identified long before. Citing the many indicators of failure of Cleveland’s public schools as the backdrop for the voucher program, the Court proceeded to declare that the program did not violate the Establishment Clause for two reasons: The program did not directly channel money to religious schools but rather allocated it to parents in the form of vouchers to be used at religious or nonsectarian private schools; and in providing parents this choice, the program did not coerce them into choosing religious schools but rather provided religious schools as one option among several, including community schools and magnet schools. “In sum, the Ohio program is entirely neutral with respect to religion,” resolved the Court. “It provides benefits directly to a wide spectrum of individuals, defined only by financial need and residence in a particular school district” (*Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*, 2002, p. 662).

The Supreme Court thus paved the way for inclusion of religious schools in voucher programs across the country. Yet, vouchers did not go on to become the primary vehicle for choice. While history sided with Friedman on including religious schools in voucher programs, vouchers remained a secondary pathway to choice, at least in the United States. (The story would be quite different in Chile and Sweden.) The primary vehicle for choice in the U.S. belonged to charter schools. Introduced in Minnesota in 1992, charter schools by 2015 existed in 43 states and the District of Columbia and enrolled nearly 3 million students (or 6 percent of the country's K–12 students) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). By contrast, vouchers (along with tax-credit scholarships, their more malleable kin) by 2015 existed in 20 states and the District of Columbia but were used by only 390,000 students (or not 1 percent of the country's K–12 students) (Friedman Foundation, 2016).

Charter schools could nevertheless be considered voucher schools by another name in that states conferred charter schools with much of the administrative and pedagogical autonomy voucher advocates desired. In fact, charter schools comport closely with the prescriptions of Chubb and Moe, except that charters must be nonsectarian and must use lotteries if oversubscribed, whereas Chubb and Moe argued that school leaders in a market system should have full control over admission of students.

### ***Foreign Endorsement and Compromise***

In Chile and Sweden, Friedman's vision found substantial support. Friedman's presence in Chile was personal. Following Augusto Pinochet's seizure of power through a military coup in 1973, many of Friedman's students went on to assume policymaking positions under Pinochet. These so-called Chicago Boys were the product of a collaborative program established in the 1950s by the U.S. government between the University of Chicago and the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile in the name of countering Marxist concepts spreading across Latin America with the laissez-faire ideas of Friedman and his colleagues. With the resignation of the minister of education in 1979, education policy, in fact, became the domain of the Ministry of Finance (Verger, Fontdevila, & Zancajo, 2016).

The Chilean government introduced vouchers two years later with the contention that competition from the private sector would lead to greater efficiency. In keeping with Friedman's vision, the government allowed schools control over admissions and encouraged entrepreneurs to open proprietary schools. The government had previously subsidized tuition at private schools to a limited degree, but the new voucher system boosted the subsidy by 61 percent per student to match the per-pupil expenditure in government schools. The result was a surge in the opening of proprietary schools and a steady decline in the number of students attending government schools. The year before the introduction of vouchers, 78 percent of students in primary and secondary schools attended government schools; 15 percent, private schools with marginal subsidies from the government; and 7 percent, elite schools that took no subsidies. By 2006, the figures were 51 percent, 43 percent, and 6 percent, respectively (Elacqua, 2012).

Until 1990, Friedman's stipulation that the market determine teacher salaries held, but with the restoration of democracy in Chile, uniform salary schedules, based on credentials and seniority, were reinstated. Conversely, another of Friedman's stipulations only went into effect in 1993. Responding to fiscal pressures, the government allowed schools accepting vouchers to charge add-on fees. By 2007, more than half of schools taking vouchers did so. Yet the government reversed course in 2008 in response to reports of increasing inequality in student achievement and growing socioeconomic segregation among schools. Distancing itself from Friedman and instead choosing the highly regulated path of Jencks, Sizer, and Coons and Sugarman, the government enacted the Preferential Subsidy Law, which increased the value of vouchers by 50 percent for students coming from families



in the bottom 40 percent of earnings (Murnane, Waldman, Willett, Bos, & Vegaset, 2017). By 2015, the government had pledged to phase out two additional features basic to Friedman's vision: Voucher schools could no longer control admissions or operate for profit (Grandin, 2015).

