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## **Vouchers or School Choice?**

**by Sheldon Richman**

The voters of Utah said no to school vouchers on Tuesday. More than 60 percent of voters refused to ratify a bill passed earlier by the state legislature. It would have provided taxpayer-funded vouchers for each government-school student, ranging from \$500 to \$3,000, depending on family income. Students currently in private schools, unless they came from low-income families, would have been ineligible.

This was the latest setback for the school-voucher movement. It was the tenth time since 1972 that vouchers or education tax credits have been defeated in public balloting, with the vote against the initiatives averaging more than 68 percent, according to the National School Boards Association.

It's difficult to know why the voters turned vouchers down. The most likely explanation is that the government-education establishment scared them into believing that vouchers would drain the state system of money. That's what voucher opponents, most prominently the teachers' union, argued, but it wouldn't have been true. Utah spends about \$7,500 per student, far more than the most expensive voucher.

But that really isn't the point. Regardless of why Utahans said no, in the long run they have struck a blow for education free of state control. That may seem hard to believe, since the voucher movement promotes itself as being in favor of "school choice." But while their hearts are in the right place, their solution won't get them where they want to go. The way to create school choice is not to give the state more excuses to regulate the private schools. That's what vouchers would do.

Look at the failed Utah initiative. It would have required private schools to "give a formal national test every year" to students. That undoubtedly would be a test produced and recognized by the national education establishment. But he who controls the exam controls the curriculum — and thus controls the school. Schools would have to teach to the test. That would limit innovation and make the private schools more like the public schools. Some choice.

“Public” money going to private schools cannot bode well for the future of those schools. There will be inevitable calls for “accountability” for the money, and that appeal will have plausibility because the taxpayers won’t want their money handed out willy-nilly. Voucher advocates insist that the money will be the parents’ and that they should be free to spend it on schooling as they wish. For most, it will indeed be the parents’ money, although for low-income parents vouchers will inevitably involve subsidies. But that won’t change the perception that the money is the general public’s and that the government should protect the public by attaching strings.

That provision will doom vouchers as a source of *real* choice. After all, the point of education reform shouldn’t be simply to let parents choose among schools that are more or less the same. The point is to free the system from the dead hand of bureaucracy so that innovation can flourish.

That can happen only in an entrepreneurial setting. But entrepreneurship requires freedom for both buyers and sellers. Government must not be allowed to interfere in transactions between consenting education providers and parents. Great ideas are often the result of trial and error, and entrepreneurship consists in the profit-driven effort to discover how to satisfy consumers. When the government dominates education, entrepreneurship is all but ruled out. The demand for alternative schools is suppressed when government provides apparently free schools. Most parents, faced with the choice between schools for which they have to lay out cash and schools for which they don’t, will go with what looks like free schools. They of course are not really free because parents —and those who do not have children — have to pay taxes whether they use the schools are not. Thus government schools inhibit true education reform. We don’t know what we’re missing.

Education liberated from government wouldn’t only be more efficient. It would also be more in keeping with a free society. Where did the people inspired by the Declaration of Independence ever get the dangerous idea that government should teach their children?

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