

LOOMIS CHAFFEE DEBATE TOURNAMENT PACKET: JANUARY 2017

In November President Elect Donald Trump named Betsy DeVos as his pick for Secretary of Education. The pick drew widespread attention in part because Ms. DeVos is one of the most enthusiastic promoters of school vouchers (a mechanism that allows public money to be used at parental discretion toward the costs of sending a child to a private or parochial school). Scrutiny of Ms. DeVos will, no doubt, include a spirited discussion/debate on the merits/advisability of promoting and implementing even more widespread use of school voucher programs. We take on that issue today as participants debate both sides of the resolution:

Resolved, that federal, state and local governments should develop and implement programs to promote and support increased use of school vouchers for the education of students in grades K through 12.

The articles below, while not exhaustive, give a glimpse of some of the issues as to whether vouchers should be seen as a worthwhile mechanism that facilitates school choice and improves education for all through marketplace forces, or as a destructive mechanism that can harm critical public education and divert needed dollars to marginally effective schools (among other issues).

SCHOOL VOUCHERS

Inside Penn Wharton Public Policy Initiative

ISSUE BRIEF: Volume 4, Number 9

by Vincent S.J. Buccola, JD

November 25, 2015

A school voucher is a credit given to parents who want to move their child from a public school to a private school of their choosing. Most voucher programs involve moving taxpayers' money from public schools to private schools. They allow parents to take their child's portion of the per pupil spending of the state and reallocate the funds to private schools. School voucher programs have started to spread across the country. Such programs exist in Milwaukee, Indiana, North Carolina, Ohio, Florida, and Washington DC. ...

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The research on vouchers has allowed many politicians and educators to come to very different conclusions on the effectiveness and impact of these programs. Many districts have had great successes with vouchers, while others struggled with them. The long-term impact of these policies has not yet been determined, but hopefully with the coming years we will have the data to make more informed decisions on education policy. ---END---

Excerpt from Wikipedia Article on Betsy DeVos:

Education as industry

DeVos, in contrast to the idea that the U.S. public education system should be maintained as a civic institution, views education as an industry that should be opened up to entrepreneurs and innovators, and she has stated that education is "a closed system, a closed industry, a closed market. It's a monopoly, a dead end."^[44] *DeVos believes that opening up the education market will offer parents increased "choice," a view that critics call a drive to privatize the American public education system.*^[44]

School vouchers:

DeVos is known as a "a fierce proponent of school vouchers" that would allow students to attend private schools with public funding.^[45] According to *The New York Times*, it "is hard to find anyone more passionate about the idea of steering public dollars away from traditional public schools than Betsy DeVos."^[31]

An article in *The Washington Post* stated that "her policy positions on school vouchers appear to be motivated by her Christian faith".^[46]

DeVos served as chairwoman of the board of *Alliance for School Choice*^[47] She heads the All Children Matter PAC which she and her husband founded in 2003 to promote school vouchers, tax credits to businesses that give private school scholarships, and candidates who support these causes.^[48] Over the years, DeVos and her husband have provided millions in funding for the organization. In 2008, All Children Matter was fined a total of \$5.2 million after the Ohio Elections Commission brought a case for campaign spending violations.^[49] The fine was never paid.^{[50][51]}

Her other activities on behalf of public-school reform have included membership on the boards of directors of the Advocates for School Choice, the American Education Reform Council, and the Education Freedom Fund.^[52] She has chaired the boards of Choices for Children, and Great Lakes Education Project (GLEP).^[53]

DeVos is Chair of the American Federation for Children (AFC), which describes itself as "a leading national advocacy organization promoting school choice, with a specific focus on advocating for school vouchers and scholarship tax credit programs." It is affiliated with the [Alliance for School Choice](#).^[54]

During the 1990s, she served on the boards of Children First America and the American Education Reform Council, which sought to expand school choice through vouchers and tax credits. She and her husband worked for the successful passage of Michigan's first charter-school bill in 1993, and for the unsuccessful effort in 2000 to amend Michigan's constitution to allow tax-credit scholarships or vouchers. In response to that defeat, DeVos started a PAC, the Great Lakes Education Project, which championed charter schools. DeVos's husband and [John Walton](#) then founded All Children Matter, a political organization, which she chaired.^[55]... ---END--

"Why private school vouchers aren't enough"

Mathews, Jay [The Washington Post](#); Washington, D.C. [Washington, D.C.] 20 Nov 2012.

If I were a D.C. parent with little money and a child in a bad public school, I would happily accept a taxpayer-supported voucher to send my kid to a private school. But I still don't think voucher programs are a good use of education dollars, particularly after reading a startling story on [The Washington Post's](#) front page on Sunday.

My colleagues Lyndsey Layton and Emma Brown revealed that the \$133 million appropriated for vouchers in the District since 2004 have gone to private schools with no requirements to report publicly how well their students are doing. Some of those schools have dubious curriculums and inadequate facilities. At least eight of the 52 schools with voucher students are not accredited.

Take a look at the Academy for Ideal Education in Northeast Washington. Almost all of its students are in the voucher program run by the nonprofit D.C. Children and Youth Investment Trust Corp. The school's founder, Paulette Jones-Imaan, believes in learning through music, stretching and meditation, Layton and Brown report.

The Academy for Ideal Education does not have to reveal its results on the nationally standardized test that voucher students are required to take, but I suspect those children are not learning much. I have some experience with the Ideal Academy, a charter high school also founded by Jones-Imaan. In 2009 I wrote about it having some of the lowest achievement rates in the city, which I knew because charters have to report their test scores. The D.C. authorizing board for charters forced it to close. Sadly, no agency has that power over private schools using vouchers.

Apparently there are not even reliable health standards. Layton and Brown visited one school where "the only bathroom . . . had a floor blackened with dirt and a sink coated in grime."

Ed Davies, interim executive director of the agency running the voucher program, admitted to Layton and Brown that quality control is "a blind spot" because the law has so many holes. The same goes for voucher programs in 14 states. Advocates for parent choice think vouchers are a good way to free educators and parents from oppressive government bureaucrats, but a voucher surge is likely to strangle that tradition of private school independence.

