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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

schools.

In *The Rights of Man*, as David Kirkpatrick shows (*Choice in Schooling*, Loyol University Press, 1990), Paine urged that the government provide "four pounds a year for every child under fourteen years of age; enjoining the parents of such children to send them to school, to learn reading writing, and common arithmetic." They are to be educated in the parish schools, and that "the ministers of every parish, of every denomination," are to "certify" to the government that "the duty is performed."

His reasoning was simple- he saw education as a ticket out of poverty, a benefit to the children, their families, and society as a whole. Paines writes: "By adopting this method, not only the poverty of the parents will be relieved but ignorance will be banished from the rising generation, and the number of poor will hereafter become less, because their abilities, by the aid of education, will be greater. Many a youth, with good natural genius, who is apprenticed to a mechanical trade, such as a carpenter, joiner, millwright, shipwright, blacksmith, etc., is prevented getting forward the whole of his life from the want of a little common education."

Similarly, John Stuart Mill, thought that education could help wipe out the ill of ignorance and vice among the poor. However, Mill's argument for government vouchers for private schooling came from a distrust of the government's competence to run schools. Mill feared that government-run schools were a threat to diversity of thought and pluralist society. In *On Liberty* he wrote, "a general State education is a mere contrivance for moulding people to be exactly like one another; and as the mould in which it casts them is that which pleases the predominant power of the government." Those among us who grind our teeth over the narrow bandwidth of acceptable political thought in this nation, take heed, the public schools may, in great measure, be the cause.

Mill also questioned whether the schools themselves might become "a battleground for sects and parties," all trying to have their way of thinking become enshrined as the curriculum (remember the evolution decision in Kansas?). Mill thought this trouble might be sensibly avoided. "If the government would make up its mind to require for every child a good education, it might save itself the trouble of providing one. It might leave to parents to obtain the education where and how they pleased, and content itself with helping to pay the school fees of the poorer classes of children, and defraying the entire school expenses of those who have no one else to pay for them."

So why not experiment with some adequately funded, well-designed voucher programs targeted at poor children in failing schools? Why insist that public plans to send poor children to private schools at government expense are never to be tried? If we place the good of the young above partisan and material self-interest, it seems we are obliged to experiment with voucher programs as a way to rescue students from failing schools.

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