



11350 Random Hills Road, Suite 800, Fairfax, Virginia 22030 Phone (703) 934-6101 Fax (703) 352-3678

fff@fff.org www.fff.org

Milton Friedman Was Wrong on Vouchers

by Jacob G. Hornberger

In an article I wrote in September 1990 entitled “[Letting Go of Socialism](#),” I pointed out how public schooling is a model of a socialistic program. I also addressed the issue of school vouchers:

But the real tragedy is that so many freedom devotees in America also won't let go of socialism. All too often, their answer to the problem involves a futile attempt to make socialism work more efficiently. They want competition in public schools, vouchers, and other schemes which have the ultimate effect of leaving the socialist system intact, reformed, and more efficient.

My article provoked a response from the late Milton Friedman, the Nobel Prize-winning economist who introduced and popularized the idea of school vouchers. In a speech entitled “Say No to Intolerance” that was printed in the September 1991 issue of *Liberty*, Friedman took me, along with such libertarian luminaries as Ludwig von Mises and Ayn Rand, to task for being too “utopian.” He pointed out that while he too favored ending public schooling, school vouchers, he said, were simply a practical means to achieve that goal. He wrote,

In the Future of Freedom Foundation's *Freedom Daily*, for September 1990 — again, a group that is doing good work and is making an impact — Jacob Hornberger wrote, “What is the answer to socialism in public schools? Freedom.” Correct. But how do we get from here to there? Is that somebody else's problem? Is that a purely practical problem that we can dismiss? The ultimate goal we would like to get to is a society in which people are responsible for themselves and for their children's schooling. And in which you do not have a governmental system. But am I a statist, as I have been labeled by a number of libertarians, because some thirty years ago I suggested the use of educational vouchers as a way of easing the transition? Is that, and I quote Hornberger again, “simply a futile attempt to make socialism work more efficiently”? I don't believe it. I don't believe that you can simply say what the ideal is. This is what I mean by the utopian strand in libertarianism. You

cannot simply describe the utopian solution, and leave it to somebody else how we get from here to there. That's not only a practical problem. It's a problem of the responsibilities that we have.

I believed Friedman was wrong then, and I still contend he was wrong. School vouchers are nothing more than a reform device that leaves the public schooling system intact.

As evidence to support my position, I cite a scholarly paper entitled "A Win-Win Solution: The Empirical Evidence on How Vouchers Affect Public Schools," by Greg Forster, Ph.D. The paper was published in the January 2009 of *School Choice Issues*, which is published by The Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice.

Forster writes,

This report collects the results of all available empirical studies on how vouchers affect academic achievement in public schools. Contrary to the widespread claim that vouchers hurt public schools, it finds that empirical evidence consistently supports the conclusion that vouchers improve public schools. No empirical study has ever found that vouchers had a negative impact on public schools.

Given that vouchers are actually working to improve the public-schooling system, Milton Friedman's claim that vouchers would lead to the demise of public schooling is obviously dubious.

In fact, what better reason to oppose vouchers than the fact that they are improving a socialistic program that has done so much damage to so many young people? With its coerced system of regimentation and conformity, along with its use of Ritalin on those who resist such aberrance, the sooner we rid the country of this socialistic scourge, the better.

As I stated in my article some 20 years ago: "What is the answer to socialism in public schools? Freedom! Why not separate school and state in the same way that our ancestors separated church and state?"

Mr. Hornberger is founder and president of The Future of Freedom Foundation, publisher of the book *Separating School & State: How to Liberate America's Families*, by Sheldon Richman.

This article was originally published in April 2009.