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NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND Lessons from American school voucher programmes

In a comprehensive review of America's public and private school voucher programmes, CHARLES GLENN analyses their outcomes, and argues that South Africa should experiment with school vouchers as a means of expanding access to quality education for the poor

For African-Americans, a central element of the struggle against racial oppression was the struggle over public – South Africans would say 'government' – education. The American civil rights movement was determined to ensure that African-Americans would have the right to attend all schools within the public system. They were equally determined to see that every school in the public system received equitable funding and offered, as nearly as possible, an equal standard of education.

But since the 1970s it has become clear that ensuring that schools cannot discriminate on racial grounds and that all public schools are equitably funded does *not* mean that members of disadvantaged groups, such as poor African-Americans living in inner cities, will have access to good schools.

The American experience has shown that ending racial discrimination, vital though that is, is not enough to bring the goal of decent schooling for all significantly closer. An array of far more complex – and much more specifically educational – reforms of the school system is required. Creating more *freedom of choice* among schools for learners and their parents is a fundamental element of these reforms.

The right to choose

Why is freedom of choice so important? There is a strong case to be made that it is an important human right to be able to choose the school attended by one's children. The principle that parents have a right to ensure that their children receive an education consistent with their own values, and that governments should make this possible, is recognised in almost all European countries, as well as in Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. It is also protected in several international covenants and in a number of constitutions. And even where this right is not enshrined in law, it is exercised in

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practice by 'educationally ambitious' (usually middle-class) parents. Educationally ambitious parents know how important attending a good school will be for their children.

Because they are usually relatively well off and well informed, educationally ambitious parents tend to be able to get their children into the best available schools. Sometimes this is just a matter of paying private school fees. But private schools are often prohibitively expensive. Parents who care about their children's education and who cannot afford a private school will often know which the best schools in the public system are, and will take steps to secure places in them for their children. These steps are often quite drastic, such as moving to a good school's catchment area. Equally, such parents will protest - or even leave the jurisdiction - if their right to choose a good school for their children is threatened.

But if the right to choose is so important to 'educationally ambitious' middle-class parents, it is unacceptable for it not to be enjoyed by poorer parents and children simply because they are less well off. If school choice is a right that anyone enjoys, it should (ideally, at least) be a right that everyone enjoys. How, then, is freedom of school choice to be expanded beyond the middle class?

A diversity of schools makes choice meaningful

The first stage in creating real freedom of choice in education is to allow a wide range of different types of schools to flourish within the public system and/or among religious or private schools. Freedom of choice would be pointless if all schools were identical, or if choice were only available at prohibitive cost.

Educational advantages aside, different types of schools are desirable for two reasons. First, an acceptance (and even celebration) of cultural differences strengthens the social fabric. Second, given the complexity of any modern society, no single type of school can suit all children.

A diversity of schools improves educational outcomes

There is considerable recent evidence from Britain that allowing a diversity of schools improves educational outcomes. In 1999, for instance, the results of pupils at specialist schools improved by 66 per cent more than those of pupils at all other schools. According to the British minister of education, '[Specialist schools that create] expertise in technology, languages, sports or the arts [help] to improve standards in secondary education as a whole. ... It works.'¹

And 'it works' for students at the specialist schools as well as for students at other schools. Students at Britain's specialist schools benefit from the additional expertise on offer. Students at other schools benefit too because an educational system that allows freedom of choice among schools creates pressure to improve all schools by encouraging competition among schools. Schools that do not attract learners and their parents are 'punished' by shrinking learner numbers and are therefore at risk of losing staff if, as is almost always the case, staff size is linked to enrolments. More importantly, as they shrink they become obvious to the educational authorities as problem schools and can be earmarked for assistance that will help them to improve their standards. Attractive schools gain staff and, depending on other policy choices, may be rewarded in other ways as well.

In 2000, 73 per cent of people with family incomes below \$20 000 a year and 75 per cent of black parents in the United States supported vouchers

School vouchers make school choice a practical possibility

The existence of a wide range of schools to choose from is the essential first step to making the right to school choice a reality beyond the middle class. The next step is to make chosen schools accessible to less well-off parents and their children. Given the financial barriers that would have to be surmounted to make this possible, unrestricted school choice has to be a long-term goal, in developing countries at least.

