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INTRODUCTION

THE THREE LIBERAL RESPONSES TO PRIVATE SCHOOL VOUCHERS

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There is a strange tenor to the debate over school vouchers, with conservative groups, not known for a history of commitment to the down-trodden, evincing a newfound moral passion for liberating poor children from bad schools. They note that the wealthy can choose high-quality schools, by purchasing a home in an area with top-ranked public schools or by paying tuition to a good private school, and argue that poor families should have the same right.¹ This sentiment represents an enormous shift from the days of racial desegregation, when conservatives championed the “neighborhood” school above all other values. Now conservatives point out that the neighborhood school is not such a great deal for children stuck in poor neighborhoods and argue, with great egalitarian passion, that everyone should have the right to choose a good school. There are at least three possible responses.

One response is to join conservatives. The new emphasis on equity has convinced some liberals that conservatives are right: vouchers are the way to go. Well-respected liberal thinkers like Joseph Califano, Andrew Young, Robert Reich, Matthew Miller, Arthur Levine, William Raspberry, Martha Minow, and the editorial page editors of the *Washington Post* have all come around to thinking that vouchers are worth a try.² Polls find, likewise, that young African Americans support

vouchers by more than two to one.³ A failure to sign on to vouchers is seen by many of these liberal proponents as a simple matter of interest group politics: powerful teachers unions will not let Democrats do what is right for poor kids.

A second response is to charge conservatives with hypocrisy and continue to plug away at ongoing public school reform. Advocates point out that conservatives are not serious when they say throw open the doors to everyone; certainly they do not mean that the poor have a right to an equal representation at St. Albans or Andover. Instead, this group dismisses the new conservative rhetoric about liberating poor kids as insincere and pushes for ways to improve neighborhood public schools through traditional approaches like reducing class size, increasing teacher pay, and the like. The leadership of the National Education Association, for example, says Americans “want quality public education in their neighborhood school, and that’s what we should be working toward.”⁴

There is a third possible response, which sees the conservative argument in support of vouchers as an enormous opportunity. While vouchers themselves are wrongheaded, this group asks, what sort of public policy response could be crafted to build on the wholly legitimate premise of voucher advocates that it is immoral to trap poor children in failing schools? This volume lays out that alternative path, recognizing that the ongoing efforts to fix economically segregated neighborhood schools are unlikely to succeed and that private school vouchers are likely to make things even worse. Though not every contributor would necessarily agree, the core thesis of the volume as a whole is that public school choice, properly structured, can garner all the benefits of vouchers (allowing poor kids to escape bad schools, providing more variety in schooling, and shaking up the bureaucracy with competitive pressures) while avoiding the many pitfalls (increased racial and economic segregation, weakened social cohesion, reduced achievement for those left behind, and greater reliance on unaccountable institutions). Whereas many school reformers have rhetorically embraced “public school choice” as a crisp and convenient rebuttal to the argument for school vouchers, this volume suggests that public school choice must be at the very center of school reform efforts.

Over the past few years, The Century Foundation has committed a fair amount of time to developing the dialogue on school vouchers and public school reform, and we thought it would be useful to assemble these materials in a single place. This volume also

contains a number of essays written specifically for this collection as well as previously published articles written by friends of the Foundation.

Part I of the volume exposes the false promise of school vouchers. Gordon MacInnes's essay reveals the claims of voucher proponents to be overblown and raises a number of probing questions: What is the capacity of the private school sector, which now serves only 10 percent of American schoolchildren, to absorb more students? If new schools emerge in response to demand, are they likely to be of the low caliber seen in proprietary trade schools that arose to take advantage of government funds made available through higher education vouchers? Will private schools, which pride themselves on independence, be willing to subject themselves to accountability schemes? Richard Leone's essay outlines the unfairness of the sister proposal for private school tax exemptions, which provide the bulk of the benefits to those least in need of extra help—the wealthy. The volume then proceeds to challenge four central myths that have grown up around the voucher debate.

