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A GREAT EXPERIMENT: Why Are Liberals Opposed to Vouchers?

Thomas Paine and J.S. Mill Favored School Vouchers

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In their recent book, *A Legacy of Learning, Your Stake in Standards and New Kinds of Public Schools* (Brookings 2000), David T. Kearns and James Harvey note, "If our experience is any guide, education leaders will lie up to shake your hand if you point out that school organization is wretched, that teaching needs to be improved, that standards are nonexistent, that curriculum is vapid, and that most educational research is an intellectual embarrassment. Hardly anyone will have a bad word to say about you. In fact, most will consider you a fine corporate citizen -- and a wonderful fellow to boot. ... But ... the smiles turn to frowns ... when school choice was brought up. Now suddenly, I was no longer a fine corporate citizen and a wonderful fellow, but a threat to Western civilization and the American way of life."

Not long ago, Al Gore thundered from the stump that he would "never, ever" allow public schools monies to flow into private school coffers. It was an odd promise, in light of the fact that tax dollars have long gone to religious schools. To take one of many examples, Pell Grants (a taxpayer funded voucher) can be used to cover tuition at private schools. And as Edmund Walsh of the *Weekly Standard* noted, Gore has proposed "college savings and tuition-deduction plans [that] would subsidize attendance at private and religious as well as public institutions."

So what is one to make of the hostility of some to using public school dollars to send the young to learn at private schools? One wonders if in part it might be due to a suspicion that vouchers are a radical, new scheme cooked up by extremists of the far right. In which case, why try some risky scheme when one can stick with the dependable, if not particularly well performing, public schools?

In fact, readers of this publication will be interested to hear that two of the great liberal thinkers in history, Thomas Paine and John Stuart Mill, both favored the idea of using public dollars paying to send children to private