What can be done immediately, however, is to start school voucher programmes that will enable at least some poorer parents to choose the school that their children attend.

A voucher is simply a certificate that can be used instead of money to pay for particular types of goods or services. Food vouchers, for example, can only be used to buy food. They might be preferred to ordinary money grants as an instrument of poverty relief because they cannot be used to purchase alcohol, for example. Similarly, a school voucher is a form of government grant that can only be used to pay for schooling at approved schools.

Vouchers are an attractive policy instrument for reformers frustrated by the slow pace of improvement in American public schools despite massive increases in funding. While still relatively small, school voucher programmes have already shown encouraging results. In the 1999-2000 school year nearly 50 000 students participated in 68 privately funded voucher programmes, and another 12 000 or more in three publicly funded ones.

Publicly funded school voucher programmes

There are now three publicly funded voucher programmes in the United States explicitly designed to provide children and their parents with an alternative to inadequate public schools.

Milwaukee, Wisconsin

America's first major publicly funded school voucher programme was introduced by the Wisconsin legislature in April 1990, at the instigation of Annette 'Polly' Williams, an African-American Democrat who had represented Milwaukee – a predominantly black urban district – in the legislature since 1980. Williams filed a bill providing for vouchers to be issued to children from low-income families in Milwaukee, enabling them to attend non-religious private schools. The programme was open to families with an annual income below a certain level.

It was clear that the scope of the programme would remain very limited as long as religious schools were excluded from participation. The legislature lifted this restriction in 1995 and substantially increased funding. Within days, 72 additional schools had indicated their intention of participating.

In the 2001-2 school year, 10 882 students received vouchers to attend 106 private schools in Milwaukee, up from 341 students at seven schools in 1990-1. In 2000-1, 62.4 per cent of the students participating in the voucher programme were African-American, a slightly higher proportion than the average for Milwaukee public schools.

An educational system that allows freedom of choice among schools creates pressure to improve all schools by encouraging competition among schools

The public voucher covers the entire cost of studying at a private school – not the tuition charged to other students, which might be higher or lower – to a maximum of \$5 553. This is significantly less than the \$9 926 average per-student cost at Milwaukee public schools.

Private school teachers tend to earn less than those in public schools and private schools also tend to have less elaborate infrastructures, and fewer administrative staff. The regulatory environment in which private schools operate is also more relaxed, which means they have to deal with fewer and less onerous administrative demands. The Wisconsin voucher law, for instance, does not prescribe detailed requirements beyond non-discrimination and compliance with health and safety standards; instead, it emphasises outcomes. In essence, the legislation requires only that parents be given the information they need to compare public and non-public schools so that they can decide whether to participate in the voucher programme or not.

Ideally, vouchers should be worth enough to stimulate the creation of new non-public schools

Cleveland, Ohio

Just as in Milwaukee, the Cleveland programme had a background in the failures of the public school system.

In 1995 the Ohio state legislature enacted a voucher programme for students from low-income families living in Cleveland, a city, like Milwaukee, with a heavily black enrolment in a notably unsuccessful public school system. The United States Supreme Court confirmed the constitutional legality of this programme in June 2002.

Children in grades 0–8 are eligible for publicly funded vouchers enabling them to attend private schools, with priority given to children from low- and moderate-income families. Funding for 2001–2 supports 4 195 students in 50 schools up to a maximum of \$2 250 a year. Special needs students are eligible for additional funding to cover the additional costs associated with teaching them.

An important difference between the Milwaukee and Cleveland programmes is that the money value of vouchers is significantly lower in Cleveland, and has not been increased, as in Milwaukee, to keep pace with public school expenditures. The relative value of the voucher has declined steadily, and in 2000–2 represented only 25 per cent of the per student expenditure of Cleveland public schools. One result has been that, unlike in Milwaukee, non-religious private schools have been reluctant to accept voucher-funded students.

When the Cleveland and Milwaukee experiences are compared, an important lesson emerges: vouchers must be valuable enough to stimulate supply. At the very least, they must be generous enough to encourage schools outside the public system to compete for voucher students. Ideally, they should be worth enough to stimulate the creation of *new* non-public schools. These additional schools expand choice and so encourage public schools to improve their performance by giving parents and pupils a challenging standard of comparison, and by putting public schools at risk of declining student numbers as pupils make use of the voucher option.