Only 1,584 D.C. students are receiving vouchers, just 2 percent of all publicly funded students in the city. The lack of oversight exposed by Layton and Brown is disturbing, but affects too few students to inspire much action. Imagine what would happen if voucher enrollment grew to match D.C. charter school enrollment, 35,019, or 42 percent of all publicly funded students.

A voucher program that size would cost about \$450 million a year in tax dollars. At that price, the current lack of accreditation and accountability would no longer be tolerated. Private schools would have to accept severe regulation if they wanted voucher funds. Good-bye to their flexibility and autonomy. The voucher movement would die from its own success.

The temptations of voucher cash are great. The D.C. program pays \$8,000 a year for every elementary school student and \$12,000 for each high schooler. Rent an old house or storefront, lure parents with promises of a free private school education, and watch the money rolling in. Teachers don't need credentials, just four-year college degrees. Schools don't have to publish their test results, or answer questions from nasty reporters.

The better alternatives for those of us who want more parent choice are innovative regular public schools and independent charter schools. They are regulated, accredited and accountable. They have to report their test scores. They can be closed if they don't work.

Vouchers sound good to the relatively few families who get them, but they will never be able to help more than a tiny fraction of the students who need better schools. END.

“Vouchers in Black and White”

Editorial

Wall Street Journal, Eastern Edition; [New York, N.Y] 08 Nov 2006: A.22.

One frequent, and nasty, argument against school vouchers is that they will end up resegregating public schools. It's all the nastier because the truth is the opposite, as some new evidence shows.

The liberal Urban League has charged that school vouchers -- which go mostly to minority families -- would "subsidize segregation." ...

[A] new study by Greg Foster of the Milton and Rose Friedman Foundation finds that vouchers have allowed students to move to more racially integrated private schools. The Friedman Foundation favors school choice, but its data here seem unassailable and the Foundation is challenging anyone to refute it. The study finds that in 2003 private voucher schools in Milwaukee were 13% more racially diverse, and the Cleveland voucher schools 18% more diverse, than their public school counterparts.

America's inner-city public schools remain highly segregated primarily because the neighborhoods and school districts are themselves divided by race or ethnicity. The public urban schools, Mr. Foster finds, tend to "reproduce the segregation that arises from housing patterns." Vouchers increase racial mixing in schools, the study concludes, because "they break down geographic barriers, drawing together students across neighborhood boundaries in a way the government school monopoly cannot match even when it tries to do so."

In the 50 years since *Brown v. Board of Education*, educators have thought that if they could integrate the schools, even using such detested strategies as forced busing, school quality would improve. It hasn't. School vouchers give inner-city and other kids a chance to escape failing public schools, and it's a nice bonus to know that this choice will produce classrooms that, to borrow a famous phrase, look like America. ---END---

“Why Trump’s Education Pick Won’t Be Able to Privatize U.S. Schools”

Kevin Carey, *New York Times*, Nov. 23, 2016.

Betsy DeVos, a wealthy Republican philanthropist, whom [Donald J. Trump selected](#) on Wednesday as the next secretary of education, has spent her career promoting a market-based, privatized vision of public education. If she pursues that agenda in her new role, she is quite likely to face disappointment and frustration.

Market-based school reforms generally come in two flavors: vouchers and [charter schools](#). They differ in both structure and political orientation. Charter schools are public schools, open to all, accountable in varying degrees to public authorities, and usually run by nonprofit organizations. Vouchers, by contrast, allow students to attend any school, public or private, including those run by religious organizations and for-profit companies.

While charters enjoy support from most Republicans and some Democrats, vouchers have a narrower political base, those who tend to favor free markets to replace many government responsibilities.

Working primarily in Michigan, Ms. DeVos has been a strong advocate of vouchers, and her charter work has often focused on making charter schools as private as possible. The large majority of Michigan charters are run by for-profit companies, in contrast with most states. The DeVos family [donated](#) more than \$1 million to Republican lawmakers earlier this year during a successful effort to oppose new oversight of charters.

That support made Ms. DeVos a natural choice for Mr. Trump, who proposed a \$20 billion federal voucher program on the campaign trail, and has likened the public school system to a monopoly business that needs to be broken up.

But any effort to promote vouchers from Washington will run up against the basic structures of American education.

The United States spends over \$600 billion a year on public K-12 schools. Less than 9 percent of that money comes from the federal government, and it is almost exclusively dedicated to specific populations of children, most notably students with disabilities and students in low-income communities. There are no existing federal funds that can easily be turned into vouchers large enough to pay for school tuition on the open market. Mr. Trump's \$20 billion proposal would be, by itself, very expensive. It may be hard to fit into a budget passed by a Republican Congress that has pledged to enact large tax cuts for corporations and citizens, expand the military and eliminate the budget deficit, all at the same time. Yet \$20 billion isn't nearly enough to finance vouchers nationwide, which is why Mr. Trump's proposal assumes that states will kick in another \$110 billion.

States don't have that kind of money lying around. The only plausible source is existing school funding. But even if Ms. DeVos were to find a willing governor and state legislature, it's not that easy. Roughly half of all nonfederal education funding comes from local property taxes raised by over 13,000 local school districts. They and their elected representatives will have a say, too.

This is where the intersection of geography and politics makes any national voucher plan much more difficult to enact. The practicality of school choice is highly related to population density. Children need to be able to get from home to school and back again every day. In a large metropolis with public transportation, there could be dozens of schools within reasonable travel distance of most families. In a small city, town or rural area, there

will be few or none.

And population density, as Americans saw in the last election, is increasingly the dividing line of the nation's politics. A significant number of Mr. Trump's most ardent supporters live in sparsely populated areas where school choice is logistically unlikely. At the same time, many of the municipalities where market reforms are theoretically much easier to put in voted overwhelmingly against the president-elect.

On Election Day, voters in liberal Massachusetts rejected a ballot measure by a 62-38 margin that would have increased the number of charter schools in the state, [despite strong evidence](#) that the state's well-supervised charters produce superior results for low-income and minority schoolchildren.

