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Vouchers A Costly Path to a Divisive Education

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As the Supreme Court weighs arguments for and against using public money in the form of vouchers to pay for education at private religious schools, it's worth considering what might happen should the high court approve the practice.

The best evidence suggests that vouchers won't improve achievement, but they will increase school segregation, siphon funds from public schools and use tax dollars to spread divisive ideologies.

A recent Rand report, confirming scholarship by other non-partisan researchers, found that there is no compelling evidence that vouchers have positive effects on achievement. Because of non-random assignments of children and their families to voucher and non-voucher programs, none of the studies should be considered reliable. The few cases where small effects were found are countered by even more evidence that such effects are non-existent or trivial.

Parents do not want vouchers. Despite expensive campaigns to convince parents otherwise, voucher proposals lost by 2-to-1 in Michigan and California referendums. Parents like their public schools, especially those parents who picked their child's school by picking the community in which they live and those parents whose children attend a school of choice within their public school system. The children of these families constitute 48 percent of America's public school children, and all of them now attend schools of choice.

Bad public schools exist, often where people live who lack the resources to move where there are better public schools. Survey research tells us that these parents do not want vouchers, however. They do want choice: magnet schools, charters and open enrollment policies.

They also want smaller schools, smaller classes, higher expectations for their children's achievement and all the resources that go to schools where more advantaged families send their children. The demand for vouchers is minimal, but the demand for equitable public funding for all the nation's children is strong.

Vouchers are supposed to improve the public schools they compete with. There is no evidence of that. They have, however, drained millions of dollars from publicly supported schools in Milwaukee and Cleveland.

Finally, research shows that voucher plans in Scotland and Chile led to increased socioeconomic segregation, and one in New Zealand resulted in increased racial segregation. The history of all private education is a history of exclusivity, leaving the hardest to educate and the poorest students for the public schools to teach.

These facts alone offer reasons to be wary of voucher schemes. Including religious schools, however, seems almost certain to increase segregation and divisiveness.

Consider the Rev. Jerry Falwell's remarks that "pagans, abortionists, feminists, gays and lesbians, the ACLU and People for the American Way" were responsible for the Sept. 11 attacks - an assessment endorsed by Pat Robertson, until both men retreated in the face of public outrage. Diverting public funds to religious schools guarantees our tax dollars will help support such messages in some social studies classrooms.

It would be ironic if a curriculum as hateful as that of the Madrasas that trained the Taliban were to benefit from public funds. This assertion is not alarmist. Researchers examining textbooks used in Christian fundamentalist schools have found some that condemn "false religions," such as Buddhism, Islam and Catholicism; some that condemn anyone who defends the right to abortion; and others that assert Presidents Kennedy, Johnson and Carter were socialists.

One eighth-grade text says we were a sinless nation until the 1960s, when immorality took over. A civics text claims that wives must obey husbands since God gave men dominion over the family. A Bob Jones University text for high school students equates homosexuals with child molesters and rapists.

Our democracy gains in strength when we tolerate those who say and believe outrageous things about the government and some of their fellow citizens. But there is no necessity to move from toleration to support of people with hateful ideas. The proud message of 9/11, proclaimed throughout the world, was: "United we stand." The other, unspoken half of that is: "Divided, we fall."

We already segregate our schools by social class and race, based on housing patterns. Religious school vouchers would add religion to that list.

Publicly supported vouchers for religious schools won't improve achievement, and they will use public funds to create new fissures in our society. They aren't worth the price.