Florida

The Florida state legislature enacted the A+ Opportunity Scholarship Programme (A+OSP) in 1999. This programme offers state-funded scholarships to students at public schools classified as ‘failing’ for two out of four years by the Florida depart

ment of education. The scholarship is valid up to the highest grade offered by the failing school, and may be used to enrol in a private school or another public school.

Schools are classified as 'failing' if their students perform poorly in reading, writing, and mathematics in Florida's public exams. In the first year of the programme, two schools received this classification. Parents of 93 students at these schools requested vouchers enabling them to enrol their children at five private schools, and those of 85 students requested vouchers to enable their children to attend different public schools.

Although a mark of success in a voucher programme would ordinarily be a steady increase in the number of students participating, the opposite has occurred in Florida: no new A+OSP scholarships were awarded in 2000-1 or 2001-2, because no Florida school received a second failing grade.

Seventy-eight Florida schools were on the verge of a second 'failing' designation for 2000-1, which would have made tens of thousands of additional students eligible for the programme. Following widespread efforts to avoid that designation, Florida's education commissioner announced after the 1999-2000 school year that the test scores of all 78 schools had improved enough to avoid the 'F' grade.²

Florida's experience suggests that even the 'threat' of a voucher programme can improve general educational performance.

It is nearly impossible to fire public school teachers even in cases of extreme incompetence or prolonged substance abuse

Privately funded school voucher programmes

Private benefactors in the United States have also created voucher programmes enabling children from low-income families to attend non-public schools. In some respects these efforts seem like a continuation of a long-established philanthropic tradition of endowing scholarships. There are, however, two new elements which deserve attention.

First, the private voucher programmes have explicitly opted to introduce, at least in theory, elements of competition among schools and empowerment of parents, because recipients may use vouchers at any one of a number of schools. This differs from private scholarships that are administered by the schools themselves and are awarded to whomever those schools select. In practice, however, the effect of this form of parental choice on the education system as a whole is less than might be expected, since the space available in non-public schools prepared to accept inner-city children is much less than the demand.

The second, and more important, way in which privately funded voucher programmes differ from privately funded scholarships is that those establishing the private voucher programmes have generally done so not only to help individual children but also to have an impact on public policy. This is evident from the strong emphasis on evaluation built into these programmes from the outset. The intention is to demonstrate beyond any doubt that children perform better academically when given a real choice of schools, and so to create pressure for publicly funded vouchers as a response to the catastrophic failures of many urban public school systems.

The origins of the private voucher movement are usually traced to a programme started in 1991 in the mid-western city of Indianapolis by J Patrick Rooney, chairman of the Golden Rule Insurance Company. After the state legislature rejected a proposal for publicly funded vouchers, Rooney established the \$1.2 million Educational

CHOICE Charitable Trust. The trust offered to pay half the tuition for up to 500 children so that they could attend schools chosen by their parents. The idea was picked up by the Texas Public Policy Foundation, which organised sponsors to establish the Children's Educational Opportunity Foundation of San Antonio (CEO San Antonio) in April 1992.

In May 1994 the Children's Educational Opportunity Foundation America, or CEO AMERICA, was established, and each year since then affiliated organisations have been established in additional cities; there are now about 80 affiliates listed on

Vouchers are an excellent way of making education monopolies face competition

Vouchers - a powerful tool for reform

All children should enjoy the right to a decent education, not least because, without an educated population, a country will not prosper in the 21st century.

But this does not mean that education must be provided by a public monopoly, as it often is in the United States. In most American cities, all the schools in a particular area are controlled by a single education bureaucracy working in close cooperation with a powerful teachers' union.

In New York, for example, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) has dominated the public school system for decades. Its power is so great that half the job openings in all public schools must be filled by UFT members from other schools. The principal does not have the right to interview these teachers. Principals cannot assign teachers to classes on merit if the UFT prefers to assign them on the basis of seniority. Principals cannot ask to see teachers' lesson plans. It is nearly impossible to fire teachers even in cases of extreme incompetence or prolonged substance abuse.