Myth number 1 is that vouchers raise student achievement, both for students who receive vouchers and for those who remain in public schools and see their schools transformed by competition. Gordon MacInnes looks at the early research on vouchers, which on the whole shows no significant positive effects from private schooling once differences in background are considered and finds no substantial gains from the nation's first voucher program in Milwaukee. Bernard Wasow then analyzes the data in the most recent studies and concludes that the case for vouchers is unconvincing. The achievement results are mixed for voucher recipients not only in Milwaukee but also in privately funded programs in Washington, Dayton, and New York. Those who remain in public schools may benefit from the competition of choice, but those benefits also accrue to public school choice, he notes. Finally, Richard Kahlenberg finds that any apparent achievement gains for students receiving vouchers are most likely to disappear when small voucher programs are scaled up. Even if the claims of voucher advocates are taken at face value—that African American students from low-income families benefit from existing voucher experiments—the benefits may disappear once large numbers of poor children are given access to private schools. The current advantages those students enjoy in voucher schools—having particularly motivated and well-behaved classmates and actively engaged parents—will quickly fade away once programs are

expanded and voucher schools come to resemble high-poverty public schools.

Myth number 2 is that vouchers are part of a new civil rights movement. The notion is trumpeted by the ubiquitous ads of the Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO) and by conservative politicians not otherwise known as champions of civil rights. As Richard Leone points out in a brief essay, President Bush's comparison of the recent Supreme Court voucher decision to *Brown v. Board of Education* is nothing short of astonishing given the history of school vouchers and their likely effects in the future. An excerpt from The Century Foundation's Task Force on the Common School (chaired by Lowell P. Weicker, Jr.) outlines why the experience in other countries—Sweden, Chile, and the Netherlands—indicates that vouchers will likely lead to further segregation and hurt poor and minority students left behind. Edward B. Fiske and Helen F. Ladd's article demonstrates how unregulated school choice in New Zealand led to precisely that result. Sean F. Reardon and John T. Yun's piece finds that while American public schools are hardly models of integration, private schools are even more segregated. Amy Stuart Wells and colleagues provide an additional reason to be skeptical: charter schools often further segregate students. Their evidence raises concerns that voucher proposals, which often allow schools to decide whom to admit, are likely to fare even worse on this score. Gordon MacInnes provides still more evidence that unregulated choice (public or private) can often mean segregation.

Myth number 3 is that vouchers are good for democracy because they nourish religious and nongovernmental institutions, which, in turn, encourage civic engagement. Essays by Richard Kahlenberg, Richard Just, and Gordon MacInnes question whether democratic unity is really well served by a system that uses public funds to support private schools that may appeal explicitly to particular ethnic groups or that harden religious differences. The private sector operates best by finding ways to segment markets and, as the late Albert Shanker, head of the American Federation of Teachers, noted, under voucher programs "you'll end up with kids of different religions, nationalities and languages going off to different schools to maintain their separateness and I think we'd have a terrible social price to pay for it."⁵ Justice David Souter's dissent in the 2002 U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* upholding Cleveland's voucher program notes that every religion teaches that other religions are in error, which is their right. But in a country as diverse as ours, public funds need to be used to emphasize common

ideas and allegiance to country, not to support teaching that will help tear at the social fabric. As Just writes, “The inane logic of vouchers would leave us with a stark choice: either become a country that pays religious institutions to proselytize to children of other faiths, or become a country that educates children of different religions separately.” While the *Zelman* case settled the constitutional questions about vouchers, the serious policy objections regarding aid for religious indoctrination of young children in a multicultural democracy remain to be answered.

Myth number 4 is that the American public is clamoring for vouchers. Ruy Teixeira remarks that in fact the public generally likes public schools. Despite the expenditure of hundreds of millions of dollars by conservatives on voucher programs, less than one-tenth of 1 percent of American students use publicly funded vouchers. To the extent Americans support vouchers, it may be fairly interpreted as a plea to do something dramatic rather than as an endorsement of privatization per se. Thad Hall’s essay notes that Congress has little appetite for school vouchers. Few bills are introduced as even symbolic gestures, and, despite control of the House, the Republican leadership has not generally pushed for votes on vouchers as they have on other conservative priorities. Indeed, President George W. Bush’s signature No Child Left Behind Act provides for greater public school choice rather than vouchers. Voucher proposals largely have been limited to the District of Columbia, which has no genuine voice in Congress.

While school vouchers are bad public policy on the whole, it is incumbent on opponents to articulate a principled and realistic alternative that will respond to the legitimate premise of voucher proponents: that compulsory assignment of students to high-poverty schools is unfair and immoral, given the grave odds of failing that students in those schools face. Part II of the book articulates the affirmative case for public school choice.