In theory, information technology offers a way around the population density problem. Virtual schools can be attended from anywhere with an internet connection. [For-profit colleges](#) that have pocketed billions of dollars by offering low-quality online courses are poised to make a comeback under the Trump administration, which is likely to roll back President Obama's efforts to regulate them.

But the federal government is a much larger financial contributor to colleges and universities than to K-12 schools, and college students don't need an adult looking after them all day. Ms. DeVos will probably be a boon to the relatively small, growing population of families that home-school their children. But most parents will still want their children in a school building during the day, taught by a teacher, not by a computer.

...While there is substantial academic literature on school vouchers and while debates continue between opposing camps of researchers, it's safe to say that vouchers have not produced the kind of large improvements in academic achievement that market-oriented reformers originally promised. ---END---

“Do private school vouchers help? New study offers data.” Stacy Teicher Khadaroo. *The Christian Science Monitor*. [Boston, MA] 23 August 2012

A new study suggests that private school vouchers can have a positive impact on the rate at which African-American students attend college.

The study takes a rare long-term view of vouchers, which are often studied for shorter-term effects such as gains on test scores.

We want to have our students college-ready, and to learn that for African-American students, this is a way of improving their chances of being college-ready ... is a really important finding, says voucher advocate Paul Peterson, a Harvard professor and director of the university's Program on Education Policy and Governance, which published the study with the Brookings Institution on Thursday.

The randomized experiment compared about 1,300 students who won a New York City lottery in the late 1990s for privately funded vouchers with a control group that applied for but did not win the lottery.

Tracking them until 2011, it found no significant effect in the overall group, but African-American students who used the vouchers to attend private schools were 24 percent more likely to go on to college than African-Americans in the control group. For private four-year college attendance, the increase was 58 percent.

Because vouchers are such a politicized issue, the study has stirred up a variety of reactions. Voucher proponents cite it as another reason to support programs that provide public dollars to low-income parents who want to send their children to private or parochial schools. Groups opposed to vouchers, as well as some academic researchers, point to the limited scope of the study and raise questions about the methodology.

Pundits may dismiss vouchers, but African-American parents know they work, and strong scientific data prove they work, said Robert Enlow, president of the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice in Indianapolis, in a statement.

The grandiose statements made in the executive summary are not substantiated by the data, countered Anne Bryant, executive director of the National School Boards Association, in a statement. The NSBA opposes publicly funded vouchers for private schools.

The study doesn't track what happens to people who left the voucher program, nor does it effectively isolate the impact of private school or school choice, NSBA contends.

Expanding voucher programs wouldn't necessarily yield the same kinds of results because including more low-income students in private schools changes the social composition of schools the peer effect on student achievement when there are more middle- or upper-income students, says Christopher Lubienski, an education policy professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

While the study authors acknowledge that near the end of the report, he says, it would be better to control for that [peer effect] in the study.

Research as a whole indicates there doesn't appear to be much of an impact on student success from school vouchers, Professor Lubienski says.

During this presidential election season, school choice is one education issue Mitt Romney is trying to use to appeal to the Republican base. He cites strong results from a voucher program in the District of Columbia that President Obama did not propose to continue funding in his 2013 budget.

Republicans make a moral argument that Mr. Obama is standing in the way of school choice for poor African-Americans, but a study showed the program didn't have a major impact, Lubienski says.

In the 2012 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll on education, 44 percent of Americans say they favor allowing students to choose a private school at public expense. Since 1993, such support has fluctuated between 24 percent and 46 percent.

Thursdays study suggests that vouchers could be a cost-effective policy option when compared with other education-related spending. The vouchers were for \$1,400 a year and were used for an average length of 2.6 years. The study contrasts that with the \$12,000 per-pupil price tag of a Tennessee program to reduce class size which was found to increase African-American college enrollment by 19 percent.

The authors Professor Peterson and Matthew Chingos, a fellow at Brookings's Brown Center on Education Policy also interpret a study on the impact of having a more effective teacher, and they say their voucher study yields better results.

African-American students who used private school vouchers were 24 percent more likely to go on to college than blacks in a control group, the study says. But debate over vouchers has followed. —END—

“The new push for school vouchers at state, federal levels.”

Strauss, Valerie. Weblog Post. Washington Post—Blogs, Washington: WP Company. Feb. 12, 2014.

Bryant is director of the [Education Opportunity Network](#), a partnership effort of the Institute for America's Future and the Opportunity to Learn Campaign. Jeff owns a marketing and communications consultancy in Chapel Hill, N.C., and has written extensively about public education policy. A version of this first appeared on [Salon](#).

By Jeff Bryant

It was ... recently reported that parents who have sent their children to private – often, religious – schools are, in many cases, now getting to extend that privilege at taxpayer expense. In [Indiana](#), a report from the state Department of Education revealed that state taxpayers are now footing a nearly \$21 million bill to give students a private-school education that previously had been paid by their parents. Similarly in [Wisconsin](#), another report revealed that a \$3.2 million new statewide program that sends students to private schools at taxpayer expense mostly serves children who had been getting that privilege paid for by their parents. And the program is due to expand next year.

The Wisconsin state program is a state roll-out of a program that has been operating in Milwaukee for years – the same program that recently saw a [private school](#) rip off \$2 million in taxpayer money and close its doors in the middle of the night. Leaders of that school were then unearthed by Milwaukee journalists in [Florida](#), where they “now live in a gated community ... by the beach” and operate – not surprisingly – a private religious school that can get taxpayer money from the state.

In [North Carolina](#), the state legislature recently passed a bill to divert \$10 million of taxpayer money meant for public schools to private schools, including [those](#) that “provide an education that is Christ-centered” and teach “the truth of scripture” with “Bible-based facts,” such as: “dinosaurs and humans co-existed on Earth; slave-masters generally treated their slaves well; in some areas, the KKK fought the decline in morality by using the sign of the cross; and gay people have no more claims to special rights than child molesters or rapists.”