The transformation of perspectives on vouchers in Chile was to some degree echoed in Sweden. Vouchers in Sweden were, in effect, the result of a coup of a different form. For a substantial portion of the 20th century, Sweden was run by the Social Democrats. Yet the enchantment with free-market policies sweeping the world in the era of Thatcher and Reagan put Sweden's conservative Moderate Coalition Party (*Moderaterna*) in power in 1991. To the conservatives, the Social Democrats had rendered Sweden an iconically stale, inefficient welfare state. Privatization, they argued, would revitalize the country through choice and competition (Abrams, 2016). Carl Bildt, the leader of the *Moderaterna*, made this clear soon after becoming prime minister: "The time for the Nordic model has passed . . . It created societies that were too monopolized, too expensive, and didn't give people the freedom of choice that they wanted; societies that lacked flexibility and dynamism" (Hilson, 2008, pp. 180–181).

For Bildt and the *Moderaterna*, the school sector, in particular, was rigid and inefficient. Their answer was vouchers, which they introduced in 1992. Unlike in Chile, where before the introduction of vouchers 22 percent of primary and secondary students attended private schools (with and without subsidies), only 1 percent did so in Sweden, with the government covering approximately 50 percent of tuition at religious, Montessori, and Waldorf schools, and 35 percent at international schools. In contrast to Friedman's vision for vouchers as well as initial policy in Chile, vouchers in Sweden would correspond in value to the per-pupil expenditure in each municipality and cover all of tuition, with no additional fees permitted. Also, all schools would participate (including the country's three elite boarding schools, where vouchers would cover tuition but not boarding costs), and schools would admit students on a first-come, first-served basis (Abrams, 2016). The parity in funding nevertheless took several years to establish. At the outset, vouchers covered 85 percent of tuition, with add-on fees allowed. When the Social Democrats returned to power in 1994, they reduced coverage to 75 percent. But two years later, the Social Democrats boosted coverage to 100 percent, with the specification that add-on fees be nullified (Klitgaard, 2007).

In keeping with Friedman's vision as well as initial policy in Chile, proprietary as well as religious schools would participate in Sweden, and the market would determine teacher salaries, rather than fixed schedules tied to credentials and seniority. Proprietary schools became fundamental to Sweden's voucher program, in part because the government needed to entice people to open schools in order for choice to exist. The supply of private schools in 1991 was, as noted, minute. In giving entrepreneurs an opportunity to earn a return on their investment in opening private schools, the government incentivized the creation of a sector. By 2010, 1,230, or 22 percent, of Sweden's 5,641 primary and secondary schools were independent and financed by vouchers. Of those 1,230 schools, 930, or 76 percent, were run by for-profit operators, many of which were networks, such as *Kunskapskolan*, with 33 secondary schools in 2012; *Internationella Engelska Skolan*, with 22 secondary schools in the same year; and *AcadeMedia*, with 285 primary and secondary schools as well as preschools in 2014 (Abrams, 2016).

Proprietary schools were also fundamental to Sweden's voucher program because of the shared conviction articulated by Bildt that government was inefficient. Peje Emilsson, the founder and chairman of *Kunskapskolan* as well as Bildt's predecessor in the 1970s as the chairman of the Confederation of Swedish Conservative and Liberal Students, made Bildt's point specifically in the context of schools. In a 2009 meeting of his company's board of directors, he declared, "A majority of Swedish schools will in time be run for profit, as there will be pressure for greater efficiency. There's too much slack in the current system" (Abrams, 2016, p. 262).

To many Swedish teachers, the voucher system also held strong appeal. Both teacher unions—*Lärarförbundet* (representing preschool and primary teachers) and *Lärarnas Riksförbund* (representing

secondary teachers)—endorsed the system in large part because of two expectations: more opportunity to teach in a variety of schools; and higher pay, as Friedman forecasted, due to more competition among schools for teachers. The latter expectation met with disappointment, however. The voucher system instead drove down salaries because teachers working in private schools did not have to be certified. Union officials conceded they had not anticipated the ramifications of this exemption for private schools and saw to it that legislation was passed in 2006 to terminate the exemption for all new hires (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2011, Table D3.4; Abrams, 2016).

