

Can Vouchers Improve the US School System?

Martin Carnoy's academic article "School Choice? Or is it Privatization" (2000) from *Educational Researcher* and Dan Lips' "Second Chance for School Choice" (2006) from *FOX News* present vastly different views of the issue of vouchers and privatization of schools in American cities. Carnoy uses other researchers' studies and quantitative analyses of the effects of the voucher system on education for various population of students to argue that school choice has no net positive impact, and may even weaken the already ineffective public school education available to students. Contrastingly, Lips argues that school choice is a sign of progress toward providing families with effective alternatives to failing public schools.

Lips (2006) uses the charter school as an example of school reform which helps students succeed. He sees that lack of government regulations and bureaucracy on charter schools as helping these schools serve students, but does not support this claim with concrete evidence. Instead, Lips uses two examples of high achieving charter schools to convince the reader of charter school's overall superiority. This is ineffective, as he does not supply information on selectiveness of the admissions process to the charter schools. All 18 of the students graduating from The Thurgood Marshall Public Charter School might have gone on to college even if they had stayed in a normal public school.

The *FOX News* article also overlooks the effect that vouchers have on students who stay

in public schools. As argued by Carnoy (2000), being surrounded by high achievers can have a positive impact on learning outcomes. Lips (2006) neglects this variable and ignores the fact that public school students could suffer from the absence of peers who have left for specialized charter or private schools. This is important because, as noted by Lips, there are not enough scholarships to support the students applying for them. Availability issues make clear that some students wishing to take advantage of school choice are left behind in the old public schools, and this article does not address the effect of school choice on educational quality of public schools.

Lips (2006) also uses statistics about poor public school performance as evidence for the need for school choice. He provides no evidence that at risk students are taking advantage of school choice in a way that changes educational outcomes. He focuses on a charter school catered to students who want college preparation and careers in law, which is an unlikely setting of choice for students who would have dropped out in the public school system. This argument could be bolstered with an addition as simple as following an at risk student through the transition from public to charter school.

Carnoy's (2000) argument is much more comprehensive and convincing. He uses a variety of studies on the outcomes of school choice for students in the charter, private, and public schools. One of his arguments directly challenges Lips (2006) assertion that parent satisfaction indicates a positive impact. Carnoy states that satisfaction follows directly from choice, not

from the quality of schooling, since parents are more likely to become involved in their children's educations when they can choose the type of education that they receive. This argument is strengthened by the referenced study of California charter school showing that there is more demand for charter schools among higher educated parents in a low-income community, which can easily be extended to show that when this demand is met they will be satisfied no matter the outcome. This is an important factor for parents to consider when using other families' satisfaction to make decisions about their children's schooling.

Carnoy (2000) also attacks claim of better efficiency in private and charter schools. The schools do in fact have lower cost per student, but upon inspection this is not because of better resource management, but due to lower teacher pay and the ability to turn away students who would require special programs or materials. This, compounded with the lack of evidence that that this financial "efficiency" is giving the same or improved schooling to students should make politicians wary of the use of tantalizing inexpensive school choice programs. Teachers also need to take note of the use of this argument, because their livelihood might be threatened if the transition to charter and private schooling continues.

"School Choice? Or is it Privatization?" (Carnoy, 2000) also raises the issue of achievement and access gaps according to economic status. While vouchers limited to the poor could help decrease the variance between students of high and low income families, Carnoy

realistically doubts the probability of such legislation passing into law. Thus advocates of school choice reforms lose their argument that such policies lift up low achievers and low income students, because they cannot limit the benefit of the policy to needy children.

Use of international data makes the Carnoy's case even more persuasive. Chilean studies show that a long standing government supported voucher system for both Catholic and private for-profit schools has been ineffective in improving overall educational outcomes.

While policies in the United States may differ significantly from international programs, data from other nations showing increased stratification of students after the implementation of school choice show that such a route will not solve the problems in American public education.

Carnoy's (2000) article uses a wide variety of quantitative studies to refute the popular ideas put forth by Lips' (2006) editorial on school choice. His analysis of variables unnoted by many observers, such as peer effects and the definition of efficiency, show that school choice will not solve the problems faced by public schools. Based on the evidence presented, I agree with Carnoy that increasing choice does not lead to educational improvement for all students, and should not be a part of the public school system. Teachers, policy makers, and parents should be wary of generalizations like Lips' article, which use incomplete evidence and specific examples to verify their opinions while neglecting quantitative studies refuting their claims.

Works Cited

Carnoy, Martin. (2000). School Choice? Or is it Privatization? *Educational Researcher*, 29(7), 15-20.

Lips, Dan (2006). Second Chance for School Choice. *FOX News*.