What knits these news stories together is a common cause: school vouchers. Vouchers – also called scholarships, tax credits and other variations on a theme – turn public dollars for education into private coin to be expended as parents wish and legislators allow.

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Republicans Introduce Nationwide School Voucher Schemes

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A [new bill introduced](#) by Sen. Lamar Alexander, R-Tenn., just before Obama's address “would take about \$24 billion – or about 41 percent – of current federal spending on elementary and secondary public schools, and allow states to decide whether to give the lowest-income families the money as individual scholarships to pay for private school tuition, or to attend a public school outside the child's traditional neighborhood zone, or a charter school.” The bill would hand over “about \$2,100 in federal money” for each eligible child, based on family income.

Nearly simultaneous to the Alexander bill, [Sen. Tim Scott](#), R-S.C., also introduced a new bill to “provide

federally funded vouchers to children with disabilities, children living on military bases, and children living in impoverished areas,” according to Scott’s official website.

Then, after Obama addressed the nation, Republican leaders took to the airwaves to deliver rebuttals that were laced with the language of school voucher marketing campaigns. In the party’s official response, [Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers](#), R-Wash., assured, “We have plans to improve our education and training systems so you have the choice to determine where your kids go to school.”

Then [Sen. Rand Paul](#), R-Ky., in his address stridently called for solutions from “the marketplace,” promoting his “economic freedom zones” that allow for “school choice” and give parents an “educational tax credit” because parents, “not the government,” know “what’s best” for kids.

The vouchers, by whatever name, are being sold to the American people as a way to “rescue” students – especially those who live in poverty or have disabilities – from “failing” public schools so they can attend a privately run school at the expense of taxpayers.

Said Alexander of his proposal in the pages of [Education Week](#), “There would be no better way to help children move up from the back of the line than by allowing states to use federal dollars to create 11 million new opportunities to choose a better school.”

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The Milwaukee Model Rolls Out to America

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Politicians who media outlets often cast as “moderate” and “bipartisan” are often the purveyors of voucher plans claimed to be “all about the children” but are really opening the doors to opportunists who want to spread religious diatribes, make a buck off the taxpayers, or both.

According to [this story in The New York Times](#), “About a third of states have already taken steps to redefine public education with a network of vouchers and scholarships that allow families to use state taxpayer funds to educate their children however they want, whether it be in public, charter, private or religious schools, online or at home.”

America’s oldest running voucher scheme has taken place in Milwaukee for over 20 years. And the results leave a lot to be desired. A report from the [Associated Press](#) in 2004 looked at the schools receiving the money from Milwaukee’s school voucher program and found that a school that had “received millions of dollars ... was founded by a convicted rapist. Another school reportedly entertained kids with Monopoly while cashing \$330,000 in tuition checks for hundreds of no-show students.”

Then in 2009, another Milwaukee voucher school got into hot water over \$4.5 million it had received from the state of Wisconsin when “no one in the general public knows anything about how students have done academically,” according to a report in the [Milwaukee Journal Sentinel](#). The “most vivid pillar” of the school’s program, according to the report, “has been its emphasis on physical discipline — making students carry desks over their heads, twisting their arms until they ‘give,’ forcing them to do push-ups for infractions.” After the school closed due to its dispute with the state regulators over money, “At least 51 of its 200-plus students have enrolled in the Milwaukee Public Schools since then. What others are doing is unknown.”

Given the report cited above about the Milwaukee voucher school whose owners left students in the lurch and fled to Florida, it’s hard to believe matters have gotten any better for Milwaukee voucher schools. And unfortunately in the meantime, according to AP, “Milwaukee’s 14-year-old voucher program has served as a model for others around the country.”

With the Milwaukee system as the model, voucher programs sprang up across the nation. In Florida, from 2006 to 2010, the state carried out a school voucher plan that resembled “a perverse science experiment, using disabled school kids as lab rats and funded by nine figures in taxpayer cash,” according to a report at [The Miami New Times](#) website.

At one South Florida voucher school that had received “at least \$236,000 from a state-run tax-credit scholarship for low-income kids ... two hundred students were crammed into ever-changing school locations, including a dingy strip-mall space above a liquor store and down the hall from an Asian massage parlor.”

Other cases of voucher school corruption described by the New Times included a school in Hialeah led by a couple who were indicted for stealing information about students from other schools, claiming they were

enrolled in their school and pocketing the tuition money. Founders of the Faith Christian Academy in Polk County were convicted of bilking the state of \$200,000 through false enrollments. And a high school in Boca Raton had a program that made students fill out workbooks every day for five and a half hours.

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When corruption is not the game voucher schools are into, religious indoctrination often sets the agenda.

[Zack Kopplin](#), whose research contributed to the Slate article cited above, “documented over [300 voucher schools](#), in nine states and the District of Columbia, which are receiving public money, and are teaching creationism in their science classes. The program where [he] discovered the most creationist voucher schools was in Florida, where [he] discovered 164 schools.”

In Louisiana’s statewide school voucher scheme, [Kopplin](#) found “at least 20 schools who use a creationist curriculum or blatantly promote creationism on their websites. These 20 schools have been awarded 1,365 voucher slots and can receive as much as \$11,602,500 in taxpayer money annually.”

In the meantime, voucher schools rarely if ever show evidence of improving the academic outcomes of children.

Education historian [Diane Ravitch](#) recently looked into the academic track record of school vouchers and found evaluations have not shown “any test score advantage for students who get vouchers.”

Education research experts at the [National Education Policy Center](#) have examined loads of reports and determined that “even the most dedicated pro-voucher researchers have been unable to find clear evidence of superior performance by students attending private schools as part of a voucher program.” And vouchers “[do not improve college enrollment rates](#).”

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“Accountability” For Thee, Not For Me

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Those who question school vouchers, such as Thomas J. Gentzel, executive director of the National School Boards Association, from the Times article, claim, “The big issue is really that lack of accountability.” Yet most voucher proponents are doing whatever they can to prevent enforcement of accountability.