Good teachers are not rewarded, bad teachers are protected, the bureaucracy keeps growing, and the customers (children and their parents) get poor service. In New York in 2002 only about half of the city's public school students finished high school in the usual time. This is hardly surprising, given that 62 per cent of primary school children were not reaching an 'acceptable level' in maths.

There is no single answer to this problem – but providing education vouchers so that at least some poor parents can choose where to send their children to school is a very useful step in the right direction for all parents and children. As a leading expert on voucher programmes explains:

'Empowering the poor with school choice through vouchers helps some children immediately by liberating them from failing public schools. But there is also good reason to believe that the threat of losing its children will force the monopoly public education system to become more responsive to [all] parents and taxpayers... in states where support for a voucher system has been strong, it has been easier for school reformers to make the necessary radical changes.'

In Arizona, for instance, public school districts that were losing pupils to voucher-funded schools have begun to ask parents why they are using vouchers to remove their children, and to try to improve the educational service they provide.

In education – as in so many areas – competition improves quality. And vouchers are an excellent way of making education monopolies face competition.³

CDE 2003

its website. While the primary focus is upon supporting individual children, CEO AMERICA makes no secret of its advocacy of increased school choice.

The way in which these privately funded voucher programmes work is best illustrated by example: In Indianapolis, Indiana, parents seeking to participate in this programme fill out an application, which they take to a private school of their choice. The school has complete control over the decision whether or not to admit the applicant. The voucher pays half of the school's fees, up to \$800 per student (as of 1992–3). Only low-income families are eligible, but they are expected to contribute towards the tuition. 'By requiring participating families to invest in their child's education, the trust hopes to encourage parental involvement.'⁴

A study in the second year of the programme found that 'participating family income levels are far below income levels for Indianapolis public school families', and that 'the programme attracts a higher than expected percentage of children from households headed by a single parent – more than half'. Students receiving vouchers to transfer to private schools were more likely to be African-American than those who remained in the public schools.

The performance of students receiving private vouchers was 'well above average'

Educational outcomes of voucher programmes

Rigorous studies, involving the random assignment of vouchers and tracking of control groups that have not received vouchers, are providing high-quality data about the educational benefits of private voucher programmes.

The performance of students receiving private vouchers in the test most widely used for admission to higher education in the United States was 'well above average for the most similar national norm group, all African-American students'.⁵ Another review of the early results from three carefully designed voucher experiments found that 'the effects of switching to a private school on African-American students [was] strongly positive. ...'⁶

Although the effect sizes were fairly modest (an average improvement in academic performance over two years of 3 to 6 per cent), the researchers pointed out that they were twice as large as those created by the introduction of 'accountability programmes' involving external testing, and almost the same size as the effect of reducing class sizes – which is, of course, vastly more expensive than introducing a voucher programme.

All the voucher programmes that have been evaluated have given at least modest support to the argument for supporting parent choice, especially for low-income and African-American families.

What's more, the evidence suggests that privately operated schools, perhaps because their students freely choose to attend them and because they are not bound by racially segregated housing patterns, are better able to promote positive race relations and integration than are publicly operated schools.

None of these programmes has produced a miracle. However, the outcomes of school choice programmes must be assessed in their proper context; among other things, it must be recognised that there are many factors that contribute to academic success, and that only some of them depend upon the characteristics of the school itself. School vouchers cannot cancel a long history of racial discrimination, poverty, and intractable social problems. But they can and do help.

Why do voucher programmes work?

Opponents of school choice and of the vouchers that make this possible often claim that they produce better educational outcomes because voucher schools engage in 'creaming' – that is, they accept only the most academically promising children and expel those who cause any difficulty. On this view, voucher schools only succeed by being parasites on public schools, which have to educate children from all kinds of backgrounds.