## Concerns

### *Racial and Ethnic Segregation*

In his 1955 essay on vouchers, Friedman anticipated a central critique of his proposal, though he buried this acknowledgment in a long footnote and attempted in considerable detail to deflect expected censure. Segregationists, Friedman conceded, might well use vouchers to send their children to all-White private schools rather than public schools forced to integrate by the Supreme Court's unanimous decision one year earlier in *Brown v. Board of Education*. "I deplore segregation and racial prejudice," he wrote, but "forced nonsegregation" was not the answer. He continued:

The appropriate activity for those who oppose segregation and racial prejudice is to try to persuade others of their views; if and as they succeed, the mixed schools will grow at the expense of the nonmixed, and a gradual transition will take place. So long as the school system is publicly operated, only drastic change is possible; one must go from one extreme to the other; it is a great virtue of the private arrangement that it permits a gradual transition. (Friedman, 1955, p. 131)

Though expressed in the fine print of a footnote, Friedman's point captured the attention of two libertarian economists at the University of Virginia opposed to the Supreme Court's ruling: James Buchanan and Warren Nutter. To them, *Brown* constituted a blatant violation of states' rights. Allying themselves with Virginia's Senator Harry F. Byrd and his movement of "massive resistance" to federal orders of school integration, Buchanan and Nutter built on Friedman's argument to contend in a 1959 proposal, entitled "The Economics of Universal Education," that they supported neither "involuntary (or coercive) segregation" nor "involuntary integration." Their solution was total educational privatization through the sale of all public schools and their inventories to independent operators, who would, in turn, compete for the students they desired (MacLean, 2017, p. 66).

Friedman wrote Buchanan and Nutter that he found their proposal "admirable" and encouraged them to consider publishing it. Yet, civil rights leaders in Virginia naturally found the concept of public money going to private schools operated for segregationist purposes to be abhorrent. In response to *Brown*, the state had already been issuing tuition vouchers to parents wishing to send their children to private, segregated academies. Oliver Hill, an NAACP lawyer based in Richmond, articulated in plain terms his opposition to such state subsidies to private schools: "No one in a democratic society has a right to have his private prejudices financed at public expense" (MacLean, 2017, p. 69).

Hill's objection has since been voiced in many forms as a central criticism of vouchers in Chile, the Netherlands, and Sweden (Ladd et al., 2011; Vlachos, 2011; Bunar, 2012; Elacqua, 2012; Abrams, 2016; Verger, Fontdevila, & Zancajo, 2016; Murnane et al., 2017) as well as the U.S. (Levin, 1968; Hirschman, 1970; Henig, 1994; Ravitch, 2010): They threaten to divide communities

rather than unite them. Even if private schools in the U.S. cannot make admissions decisions based on race, as the Supreme Court ruled in *Runyon v. McCrary* in 1976, they, like private schools abroad, can locate or market themselves in ways that make integration much less likely.

### ***Opacity***

Amidst the despairing verdicts about inner-city public schools by Rogers, Clark, Jencks, and Sizer, the economist Henry M. Levin weighed in with cautionary words about vouchers in an essay in the *Urban Review* entitled “The Failure of the Public Schools and the Free Market Remedy” (Levin, 1968). Levin conceded that progressive voucher systems akin to those advanced by Jencks and Sizer might be effective but he warned, “The fact that education as a good is difficult to define or measure . . . violates an important premise of the competitive market” (p. 34), meaning even a highly regulated voucher system intended to favor poor children might fall far short of providing quality schooling. (See also Chapter 16 in this volume.)

In the case of for-profit schools taking vouchers, the cause for concern is acute. Suspicions of corner-cutting were basic to the massive protests beginning in 2006 in Chile against for-profit management of schools (Elacqua, 2012). Similar suspicions kindled opposition to for-profit school management in Sweden (Vlachos, 2011; Abrams, 2016). In addition, scholars in Sweden have documented grade inflation at private schools intended to convey institutional effectiveness (Henrekson & Vlachos, 2009; Vlachos, 2011; Bunar, 2012).