From [Politico](#), we learn that the bill Lamar Alexander introduced, “would give the states flexibility to design programs that would follow children not only to the public or charter school of their choice, but also to *accredited* private schools, tutoring centers, after-school enrichment programs and any other educational program the state approved. Families could even use the money to purchase homeschooling materials.” (emphasis added)

“Accredited?”

As the reporters at [Politico](#) noted, Alexander’s bill “decentralizes authority, giving states the power to set their own policies.”

Bloggers at [Education Week](#) noted that both Alexander’s bill and the one introduced by Sen. Scott “would allow states to set their own rules and guidelines for how the money would be distributed.”

This lack of accountability for school voucher programs comes right out of the playbook used in voucher schemes outside the Beltway.

In Washington, D.C., [a 2012 Washington Post review](#) of that city’s voucher program — the only federally funded voucher program in the country — found that lack of oversight of that district’s program lead to “hundreds of students” using voucher dollars to “attend schools that are unaccredited or are in unconventional settings, such as a family-run K-12 school operating out of a storefront, a Nation of Islam school based in a converted Deanwood residence, and a school built around the philosophy of a Bulgarian psychotherapist.”

The reporters noted, “At a time when public schools face increasing demands for accountability and transparency, the 52 D.C. private schools that receive millions of federal voucher dollars are subject to few quality controls ... the government has no say over curriculum, quality or management. And parents trying to select a school have little independent information, relying mostly on marketing from the schools.” And [a November 2013 U.S. General Accountability Office report](#) said that the local agency that administers the program — which has used \$152 million in federal funds since 2004 for more than 5,000 students from low-

income families – lacks the “financial systems, controls, policies, and procedures” to ensure that federal funds are being spent legally.

In North Carolina, according to Lindsay Wagner of [NC Policy Watch](#), private schools receiving school vouchers need only to “administer a nationally recognized standardized test” that can be “any exam,” so long as the score can be compared to children in taking the same test in any other state.

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A Political Strategy Exploiting Children

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As Valerie Strauss of [The Washington Post](#) noted some time ago, messaging behind the push for school vouchers has shifted from educational effectiveness to moral imperative. Because recent voucher research reveals they “do not have a strong effect on students’ academic achievement,” Strauss noted, “Proponents have shifted their rhetoric away from academic impact and instead highlight parent choice and other issues.”

So now, as [Stephanie Simon](#) reported at Politico, “calling for more charter schools, vouchers and tax credits” is a tactic Republicans are eager to use “to attract black and Latino voters.”

For sure, Simon noted, “Helping parents pay private school tuition fits with the party’s mantra that the government works best when it gets out of the way and lets the free market flourish. But top strategists say it’s more than that: Talking about helping poor minority children softens the GOP’s image ... Plus, the photo ops are great.” ----END---

“Walton foundation pumps cash into vouchers: \$6 million grant to double budget for non-profit that promotes using tax dollars for private schools”

Layton, Lyndsey. *The Washington Post*. 17 Dec. 2013.

The Walton Family Foundation is pumping \$6 million into a Washington-based group that promotes private school vouchers in D.C. and around the country -- a donation that it hopes will double the number of students using tax dollars to pay private school tuition.

The foundation, created by the heirs of [Wal-Mart](#) founder Sam Walton, is giving the money to the Alliance for School Choice, a nonprofit that has been promoting and lobbying for school voucher programs in D.C., Ohio, Indiana, Arizona, Georgia, North Carolina, Florida, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania and elsewhere.

Proponents of vouchers say they give low-income children the opportunity to escape troubled public schools. Critics say that tax dollars are better spent improving public schools.

The \$6 million infusion will basically double the budget of the Alliance for School Choice, which reported total revenue of \$6,380,488 in 2011, according to federal tax filings. The chairwoman of the organization is Betsy DeVos, a high-profile Michigan Republican leader who is married to Dick DeVos, heir to the Amway fortune.

The alliance shares staff, facilities and other resources with the American Federation for Children, a nonprofit also founded by Betsy DeVos and its political arm, the American Federation for Children Action Fund.

Together, these three organizations have lobbied state legislatures to create programs that allow low- and middle-income students to use public tax dollars to attend private schools, including parochial schools. The groups have also helped create donation tax credits, which are state tax credits given to individuals or businesses who donate to private school scholarships.

Vouchers were once thought to be moribund, but came roaring to life in 2010 in states where Republicans took control.

Kevin P. Chavous, a former D.C. Council member who is executive counsel to the American Federation for Children, said the grant will allow his group to “aggressively” market school vouchers to low-income families.

“I’m amazed in Southeast and Northeast D.C. at how many people, particularly low-income parents, don’t know about this option,” Chavous said. “When they find out about it, they love it. We see this around the country, whenever these choice programs come into existence. We assume that once it’s in place, we assume that people know about it, and they don’t.”

Currently, about 300,000 K-12 students around the country are paying for private schools with public tax dollars, according to the Alliance for School Choice. The group says it wants to double that number.

The alliance plans to use some of the Walton funding to help communities implement their voucher programs.

The D.C. voucher program is the only federally funded type in the country. The federal government has

poured \$152 million into the D.C. Opportunity Scholarships Program since it was created by Congress in 2004. About 5,000 students have received vouchers to attend private schools in the District.

The execution of the D.C. voucher program has been rocky, with inadequate safeguards over the millions of dollars in federal funds, insufficient information for parents and a student database that is riddled with incomplete information, the Government Accountability Office found in a report released last month.

The GAO found the trust's policies and procedures "lack detail in several areas related to school compliance and financial accounting, which may result in little overall accountability for program funds."

Those conclusions echo a [Washington Post](#) investigation published last November, which found that the 52 D.C. private schools approved to participate in the voucher program are subject to few quality controls and offer widely disparate academic experiences.

The Post found that hundreds of students use their voucher dollars to attend schools that are unaccredited or are in unconventional settings, such as a family-run K-12 school operating out of a storefront, a Nation of Islam school based in a converted Deanwood residence and a school built around the philosophy of a Bulgarian psychotherapist.

At a time public schools face increasing demands for accountability and transparency, the voucher schools operate in relative isolation. The government has no say over curriculum, quality or management.

