

Vouching for Vouchers

Lessons from Maine

By Frank Heller

Vouchers have been routinely used in Maine to send tens of thousands of students to schools of their parents' choice since 1873. Few analysts have paid much attention to this system of school choice, although it is the most extensive system in the United States.

Many towns in Maine have traditionally been considered too small to maintain a local public school. Under Maine's tuition program, any student who lives in a town without a public school is eligible for tuition reimbursement, which can be used for either an out-of-district public school or an approved independent school.

The availability of tuition reimbursement has created greater competition among schools in regions where this form of school choice is available. Other benefits of the program include lower costs. Data from the Maine Department of Education suggest that the tuition program costs approximately \$6,000 per student, or 20% less than Maine's average per-pupil expenditure for public education.

No studies have compared the academic test scores of students who receive vouchers with those of students assigned to traditional public schools. However, the Maine Educational Assessment test shows that students in Maine's independent schools have higher test scores than do students in public schools and that students attending independent schools are more likely to graduate and obtain a higher education.

Not surprisingly, parents in 'sending' towns greatly favour the tuition program and the variety of options it affords. Jon Reisman, first selectman of Cooper, Maine, and professor of public policy at the University of Maine, puts it this way.

"Cooper's tuitioning system is the major reason why parents ... move here School choice is the most valued attribute of living in Cooper. Four years ago, our town was faced with ... turning over control of where our kids would go to school to the State Department of Education; we refused, since it meant losing our choice of schools."

Other towns have done the same. In Arrowsic, Maine, for instance, 80% of the voters rejected an attempt to build a public school, which would have eliminated the voucher program. Parents in other sending towns echo those sentiments and have stymied efforts to eliminate the choice system.

Frequently, parents attempt to establish residency in areas without public schools in order to have a choice of schools. Sometimes, families

will move to particular areas; other times, they cheat by adopting a mailing address in an area without a school to give the appearance of residency.

Dr. Reisman describes the system as the “most valued attribute” of living in a tuition town. Unfortunately, Maine facilitates choice only for students who live in the ‘right’ towns. Maine’s policy-makers should expand educational opportunities for all students, and policy-makers nationwide should look to Maine’s extensive experience with vouchers.

Lessons from Vermont

By Libby Sternberg

Vermont’s voucher program has been part of the state’s education system for so long that many residents would be surprised to hear it called a voucher program. In 90 Vermont towns, or roughly one in three, the state and town pay tuition for students in kindergarten through grade 12 to attend public and private schools. Vermonters dub them ‘tuition towns.’

How does a town become a tuition town? Simple. It must not have a public school or the existing school must be so small that it can hold only a fraction of local students.

Fringe Schools?

Critics of voucher systems have suggested that vouchers would lead to the establishment of schools for skinheads, Nazis, witches, and even followers of the Hale-Bopp comet. Research on Vermont’s system suggests that critics’ concerns are overblown, if not completely baseless. To date, it does not appear that residents have ever even attempted to use their tuition dollars to open fringe schools.

Giving Up on Community?

Despite the fact that only a minority of citizens has children in school at any given time, critics argue that vouchers will destroy the sense of community that public schools create. But the tuition towns have any number of community centres, from the local grocery store or golf course to the town hall. In fact, the event that draws out the most people in these tiny towns is what many would consider a very appropriate focal point - the face-to-face democracy of the New England town meeting that involves all citizens equally.

Transportation?

Voucher critics charge that only the wealthy, with time on their hands and access to cars, will be able to transport their children to independent schools. In Vermont, school districts have adopted a variety of transportation policies ranging from busing students to private schools

to reimbursing parents for the cost of travel. Parents, too, have arranged carpools and vanpools without assistance from the state.

Expanded Opportunities?

Voucher critics suggest that if parents are allowed to choose their children's schools and independent schools can selectively accept students, students with similar backgrounds will congregate in particular schools, creating a two-tiered educational system. Data are hard to come by, but anecdotal evidence suggests that Vermont's voucher system actually expands educational opportunities by giving families access to public and private schools that would otherwise be closed to them because of residency requirements or financial barriers.

Very limited data are available on the progress or satisfaction of voucher students. This very lack of data holds an important lesson, however. Vermont has operated its voucher system for 130 years; yet, no cry has gone up for information to be compiled to justify the system's continuation. In other words, it is widely accepted that vouchers work.

(Both articles were adapted with permission from much longer briefing papers published by the Cato Institute, www.cato.org.)