### ***Inadequate Transportation***

Levin also worried about inadequate transportation: “Even if the slum children were accepted at private schools located outside the ghetto . . . the poor would have to bear the costs of transportation to such institutions” (Levin, 1968, p. 34). This matter of transportation would even apply in the case of cross-town commutes, as documented decades later in Milwaukee and similar cities with voucher-funded private schools that do not provide busing (Teske, Fitzpatrick, & O’Brien, 2009; Richards, 2017).

### ***Economic Stratification***

Levin’s chief concern with Friedman’s proposal, however, was the likelihood of greater segregation, not only by race and ethnicity but also by class. Levin pointed to experience already with private schools as evidence for this conclusion and cited Friedman’s provision allowing parents of greater means to supplement their vouchers with additional funds as cause for considerable concern that greater stratification would result (Levin, 1968). Scholars have documented that the provision allowing add-on fees in Chile had precisely this effect, prompting the government to enact the Preferential Subsidy Law, described above (Murnane et al., 2017).

### ***Erosion of Political Engagement***

Citing Levin’s critique of Friedman’s proposal two years later and building on it, the economist A.O. Hirschman contended in his book *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* that vouchers constituted a retreat rather than a remedy. For Hirschman, the implications of Friedman’s proposal were clear: Many parents of means would withdraw their children from public schools and, in the process, take with them their countervailing power to achieve improvement. Hirschman instead urged political involvement: “[T]he decision to voice one’s views and efforts to make them prevail are contemptuously referred to by Friedman as a resort to ‘cumbrous political channels.’ But what else is the political, and indeed

the democratic, process than the digging, the use, and hopefully the slow improvement of these very channels?” (Hirschman, 1970, p. 17).

In his book *Rethinking School Choice*, the political scientist Jeffrey R. Henig supplemented Hirschman’s worry about the decline in parental voice:

The real danger in the market-based proposals for choice is not that they might allow some students to attend privately run schools at public expense, but that they will erode the public forums in which decisions with societal consequences can democratically be resolved. (Henig, 1994, p. 200)

In this regard, Williams and Fuller, years after laying the foundation for vouchers in Milwaukee, faulted authorities for raising the income limits for participants and eliminating the lid on enrollment. For both, vouchers were meant to give low-income families alternatives, not to replace public schooling (Richards, 2017).

### ***Reductionism***

To Henig (1994), the confidence in vouchers as an elixir was misplaced, particularly as it eclipsed the effectiveness of “a vast array of school-reform initiatives” (p. 205)—from more challenging curricula and better measurements of student performance to greater autonomy for school leaders and fairer school funding. In his dissent in *Zelman*, Justice John Paul Stevens similarly faulted his colleagues for placing so much faith in vouchers. To Justice Stevens, vouchers obscured the need for substantial amelioration of the everyday lives of inner-city children. Vouchers themselves, he wrote, could not compensate for “the disastrous conditions [in Cleveland] that prevented over 90 percent of the student body from meeting basic proficiency standards.” Such failure, he wrote, called for “massive improvements unrelated to the voucher program” (*Zelman*, 2002, p. 684).

### ***Transaction Costs***

In an article in the *Economics of Education Review* the same year Milwaukee implemented its voucher system, Levin carried on his critique of vouchers by exposing a troubling incongruity: The conviction that a market system for schooling is optimal obscures the difficulty of arranging and regulating it. Considering the institutional mechanisms that were central to Coons and Sugarman’s ill-fated voucher initiative in California in the 1970s, Levin delved into the complexities and costs involved in a host of factors, such as providing parents necessary information about educational options; ensuring schools abide by requirements for admissions, curricula, and pedagogical practice; adjudicating parental complaints; supervising attendance; and orchestrating transportation (Levin, 1991). To that list may be added the substantial costs to schools for marketing (Lubienski, 2005; Bunar, 2012).

