

Educational Monopolies

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Abstract: Is there a monopoly in public education? This paper discusses some current literature and information on school choice and voucher programs. This paper specifically looks at school choice in Florida.

The improvement of public education is a popular topic in many circles. Many contemporary discussions on public education will eventually discuss the topic of parental school choice and its impact on our society. This paper will discuss current research that is available concerning school choice and vouchers.

There are many proposals to solve the problems of public education. One economist has suggested that more competition in education will significantly improve our public school systems (Williams, 2002). The economists' theory is that, with increased competition, in public education, the delivery of education to all students will improve. By allowing parents a choice of where they may send their children to school, the competition between schools will cause all schools to improve. Furthermore, there is a theory that public education is a government monopoly and that by allowing competition in public education society will somehow solve many of the problems that we see in our public schools. The "Choice Theory" is that students are forced into inferior public schools. If students and parents had the choice to attend a different school they would attend a superior school.

Method

A partial literature search was conducted during the week of November 17th, 2002. Multiple databases were searched including ERIC. Additionally, I searched the Miami-Herald newspaper database for related articles. In all the above cases I used keyword searches for school vouchers. The following literature review helps form the conceptual framework for this paper. The theoretical constructs are discussed in the following section.

School Choice by Residence

The predominate form of school choice is based on where one decides to reside, though school choice by residence is not evenly distributed across the country. Public education is predominately the function of the states. Residents of the U.S. have a choice in which state to live. Many people consider the type of public schools that are available to them when they select their place of residence. Those who are educated and empowered utilize school choice by residence most frequently. Generally, it is easier for the affluent to move than for a person with a low socio-economic status. In fact the quality of public schools has a major impact on the property values of a given area. (Glenn, 1988; Poetter, Knight-Abowitz, 2001).

An additional debate that coincides with the school choice issue concerns the size of school districts. Usually the larger the number of school districts within a given state, the smaller the school districts. Hence, residents of states with many school districts, like Texas, California and Pennsylvania have more educational choices than do residents of Hawaii, which has only one school district. California and Texas each have over a thousand local schools districts. Many states have several hundred school districts. The number of school districts

within a given state is directly proportional to the amount of schools choices that resident of that state have. There is only one state with a public educational monopoly and some states that have educational oligopolies in the USA. Hawaii has one single school district within the state. Residents of Hawaii, being remote islands, cannot reasonably commute from a neighboring state so that their children can be in a different school system. With so many public school systems in our country the premise of a governmental monopoly on education is really a myth.

Florida School Choices

Florida is an exception to this school choice premise via local residence. Floridians are deprived of choices in public education by virtue of geography and school system size. Floridians are not subject to an educational monopoly but they are subjected to an educational oligopoly. Florida has only one school system in each of its 67 counties. In actuality, many school children in Florida are served by only eight school systems. Residents of South Florida are especially limited in their choice of institutes of public education. If parents in South Florida do not like the big school district in which they reside their only other possible choice is one of two similar school systems that are adjacent to them. Granted, a family can move within a county-school system and relocate to a better school within the same school system. This situation is indisputably an economic governmental oligopoly.

Ironically, the larger school systems are able to provide more choices of schools within their system. Big school systems can afford to have more school choice programs such as controlled choice and magnet programs. Additionally, large school systems have a larger variation of schools within their system. Nevertheless, the philosophies that govern and operate school systems will generally remain the same throughout the system.

History of School Choice

School choice issues became prominent when busing was forced upon communities to create desegregated schools. At the beginning of court ordered busing, many private schools became very popular and overcrowded. Furthermore "*white flight*" became prominent in busing school districts. White flight is the phenomena whereby Caucasian families moved to reside just across the school district line so as to avoid desegregation by busing. White flight was a form of school choice. Many school systems avoided court ordered desegregation via busing by implementing voluntary desegregation, which frequently involved the use of magnet schools. Typically, magnet schools utilized popular programs, such as arts and Montessori programs, to pull or draw Caucasian students into a predominantly racial minority school. Later, the purpose of some magnet programs became to draw better students into poor performing schools and raise the overall academic standing of the school. Now magnet schools exist in some school districts specifically to give parents more public school choices (Blank, Levine & Steel, 1996). There are also a growing number of charter schools in the U.S. Charter schools give parents an additional choice of which school to send their children.

Home Schooling Choice

Another form of school choice is home schooling. The number of children that are being home schooled has grown astronomically during the past two decades. This growth is indicative of the growing dissatisfaction with many public schools. These families have chosen not to send their children to public schools but to teach their children themselves at home. Home schooling is seen as a less cash costly alternative to private schools. The hidden cost of home

schooling is that it requires the parents to invest significantly more of their personal time and energy into educating their children. Home schooling parents typically purchase a curriculum from a vendor. Some curricula come complete with videotapes that the students listen to while less expensive curricula come with only written instructions.

