

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

Press Release 696

PUBLIC EDUCATION UP FOR SALE WORLDWIDE

the economic and academic arguments FOR State Aid to private religious schools, not to mention any egalitarian arguments based on ‘need’ have faded into the myths of history. In the rationalisation of State Aid the only argument left is that of ‘choice’. This is the basis for the demands for vouchers, charter schools and privatisation in both America and Australia.

Although we in Australia find that America under Trump is reality trumping satire, in the education sphere, we are in fact further down the slippery slope to privatisation and church/state entanglement than the United States. Even the Gonski plan beloved by those concerned for disadvantaged children, is thoroughly undermined by an assumed ‘voucher’ style per capita grant with ‘no school losing any public money’ caveat. So, Australia got there before other countries – forty years ago. Australia went neo-liberal in education well before America.

Rising populism and identity politics are leading to increased demands from families seeking out specific types of schools that support their beliefs. In some countries, this has extended to replacing the public system of schools with government vouchers that can be used to pay for private schools – a priority of [Betsy DeVos](#), the nominee for U.S. education secretary.

Advocates argue that school choice promotes competition that will improve performance and allow the freedom of choice that will best serve student educational needs and family preferences.

But there is an inherent tension between unfettered school choice and a common educational experience that will ensure students are prepared for the demands of a democratic society. Families have their own private goals and their own reasons for preferring particular types of schooling experience.

And the evidence is now available to disprove even the arguments for ‘choice’ and voucher systems.

Nobel prize-winning economist Milton Friedman designed an educational voucher plan some 60 years ago that was adopted by [Sweden](#) and [Chile](#). Under his plan, families can use vouchers at any approved private school. Several states and cities in the [U.S.](#) sponsor voucher approaches for students from low-income families that are used mainly at religiously affiliated schools.

Friedman, like so many academics who wished to avoid conflicting ideas, merely placed them in tandem as if no conflict existed. He considered vouchers and democracy were not in conflict. Wrong!

He wrote:

“A stable and democratic society is impossible without a minimum degree of literacy and knowledge on the part of most citizens and without widespread acceptance of some common set of values,” Friedman wrote in a 1955 essay on educational vouchers. This required universal (private) schooling at government expense.

[Henry Levin, Professor of Economics and Education at Columbia University](#) in New York, says that school choice hasn't improved student performance in schools around the world where it has been implemented. Instead it has led to the systematic segregation of students by ethnicity, social class and religion.

Levin says that there is very little evidence to support the claim of choice and voucher advocates that competitive incentives induced by school choice will lead to better educational outcomes: <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/articles/2017-01-30/little-global-evidence-suggests-school-choice-helps-performance> He writes that:

Sweden has had an educational voucher system since 1992, but its achievement levels on international tests have been falling for two decades. Chile has had such a system since 1980, and there is little evidence of improvement in achievement relative to countries at similar levels of income. Cleveland, Milwaukee, and the District of Columbia have issued vouchers to low-income families, but sophisticated evaluations find no difference between achievement in private voucher schools and public schools with similar student populations. Students from low-income families in Louisiana who have used vouchers to shift from public to private schools have experienced striking reductions in achievement gains relative to similar students in public schools.

In [England](#) there has been a dramatic shift from schools governed by public councils to academies run by private groups with great autonomy and the ability to select their own students. The results on student achievement show no distinct advantage, and there are similar results for U.S. charter schools based upon careful statistical comparisons.

Sweden's vouchers have increased segregation by social class and immigrant status. Chile's voucher system has produced one of the most segregated systems of schools in the world by family income. In the [Netherlands](#), studies of the school choice system have pointed to school separation of students by ethnicity, immigrant status and family income. A [Brookings Institution study](#) found that U.S. charter schools are more segregated racially and socio-economically than public schools in surrounding areas. [The Program for International Student Assessment](#), an important triennial study of international student performance, finds school segregation by social class is associated with school choice.

Although even public schools have segregation challenges typically caused by residential location, school choice tends to streamline the racial, social class and ethnic isolation of students, as well as separate them by political ideology and religion.

Parents have their own private goals for their children and ample opportunities to pursue them. Schools account for only about 10 percent of the waking hours of the young between birth and age 18, freeing most of the time for family experience. They also have a constitutional right to send their children to religious schools.

The question is how to balance the quest for school choice with preparation of the young for the shared values and knowledge necessary for an effective democracy. Universal school choice will undermine a shared experience and further exacerbate conflict and social division. The challenge for education is to find forms of choice that insure exposure of all students to the experiences they need for democratic participation.

Henry M. Levin is the William Heard Kilpatrick Professor of Economics and Education at Columbia University's [Teachers College](#).

Trevor Cobbold of Save our Schools Organisation has picked up the findings of Henry Levin at <http://www.saveourschools.com.au/choice-and-competition/school-choice-has-failed>

And Diane Ravitch has been sounding the warning that Public Education is up for sale for some time . <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/articles/2016-08-09/worldwide-public-education-is-up-for-sale>

But, with the exception of Ravitch, all these writers, have yet to reach the logical position taken by our nineteenth century predecessors who established our democratic institutions in the first place. They realised that the only way to protect the institutions for the public good from those who wished to exploit it for their own ends – ideological or economic – was to make them genuinely public – in purpose, outcome, access, ownership, control, and accountability – with sole public funding.

This could only be done by resiling from any entanglements between religion and the state and proper resourcing of public schools.

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