The accusation that voucher schools accept only academically promising children is simply false. A high proportion of students taking part in voucher programmes would be considered at risk of academic failure, scoring in the bottom third of their class before they moved to a voucher-funded school.⁷ The claim that voucher schools expel 'undesirables' was examined in a detailed study of a private voucher programme in New York, and was also found to be false. In fact, voucher-funded students are less likely than public school students to drop out or be involuntarily discharged: 24 per cent of voucher-funded students quit or are asked to leave school; the comparable figure for public high school students is 33 per cent.⁸

Lastly, opponents of voucher schools argue that voucher schools succeed because they are more expensive than public schools. This, they say, enables voucher schools to have smaller classes and to employ better-qualified teachers than public schools can. This is also a false claim.

Voucher schools are cheaper to run than public schools. Public schools tend to have more elaborate facilities and better-paid teachers with more qualifications (at least on paper) than voucher schools do. Evidence from the private voucher programme in San Antonio, Texas, for instance, shows that the observed superior performance of low-income students attending private schools with vouchers was certainly *not* because of smaller class sizes, higher levels of teacher training, or higher teacher salaries.

Voucher schools are cheaper to run than public schools

Why do poor black parents send their children to voucher schools?

American critics of school vouchers sometimes assert that the mainly poor, mainly black, parents who send their children to voucher-funded schools make this choice for bad or trivial reasons.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Research in St Louis, Indianapolis and San Antonio has found that the predominantly black and poor parents who send their children to voucher schools do so because *they believe that a good education can make a real difference in their children's lives*, and because they value the educational quality, discipline, positive atmosphere, safety, and religious values found in voucher-funded schools.

The *idea* of voucher-funded schools is favoured by a strong majority of poorer and African-American parents even where no voucher school is actually available to them. In 2000, vouchers were supported by 73 per cent of people with family incomes below \$20 000 a year, 75 per cent of black parents, and 71 per cent of Hispanic parents in the United States.⁹

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If voucher schools do not produce their results by 'cheating', why do they succeed? The following factors seem to be particularly important, and are worth discussing in some detail.

- **Parents have to make an effort to apply for voucher schools**

Voucher schools attract parents who make the effort to learn about educational alternatives and to apply for a voucher. Such people – however poor they may be – are far more likely to contribute in other ways to their children's educational success than those who wait passively for their children to enter the nearest public school. Research from St Louis, Missouri, shows that parents who are more involved in their children's choices tend to encourage their children to aim for success at school. By contrast, parents who allow their children to choose 'the nearby and the familiar all-black neighbourhood school,' tend to expect little from education.

Of course public policy should be concerned with poor children whose parents are less motivated and involved. It would be perverse, however, to snatch away the rewards of involvement simply because some parents and students do not take advantage of opportunities. Isn't it possible that some of the latter, seeing how their similarly situated neighbours benefit from better schools, will come to change their attitude about what is possible? The active marketing of voucher programmes could also work to increase the number of parents willing to get involved.

- **Voucher schools have more autonomy than public schools**

Voucher-funded schools are not as constrained as public schools are by the large and unwieldy education bureaucracies found in America's cities. American research – and common sense – both suggest that the freer schools are from external control, and the less subject to bureaucratic constraints, the more likely they are to be effective organisations. This is because they are able to shape their structures to suit local circumstances rather than having to conform to rigid, centrally imposed requirements.

- **Teachers at voucher schools have better morale**

Largely as a result of the autonomy they enjoy, teachers at voucher schools are far more satisfied in their jobs than public school teachers, despite their significantly lower salaries.

The figures are startling: in 1993–4 a National Center for Education Statistics study found that salaries in public schools ranged from \$34 200 to \$54 900, and those in private schools from \$22 000 to \$32 000. But 36 per cent of private school teachers compared to only 11 per cent of public school teachers pronounced themselves 'highly satisfied' with their jobs. An important element of this satisfaction seems to be that voucher school teachers have a greater sense of control over significant aspects of their work. Some 59,2 per cent (versus 34,9 per cent of public school teachers) reported they had a great deal of influence over discipline policies, and 55,7 per cent (versus 34,3 per cent) over curriculae.¹⁰ And, of course, a satisfied teacher is far more likely to be an efficient and inspiring one.

- **Voucher schools are organised around shared (usually religious) values**

This is probably the most important reason for the superior performance of voucher-funded schools.