School Voucher Theory

A very controversial school choice program is the school voucher programs that have started across the country. The voucher programs give the family of the student a voucher for education that the family can redeem at any of a number of private or public schools. In theory, the vouchers allow poor students to attend private schools that they would otherwise not be able to attend. For advocates of totally free market education, school vouchers are the ultimate solution to the school choice question.

There are two types of school voucher systems, the broadcast type of school voucher program and the geographically limited type of voucher program. The broadcast type of school voucher programs allows the vouchers to be distributed by a lottery to any qualified students within the school district. Frequently the qualifying students must come from low-income homes. This type of school voucher program is in place in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and Cleveland, Ohio. The geographically limited type of voucher program limits the recipients of the vouchers to a specific local school area. An example of this type of geographical limited voucher program is the State of Florida's Opportunity Scholarships. In Florida only students from consistently low performing or double F schools are eligible for the school vouchers (e.g. Greech, 2002). There is research that indicates that the availability of school choice will enhance students' academic performance (Rees, 1993). Furthermore, research shows that African-American students have increased their test scores when they have received school vouchers (McDonald, 2000). Conclusively, there are positive benefits from school choice including vouchers.

The school voucher programs in Cleveland and Milwaukee have significant differences from the voucher programs of Florida. The voucher programs in Cleveland and Milwaukee were distributed to a few students throughout the school district. In both, Cleveland and Milwaukee, the voucher recipients had to be from low-income families (Lugg & Lugg, 2000). The Florida school voucher program or Opportunity Scholarships are part of Florida's Governor Jeb Bush's A+ Plan for all public schools. Students became eligible for the Florida Opportunity Scholarship or vouchers by virtue of being part of a consistently poor performing school. Under the A+ plan, all Florida Schools are evaluated according to their students' academic standards and assigned a corresponding grade. If a school received two Fs in a four-year time span, then all of the students in that school become eligible to receive the Opportunity Scholarship or school vouchers. The first secondary students who became eligible for the school vouchers in Florida were in June of 2002. At that time there were double F schools in Escambia, Orange, Palm Beach and Miami-Dade counties school systems. Of the almost 9,000 eligible students statewide, only between about 400 to 650 or 7 percent of the students chose to use vouchers to attend private schools (Greech, 2002). It is important to note that all of the 4,585 students in Miami-Dade County Public School system who became eligible for the Opportunity Scholarships or vouchers could have attended magnet schools within the MDCPS system prior to their school becoming a double F school. In other words, many of these Florida students and families had choices of schools before they were eligible for school vouchers (Greech, 2002).

Miami (FL) Edison High School

Miami Edison High School serves an area of Miami-Dade County, FL known as Little Haiti. Many of the Edison High School students come from homes where Haitian-Creole is exclusively spoken. Only 39% of Haitians are literate (Antonini, 1993) and many of the students at Miami-Edison come from families that are functionally illiterate in their native language. In June of 2002, Edison received its second F under Florida's A+ plan for education, allowing all students to be eligible for Opportunity Scholarships or vouchers to attend private schools. Furthermore MDCPS would allow Edison students to attend any school within the MDCPS system. Of the 2,238 students attending Edison in 2001-02 fewer than 60 elected to use vouchers to attend private schools for the 2002-03 school year (Greech, 2002).

In the case of the broadcast type of voucher program a parent had to apply for a voucher or meet a deadline to enroll in a voucher lottery, indicating that the parents of these children are proactive towards their children's education. The cases of the Florida's Opportunity Scholarships implies that when vouchers are accessible to a large number of the general population, then the parent-student response is minimal. There is more to the equation than just the availability of school choice. Perhaps the true factor is parental involvement in their children's education.

School choice will bring out the best in families where parents are proactive toward their child's education. Relatively small obstacles such as deadlines and applications will prevent many families from participating in school choice programs. Simply throwing vouchers at poor and underprivileged families will not automatically improve the educational status of their children.

Conclusion

Economics is a social science. Education is also a social science. Teachers are not producing widgets in a vacuum. Furthermore, there is no governmental monopoly in public education. Americans do have choices in the public schools that their children attend. School choices are not available to all in the same proportion. The educated and affluent citizens have more choices than do the less educated. Making school vouchers available to large numbers of the general public will not necessarily have a positive effect on public education. The economist theory that vouchers will improve public education is based on the false premise that all parents are proactive toward their children's education. The matter of school choice is important in the real political world. The volume and type of educational choices will continue to expand. Steps must be taken to assure that school choices or vouchers are not abused. School choice programs based on family income are poor criteria for allocating vouchers. Furthermore, leaders must be sure that students do not fall through the cracks of school choices. School choice, especially school vouchers, is not a panacea for all of the problems of public schools. There is no one simple solution to the educational problems in America.

The conclusion of the school choice matter will be that parent involvement is paramount to successful K-12 education. In the end, we will find that the most cost effective, socially redeeming method of educating students is a positive cooperative program in which parents play a major role in their child's education. We simply must utilize more of our resources to work with parents early in their child's life to achieve our goals of an educated population.

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