### ***Cream-skimming***

The matter of market-based systems favoring students with better academic records or parents with more education has been addressed by many scholars (Martinez, Godwin, & Kemerer, 1996; Wells, 1996; Witte & Thorn, 1996; Levin, 1998; Ravitch, 2010). If voucher programs allow schools to make admissions decisions, as recommended by Friedman as well as Chubb and Moe, less accomplished students will be left behind. And even if voucher programs proscribe such administrative autonomy, the children of parents lacking the know-how or initiative to navigate the application process will be left behind.

The economists Dennis Epple and Richard E. Romano (1998, 2008) addressed the peer-group effects of such outcomes in two journal articles. Student sorting climbs with market-based systems, they wrote, to the benefit of high-achieving students and the detriment of their low-achieving peers. While the concentration in classrooms of high performers has a positive catalyzing effect, the converse is true in classrooms of low performers. The economists Scott E. Carrell and Mark L. Hoekstra (2010) buttressed these conclusions in their documentation of the negative impact of troubled boys on their classmates in grades 3 to 5.

### **Religious Indoctrination**

The most salient issue with vouchers to many adversaries in the U.S. is keeping church and state separate. While Jencks and Sizer, along with Friedman, and Chubb and Moe endorsed public funding of religious schools, opposition to such funding goes back far and endures. In his annual message to Congress, President Ulysses S. Grant in 1875 proposed an amendment to the Constitution to mandate that states throughout the country “establish and forever maintain free public schools,” with the stipulation that no public money be allocated “for the benefit or in aid, directly or indirectly, of any religious authority.” Grant’s proposal won praise in the press and bipartisan support in Congress, though not enough to become a reality (Wells, 1993; Green, 2012). It nevertheless spurred Republican Party rival Congressman James G. Blaine of Maine to endorse an alternative amendment limited to proscribing state support of religious schools. The so-called Blaine Amendment, a veiled nativist effort to hinder the growth of Catholic schools and the surging influence of their Democratic Party patrons, also failed to win the necessary votes to become a reality. Ultimately, however, it took the form of amendments to 37 state constitutions, which stand more than a century later (DeForrest, 2003).

The Supreme Court, as explained above, found a way around these amendments by ruling in *Zelman* that public money could fund attendance at religious schools so long as 1) the funding occurred indirectly via vouchers and 2), parents were not forced to send their children to religious schools. Yet Justice Stevens in his dissent dismissed these qualifications as beside the point. While parents using vouchers were not being forced to send their children to religious schools, government money was nevertheless paying for “religious indoctrination.” Citing the religious strife that compelled “our forbears to migrate to this continent” and similar strife at the time dividing the Balkans, Northern Ireland, and the Middle East, Stevens appealed for a strict separation of church and state: “Whenever we remove a brick from the wall that was designed to separate religion and government, we increase the risk of religious strife and weaken the foundation of our democracy” (*Zelman*, 2002, pp. 685–686).

Critics of Stevens could, of course, point to federal money going to religious colleges and universities via the G.I. Bill, Pell Grants, and Stafford Loans. Justice Sandra Day O’Connor, in fact, made precisely this point regarding Pell Grants in her concurrence with the majority opinion in *Zelman*, much as Friedman had done in 1955 regarding the G.I. Bill. Yet, in fairness to Stevens, such critics would have to concede that the likelihood of indoctrination of an elementary school student far exceeds that of a high school graduate.

### **Conclusion**

Given their many incarnations, vouchers have generated myriad perspectives. Basic to these differences in opinion are conceptions of individual rights and responsibilities. Equally fundamental to these differences are beliefs about what schools and markets can and should accomplish. Determinations of the efficacy of vouchers ultimately depend as much on these matters of belief as on data about test scores, graduation rates, and educational and occupational attainment. Studies of these

metrics alone have yet to provide compelling evidence for vouchers, at home or abroad (Carnoy, 2017; Epple, Romano, & Urquiola, 2017; Hobbs, 2018; Wolf, Witte, & Kisida, 2018). Yet to many audiences, vouchers mean much more than such metrics.

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