Teachers at voucher schools are far more satisfied in their jobs than public school teachers

Detailed qualitative research on the private voucher programme in New York City reveals above all that voucher schools *live by explicitly stated, shared, social and educational values, usually with a strong religious component.*

These schools are organisations dedicated to motivating and influencing children and to producing graduates who are ready for higher education, productive work, and effective citizenship. By contrast, the public high schools in the neighbourhoods where these students lived were bureaucracies before they were schools, designed to ensure that public funds were properly spent, regulations followed, legislative mandates observed, and the civil service rights of workers respected. Although many teachers and administrators in the public schools cared deeply about students, the institutional environment of public education was routinised, and impersonal. Public schools delivered instructional programmes, but seldom made aggressive efforts to change students' values and motivations – something that the voucher-funded schools considered to be the core of their educational mission.

Voucher-funded schools protect and sustain their distinctive character, both in hiring staff members who accept the school's mission, and by socialising new staff members to their values. Public schools have no grounds, other than training and experience, to choose among applicants, and no well-defined basis on which to influence the attitudes or behaviour of new staff members.

To sum up, voucher programmes work because they provide access to schools that their students can believe in; where they can be taught by teachers who are truly engaged, and where they are more likely to receive a high-quality education.

Private voucher programmes are generally founded not only to help individual children but also to have an impact on public policy

The voucher movement: A new 'freedom train'

Opponents of voucher programmes claim that the voucher movement is 'right wing' and elitist. That is not how it is perceived in the African-American community.

Urban activist and Democratic politician Cory A. Booker, who has been described as the 'Saviour of Newark' (a poor inner-city area) by Time magazine, has called school choice a 'pillar of the urban renaissance'. As he says, 'When you walk into these schools, you can feel the difference. You can sense the energy. You walk into classrooms and can witness the people that live on my block, on Martin Luther King Boulevard, in the projects, succeeding at rates much higher than when they attended public schools.'

Mikel Holt, editor of the *Milwaukee Community Journal*, puts it this way: 'What all of these parents and all of these children have in common is that they are all part of what we call a civil rights movement.'

'It's an educational civil rights movement. It's a freedom train that's been travelling around the country....'

'We have a Democratic mayor who has fought hard for school choice. We have a Republican governor who has fought hard for school choice. We have Democrats, Republicans, independents. We have Catholics, atheists, Protestants, Methodists....'

'The civil rights movement my parents were involved in and I was involved in when I was a lot younger was to guarantee access. It was to get us to the lunch counter. The new civil rights agenda, since we're already at the lunch counter, is to make sure that our children can read the menu.'¹¹

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The features of successful voucher programmes

American experience has made it possible to develop a set of principles which successful voucher programmes should follow. These are:

- School voucher programmes require that non-public voucher-funded schools be autonomous. While voucher-funded schools must conform to reasonable curriculum and standards requirements, they must be independent of the public education bureaucracy. If they are not, diversity and teacher commitment are stifled.
- School vouchers must be generous enough to stimulate the 'supply side'. Existing private and religious schools must find voucher students attractive. Ideally, vouchers should be large enough to stimulate the creation of new non-public schools.
- School voucher programmes must make a concerted marketing effort to reach parents who ordinarily do not participate effectively in making decisions about the schooling of their children. After all, voucher programmes are based on the principle that all parents have the right to be 'educationally ambitious.'
- Voucher programmes must ensure that those operating voucher-funded schools have the desire and resources to meet the special needs of poor and educationally handicapped children. Vouchers should be realistically 'weighted' so as to provide more funding for those students who are more expensive to educate than the average.

School vouchers cannot cancel a long history of racial discrimination, poverty, and intractable social problems. But they can and do help

A voucher experiment for South Africa?

There are, of course, enormous differences between educational challenges in the United States and those that confront South Africans. But there are also some striking similarities.

In both countries, members of the middle classes – black and white – now choose the best school they can find for their children.

In both countries, many (if not most) poor black children have no choice but to attend low-quality schools.

In both countries, the private sector has a long tradition of generous and enlightened social responsibility spending.

In the United States, companies, charities, and NGOs have found that voucher programmes are effective in improving the education of those who obtain vouchers. And voucher programmes also help to improve the education system overall.

Perhaps it is time for a similar coalition to begin creating school choice – and ultimately, better lives – for poorer South Africans.

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