Of the District students now receiving vouchers, more than half attend Catholic schools and a handful are enrolled at prestigious independent schools such as Sidwell Friends, where President Obama sends his daughters.

The most comprehensive study of the D.C. program, released by the U.S. Department of Education in 2010, found that voucher students were more likely to graduate than peers without vouchers, based on data collected from families. And parents reported that their children were safer attending the private schools, though the students themselves perceived no difference.

But the study found "no conclusive evidence" that the vouchers improved math and reading test scores for those students who left their public schools.

lyndsey.layton@washpost.com ----END----

“Colorado's test on school vouchers; A wealthy, successful district wants to boost competition. Critics see a plan to aid religious schools.”

Riccardi, Nicholas. *Los Angeles Times*; Los Angeles, Calif. [Los Angeles, Calif] 15 Feb 2011: A.8.

Douglas County, a swath of subdivisions just south of here that is one of the nation's wealthiest, is something of a public school paradise.

The K-12 district, with 60,000 students, boasts high test scores and a strong graduation rate. Surveys show that 90% of its parents are satisfied with their children's schools.

That makes the Douglas County School District an unlikely frontier in the latest battle over school vouchers.

But a new, conservative school board is exploring a voucher system to give parents -- regardless of income -- taxpayer money to pay for their children to attend private schools that agree to abide by district regulations. If it's implemented, parents could receive more than \$4,000 per child.

The proposal's supporters argue that competition can only improve already-high-performing schools.

"We're an excellent school district in spite of our quasi-monopoly structure, not because of it," said Douglas County Board of Education member Dan Gerken. "The more good choices we can offer our parents and students, the better all those choices will get."

Though a formal plan isn't due to reach the board until at least next month, national education experts are watching Douglas closely, because vouchers have previously been used to help low-income families escape failing schools. Some say the district's envelope-pushing idea might help redefine how the U.S. views public schools and could provide a model for new Republican governors from Nevada to New Jersey who are trying to implement voucher programs.

Andrew Coulson, director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute, said the U.S. operated on a 100-year-old, one-size-fits-all education model that hasn't worked. Douglas' proposal, he said, "is bringing into the public dialogue an idea that people haven't thought about. They're ahead of the curve."

But to others, the idea is an alarming assault on the concept of public education and an attempt to get tax dollars to pay for religious schools. Opponents are already weighing legal challenges, and overflow crowds have filled the school board's meetings since the proposal surfaced in November.

"This whole voucher thing in Douglas County is just for a few privileged people ... who want to attend Christian schools," said Gail McDonnell, who has two sons in Douglas high schools. "I just feel like they're robbing my children."

Vouchers were first popularized in the 1980s, when some market-based school reformers proposed giving

parents the tax money that would otherwise pay for their children's schooling to spend at whatever educational institution they chose. The most significant experiment has been in Milwaukee, where vouchers have been given to poor families to help them escape failing local schools.

In 1992, Colorado voters resoundingly rejected a statewide school voucher program. About 10 years later, the Legislature created a voucher program for poor children in failing schools, but the state Supreme Court declared it unconstitutional. The Douglas school district has hired a lawyer who worked on the state law to advise it on its voucher program.

In 2009, the Douglas County Republican Party took the unusual step of endorsing a slate of candidates for the school board. The slate took over the board and started a task force to study ways to expand the district's school choices. Parents can already opt for one of nine charter schools, two online programs or home-schooling. In Colorado, parents can also send their children to any school of their choosing outside their neighborhood, or even their district, provided it has room.

Last fall, the task force made several recommendations, the most controversial of which was the voucher program. The district doesn't like to use the politically loaded term "vouchers," preferring instead "scholarships" or "option certificates." In December, as opponents waved protest signs and banners at a meeting, the board voted unanimously to direct district officials to investigate how to structure a program and to submit a report in March.

Although there is no detailed proposal, the outlines are clear. The district would give 75% of the roughly \$6,000 in state funding it receives per student to parents to spend at private schools that contract with the district. The district would keep the remaining 25% for administrative costs.

Officials say the private schools would have to agree to evaluate students using Colorado's public school testing system; take all applicants they can, including those with special needs; and not engage in religious instruction.

Since all but one of the private schools in Douglas County are religious, however, opponents are skeptical that the latter condition can be enforced.

"It seems odd to me to say that 'we're one of the best school districts in the state, but the only way we can improve is to send our children to these private, religious schools,' " said Jeanne Beyer, a spokeswoman for the Colorado Education Assn., which represents teachers in other districts.

Critics also worry that Douglas will end up siphoning off increasingly scarce state tax dollars as the program grows, at the expense of other districts.

District officials say they believe the program will be relatively small at first -- Gerken said it might have just 500 slots. And he said the district would contract with private schools outside the county to ensure there are more secular options.

Gerken also noted that, although the county is generally affluent, 8% of district students receive free or subsidized school lunches.

Some parents hope the idea is enacted. Karin Piper has one child in a Douglas County charter school, one in a private school and home-schools a third. A native of Sweden, she grew up in a country that gives tax money to parents of all income levels to pay private school tuition.

"It's cracking the door open and starting that conversation," said Piper, 39. "I am excited about a board that is adding options and testing the border a bit about where the line for school choice and families should be."

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"The Evidence Is In: School Vouchers Work"

Riley, Jason L. *Wall Street Journal*, Eastern edition; New York, N.Y. [New York, N.Y] 03 May 2011: A.17.

'Private school vouchers are not an effective way to improve student achievement," said the White House in a statement on March 29. "The Administration strongly opposes expanding the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program and opening it to new students." But less than three weeks later, President Obama signed a budget deal with Republicans that includes a renewal and expansion of the popular D.C. program, which finances tuition vouchers for low-income kids to attend private schools.

School reformers cheered the administration's about-face though fully aware that it was motivated by political expediency rather than any acknowledgment that vouchers work.

When Mr. Obama first moved to phase out the D.C. voucher program in 2009, his Education Department was in possession of a federal study showing that voucher recipients, who number more than 3,300, made gains in reading scores and didn't decline in math. The administration claims that the reading gains were not large enough to be significant. Yet even smaller positive effects were championed by the administration as justification for expanding Head Start.