The overview of this section begins with excerpts from a discussion The Century Foundation sponsored assembling representatives of the three communities most opposed to vouchers—civil rights advocates (Christopher Edley, Jr.), members of teachers unions (Adam Urbanski), and civil libertarians (Elliot Minberg)—and giving them the opportunity to speak about what they favor as progressive alternatives to vouchers. The overview also includes a *Washington Post* op-ed by Richard Kahlenberg on public school choice.

The volume then goes on to lay out the considerable evidence that public school choice, if structured properly, will raise student

achievement, promote equity in education, and better prepare students to be citizens in a democracy—the very goals voucher proponents identify. Richard Kahlenberg’s essay discusses how “controlled public school choice”—employed in Cambridge, Massachusetts; Montclair, New Jersey; and elsewhere—gives every family the right to choose among a variety of public schools within a given geographic zone. Parents are polled to find out what sorts of schools they would like for their children, and then every single school becomes a magnet school, with something special to offer—from a “Core Knowledge” curriculum to a Montessori teaching approach, from a music and arts theme to an emphasis on computers. Families rank preferences, and school administrators honor those choices with an eye to ensuring that all schools have a healthy socioeconomic or racial mix. Requiring all families to participate in the choice process avoids the problem experienced by many private and public school choice programs in which only the most motivated families choose to participate and the least engaged are left behind.

Why is it important that the choice program contain fairness guidelines to ensure that choice promotes economic integration? The Report of The Century Foundation Task Force on the Common School, excerpted in this volume, concludes that “of all the various strategies available, research suggests that the best method for improving education in the United States is to eliminate the harmful effects of concentrated school poverty.” High-poverty schools are marked by diminished expectations, low-quality teaching, minimal parental involvement, inadequate resources, and high levels of disorder. By contrast, schools in middle-class areas tend to work fairly well, and all students, whether from low-income or middle-class backgrounds, have been found to perform at much higher levels when they attend such schools than when they attend high-poverty schools. Public school choice is therefore essential to raising achievement because it provides the most practical way to prevent economically segregated neighborhoods from producing economically segregated schools.

The report also includes a summary of two case studies. The first focuses on Cambridge, where the schools are economically integrated and 90 percent of parents receive one of their top three choices. The second examines St. Louis, where thousands of urban students attend suburban schools and enjoy much higher levels of success than those attending segregated schools with extra funding. Voucher supporters have made much of the fact that under the Cleveland voucher program

not a single suburban public school chose to receive city students with vouchers because to them this is evidence that private schools must be included, but St. Louis's example suggests the proper financial incentives can garner active suburban participation.⁶

Finally, Richard Kahlenberg's review of Terry Moe's book on public opinion and vouchers notes that even such ardent voucher advocates as Moe must concede that support for public school choice outstrips support for private school vouchers. Simply put, people like choice, and they like public schools, so they naturally gravitate to plans that combine elements of both. The number of students using public school choice within existing school district boundaries stands at 5 million. Another 300,000 students cross school district lines in public school choice programs. And the number of students in districts with economic school integration plans (some using public school choice, others accomplishing integration by redrawing neighborhood school boundaries) has skyrocketed from 20,000 in 1999 to more than 400,000 today. By contrast, about 14,000 students currently participate in publicly funded private school voucher programs.

Despite these numbers, in the public dialogue voucher supporters have enjoyed what they might call a rhetorical "monopoly" on the issue of choice. They have been able to point to the grave inequities in education to say, "it's unfair to trap poor kids in bad schools," and so long as the response was a call for gradual reform of urban public education, voucher advocates held the upper hand. But the public school choice alternative takes away the best arguments for vouchers and provides a solution more congenial to the American people—a system of choice that is fair to all, that will serve very large numbers of students, and that simultaneously honors America's historic commitment to public education.

Liberating poor children from bad schools is at bottom a moral imperative. More choice is coming because the public demands it, so the issue is not choice versus no choice but what kind of choice. Should we pour public funds into the 10 percent of schools (private institutions) that provide exclusive education, that promote particular religious beliefs, and that are beyond democratic control, or into the 90 percent of schools that take all comers, help bind together people of diverse races and religions, and are accountable to the public through their elected leaders? As the evidence in this volume demonstrates, the right choice is clear.

