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ENG 101

26 June 2008

School Choice – An Unwise Option

The topic of charter schools and vouchers is an ongoing debate that is currently being argued in places from the local school board meetings to state supreme courts. Both charter schools and school voucher programs are collectively referred to as “school choice” initiatives, in that they allow parents to choose educational options for their children that are outside of the traditional public school system. A school voucher program provides parents with certificates that are used to pay for education at a school of their choice, rather than the public school to which they are assigned. Charter schools on the other hand are publicly funded schools that have been freed from some of the rules, regulations, and statutes that apply to other public schools. In exchange, charter schools have specialized accountability for producing certain results, which are set forth in each school’s charter. As Americans we enjoy choices and often associate choice as something positive. Being able to choose a school may sound like a reasonable initiative on the surface, but after a closer look it has serious problems. School choice turns out to not only be a bad idea; it’s also a violation of our constitution.

Considering the many challenges facing public schools, it’s understandable that many people would be eager to pursue new options. Supporters of school choice point out that under the current public school system, parents with economic means already exercise school choice by moving from areas with failing or dangerous schools to neighborhoods with better, safer schools. Their argument is that school choice would allow all parents the freedom, regardless of income

level, to select the school that provides the best education (Chub and Moe). Schools would then have to compete for students by offering higher academic results and greater safety. Schools unable to measure up to the standards of successful schools would fail and possibly close. Activists within the school choice movement can be applauded for seeking to improve public education, but the changes they propose would in fact seriously damage public education as a whole.

One of the biggest dangers of school choice is the power behind large corporations specializing in opening and operating charter schools. Two notable companies are Green Dot, which is the leading public school operator in Los Angeles (Green Dot), and KIPP, which operates 65 schools in 19 different states [KIPP]. These companies represent a growing trend of privatization of public schools by large corporations. It is feared that these corporations could grow to a point that public control of education would be lost. Education policy would be left in the hands of entrepreneurial think tanks, corporate boards of directors, and lobbyists who are more interested in profit than educating students [Miller and Gerson]. Education should be left in the hands of professional educators and not business people with MBAs. To do otherwise is not only dangerous, it defies common sense.

The validity of school voucher programs has met numerous challenges, with results varying from state to state. At the center of the divided opinions is whether or not it is constitutional for the federal government to give money directly to private schools, many of which are religiously based. According to the NEA "About 85 percent of private schools are religious. Vouchers tend to be a means of circumventing the Constitutional prohibitions against subsidizing religious practice and instruction [NEA]." One might view a parent's choice to send children to a religious school using government funded school vouchers as acceptable

considering that family pays taxes and it's only fair that they have a say in where the money is spent on behalf of their children. But consider the many people who have no children, or who have grown children that no longer participate in the public school system. These people still pay taxes to support public education, and it is only reasonable to consider that they may object to the funding of religious schools with the tax money they are paying. It is clear from any point of view that far more people object to voucher programs than benefit.

The public school system guarantees an education for every child in our nation. It becomes apparent that this isn't the case after examining the various school choice options. One must also consider the fate of special needs students which require many additional hours of direct teacher attention. These students could easily be viewed as "too expensive" to educate and could face sub-standard treatment or even exclusion in profit minded, corporate operated, charter schools. Even voucher programs possess a hidden selective element when one considers that religious schools are allowed to choose their students. Parents may apply to the school for admission of their children, but the school may choose to not admit them [ATF]. The only way to truly guarantee equality in public education is to invest in our public education system.

America was the first country to provide public education to all and we must ensure that it is not eroded by school choice. It can be seen that charter schools, while attractive at first, fade under closer examination. The dangers of huge corporations taking control of education are real. Consider what would have happened if Enron was involved in education. And voucher programs, also attractive under first light, become less appealing after considering their constitutional legality and the fact that private schools are allowed to practice a form of "student choice". All of the school choice initiatives are answers to the problems facing public education. But consider that for decades public education has suffered from lack of proper funding [Haider-

Markel]. Without proper funding, public schools have never had a legitimate chance to succeed. Why don't people pursue a simple answer to a simple problem? American's should fund the public schools adequately so they can get the job done. It's a simple answer that will work.