In any case, the program's merits don't rest on reading scores alone. In a study published last year, Patrick

Wolf of the University of Arkansas found that voucher recipients had graduation rates of 91%. That's significantly higher than the D.C. public school average (56%) and the graduation rate for students who applied for a D.C. voucher but didn't win the lottery (70%). In testimony before a Senate subcommittee in February, Mr. Wolf said that "we can be more than 99% confident that access to school choice through the Opportunity Scholarship Program, and not mere statistical noise, was the reason why OSP students graduated at these higher rates."

The administration downplays these findings. But the students who attend D.C. public schools are overwhelmingly black and poor, and the achievement gap has a particularly devastating impact on their communities. High school dropouts are eight times more likely than someone with a diploma to wind up behind bars. Some 60% of black male high school dropouts in their 30s have prison records. And nearly one in four young black male dropouts is in jail or juvenile detention.

Mr. Obama says he wants to help all students -- not just the lucky few who receive vouchers. But that's an argument for offering more vouchers to those in need, not for reducing school choice. Policies ought to be weighed against available alternatives, not some unattainable ideal. The alternative to a voucher for families in D.C. ghettos and elsewhere is too often a substandard public school.

The positive effects of the D.C. voucher program are not unique. A recent study of Milwaukee's older and larger voucher program found that 94% of students who stayed in the program throughout high school graduated, versus just 75% of students in Milwaukee's traditional public schools. And contrary to the claim that vouchers hurt public schools, the report found that students at Milwaukee public schools "are performing at somewhat higher levels as a result of competitive pressure from the school voucher program." Thus can vouchers benefit even the children who don't receive them.

Research gathered by Greg Forster of the Foundation for Educational Choice also calls into question the White House assertion that vouchers are ineffective. In a paper released in March, he says that "every empirical study ever conducted in Milwaukee, Florida, Ohio, Texas, Maine and Vermont finds that voucher programs in those places improved public schools." Mr. Forster surveyed 10 empirical studies that use "random assignment, the gold standard of social science," to assure that the groups being compared are as similar as possible. "Nine [of the 10] studies find that vouchers improve student outcomes, six that all students benefit and three that some benefit and some are not affected," he writes. "One study finds no visible impact. None of these studies finds a negative impact."

Such results might influence the thinking of an objective observer primarily interested in doing right by the nation's poor children. But they are unlikely to sway a politician focused on getting re-elected with the help of teachers unions.

"I think Obama and Duncan really care about school reform," says Terry Moe, who teaches at [Stanford](#) and is the author of a timely new book, "Special Interest: Teachers Unions and America's Public Schools." "On the other hand they have to be sensitive to their Democratic coalition, which includes teachers unions. And one way they do that is by opposing school vouchers."

The reality is that Mr. Obama's opposition to school vouchers has to do with Democratic politics, not the available evidence on whether they improve outcomes for disadvantaged kids. They do -- and he knows it.

Mr. Riley is a member of The Journal's editorial board.

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A Generation of School-Voucher Success. [Chingos, Matthew M](#); [Peterson, Paul E](#). *Wall Street Journal*, Eastern edition; New York, N.Y. [New York, N.Y] 23 Aug 2012: A.13.

President Barack Obama last month signed an executive order promising to "improve outcomes and advance educational opportunities for African Americans." The order instructs federal agencies to "promote, encourage, and undertake efforts" to increase "college access, college persistence and college attainment for African American students." Unfortunately, his administration remains opposed to the Opportunity Scholarship program in Washington, D.C., which lets students -- mostly low-income and African-American -- use a voucher to attend a private school.

Perhaps Mr. Obama will reconsider his position on vouchers now that we have for the first time tracked the impact of a voucher program all the way from kindergarten (in 1997) to college enrollment (in 2011). Our study compared students who won a voucher lottery with students who didn't -- the only difference between the groups was the luck of the draw, the gold standard in research design.

The study shows that an African-American student who was able to use a voucher to attend a private school was 24% more likely to enroll in college than an African-American student who didn't win a voucher lottery.

The voucher program took place in New York City. Its impetus came in 1996, when Archbishop John J. O'Connor invited New York City schools Chancellor Rudy Crew to "send the city's most troubled public school students to Catholic schools." When Mayor Rudolph Giuliani attempted to fund the initiative out of city funds, he encountered strong opposition from those who saw it as a violation of the First Amendment's establishment

clause (an argument subsequently rejected by the Supreme Court in other cases). As the controversy raged, a group of private philanthropists -- including prominent Wall Street figures Bruce Kovner, Roger Hertog and Peter Flanagan -- created the New York School Choice Scholarships Foundation.

The foundation offered three-year scholarships -- that is, vouchers -- worth up to \$1,400 annually (in 1998 dollars) to approximately 1,000 low-income families with children of elementary-school age. A recipient could attend any of the hundreds of private schools, religious or secular, in New York City. The city's largest provider of private schooling was the Catholic archdiocese, which reported average tuition at the time of \$1,728 per year. Total expenditures at these schools, from all revenue sources, came to \$2,400 per pupil (compared to total costs of more than \$5,000 per pupil in the public schools). Over 20,000 applicants participated in the lottery.

Of the 2,666 students in the original study, necessary information was available for over 99%. To see whether those who won the lottery were more likely to go to college, we linked student Social Security numbers and other identifying characteristics to college enrollment data available from the National Student Clearinghouse, which collects that information from institutions of higher education attended by 96% of all U.S. students. We know of no other voucher study that has been as successful at tracking students over such a long period of time.

Although our study identified no significant impact on college enrollments among Hispanic students (and too few white and Asian students participated for us to analyze), the impact on African-American students was large. Not only were part-time and full-time college enrollment together up 24%, but full-time enrollment increased 31% and attendance at selective colleges (enrolling students with average SAT scores of 1100 or higher) more than doubled, to 8% from 3%.

These impacts are especially striking given the modest costs of the intervention: only \$4,200 per pupil over a three-year period. This implies that the government would actually save money if it introduced a similar voucher program, as private-school costs are lower than public-school costs. To get a similar (19%) increase in college enrollment among African-Americans from a class-size reduction effort in Tennessee in the late 1980s, the public-school system had to spend \$9,400 per pupil (in 1998 dollars).

The difference in the effects for African-American and Hispanic students is probably due to the greater educational challenges faced by the African-Americans. Only 36% of them went to college if they didn't receive a voucher, compared to 45% of the Hispanic students.

President Obama is certainly correct to identify the particularly steep educational barriers that African-American students must surmount if they are to become college-ready. And he seems to have nothing against private school per se, as he has long sent his own daughters to private schools. Yet -- apparently thanks to opposition to vouchers from powerful teachers unions -- the president still hasn't taken the next step and helped open private-school doors for low-income children as well.

"I have an 8-year-old in third grade, and she's doing great. It's miraculous the way she has changed," said a voucher-winning African-American mother at a focus group session in 1999. The cause of the change was clear. It came from the power of parental choice in education. It wasn't "miraculous" -- unless you happen to be one of the parents directly involved. ----END---

School Vouchers Under The Microscope: Do They Really Improve Student Achievement?

04/04/2011 01:16 am ET | **Updated** Jun 01, 2011

The Milwaukee School Choice Program, which was not only the first but also the largest school voucher program in the country, has fallen under fire after voucher students failed to surpass their public school counterparts in state tests.

As reported in the [Milwaukee Journal Sentinel](#), the program provides disadvantaged students a lottery-earned voucher, totaling up to \$6,607, to escape failing public schools and attend higher performing private schools. The state spends over \$128 million on vouchers, which proponents argue is cost-effective compared to expenditures on students who attend public schools.

The program was largely regarded as an experiment when it started as a solution to failing public school systems in the 1990s. Now critics are citing it is a failed one.

[According to the Sentinel](#), after voucher schools were required to participate in standardized testing, the results did not show growth, as advocates had hoped. Rather, students participating in the voucher program were outperformed, in regard to proficiency in reading and math, by those who remained in Milwaukee Public Schools.

"There was no meaningful differences over three years in student achievement growth in either math or reading between a matched set of voucher and MPS students."

According to [The Wisconsin State Journal](#), testing scores indicated that program participants were 34.4 percent proficient in math and 55.2 percent in reading, which was lower than public school students who

scored 47.9 percent and 59 percent respectively.

Both sets of students achieved far below students statewide, who collectively scored 77.2 percent proficiency in math and 83 percent in reading.

Despite these findings, Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker has moved forward with a budget proposal that would expand the Milwaukee School Choice program, eliminating income constraints and including more schools. The program currently includes 111 private schools and provides over 20,000 low-income students with vouchers to attend them the Sentinel **Error! Hyperlink reference not valid.**

[The Wisconsin State Journal](#) reports that the proposal has sparked controversy among democratic leaders, amid the current state findings that the program has failed to produce academic achievement.

“The fact that we’ve spent well over \$1 billion on a failed experiment leads me to believe we have no business spending \$22 million to expand it with these kinds of results,” Rep. Sody Pope-Roberts, the top Democrat on the Assembly Education Committee said. “It’s irresponsible use of taxpayer dollars and a disservice to Milwaukee students.”

Proponents of the program argue these test scores offer only a “snapshot” and are not substantive enough to accurately evaluate it. They insist that competition is key to fixing the problems with the education system at a lower cost, and cite statistics from other studies to advocate the program’s expansion.

[The Sentinel](#) reports, however, that though overall costs may be lower, Milwaukee residents will pay the price without the promise of increased proficiency.

Robert Costrell, an Arkansas professor who analyzed the study, estimated that \$37 million is saved each year through the voucher program. Unfortunately, the impact is not allocated evenly.

“\$30 million a year saved in state income and sales taxes, and \$52 million a year saved in local property taxes everywhere in the state except Milwaukee. But Milwaukee property taxpayers are paying an extra \$45 million a year.”

These findings come amidst a contentious federal debate over the potential of private-school voucher programs sparked by Speaker Boehner’s proposed SOAR act — legislation that has already passed in the house, which would reinstate the D.C. voucher program, expired in 2009 because it also failed to show academic growth.

[The D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program](#), signed into legislation by President Bush in 2005, included instituted mandates for yearly monitoring by the Department of Education, and provided scholarships of \$7,500 to needy students to attend local private schools.

The Department of Education, which evaluated the program yearly, [reported](#) that it did not have as much of an impact as advocates had hoped.

“The evaluation found that the OSP improved reading, but not math, achievement overall and for 5 of 10 subgroups of students examined.”

The study also showed that students applying to the program from schools in need of improvement (SINI), which were labeled as highest priority by Congress, had no achievement impacts.

Critics are also concerned about the constitutionality of such programs, as 80 percent of private schools in the program are religious.

The ACLU has [issued a letter](#) petitioning policy-makers to dismiss the bill on these grounds.

“Schools that participate in the voucher program are exempt from complying with laws like the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act and Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. Since the principal recipients of these federal voucher funds are private religious schools, Americans’ tax dollars are going toward schools that bring specific religious content into their curricula.”

President Obama has also [stated](#) his disapproval of the program.

“Private school vouchers are not an effective way to improve student achievement. The Administration opposes targeting resources to help a small number of individuals attend private schools rather than creating access to great public schools for every child.”

As policymakers in Washington, and around the country, debate the best solution for failing American Schools, Milwaukee continues to face tough decisions.

The [Sentinel reports](#) that Milwaukee public schools are currently facing \$74 million budget shortage.

Other cities around the country are looking to Milwaukee as an indication of how voucher systems perform, and advocates continue to see the silver lining in the somber statistics.

Rep. Robin Vos, who is behind a push to create voucher programs in other cities explained his position to the [Wisconsin State Journal](#):

“Obviously opponents see the glass half-empty,” Rep. Vos said. “I see the glass half-full. Children in the school choice program do the same as the children in public school but at half the cost.”