

BOOK REVIEWS

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THE EDUCATION GAP: VOUCHERS AND URBAN SCHOOLS

WILLIAM G. HOWELL & PAUL E. PETERSON, BROOKINGS INSTITUTION PRESS, 2002.

Reviewed by Bruce S. Cooper

In *The Education Gap*, Howell and Peterson have written a timely and critical book. First, as an analysis of the effects of school vouchers—tuition grants to families which allow them to select a school of choice—the book could not be more current. For in June 2002, the deeply divided U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* that families could use tax-based vouchers to help pay tuition to private religious schools, breaching the “wall of separation between church and state.” Chief Justice Rehnquist explained the majority opinion, stating that vouchers are legal under the First Amendment because “the aid is allocated on the basis of neutral secular criteria that neither favor nor disfavor religion, and is made available to both religious and secular beneficiaries on a nondiscriminatory basis” (*Zelman, supra at 2467*).

Second, the book is important because it reports data analysis on vouchers that uses a highly respected methodology, thus meeting the complaint “that American educational research is deficient—indeed, some imply that it bears the same tenuous relationship to ‘real research’ as ‘military justice’ does to ‘real justice’” (Gardner, 2002, p. 72). Howell and Peterson apply a method from the medical sciences called Randomized Field Trial (RFT), that meets Howard Gardner’s insistence that “Educational research ought to take its model from medical research—specifically, the vaunted National Institutes of Health model, the randomized trials, the ‘gold standard’ of research involving human subjects” (Gardner, 2002, p. 49).

Third, besides the topic and method, the book also frames the issues of vouchers in a larger, historical-philosophical framework that allows us to understand the issues and the sources of support and opposition to this form of privatization.

Few issues ignite controversy or drive research quite like school vouchers. It is not that vouchers are new—not at all. In fact, in the 18th and 19th

centuries, wealthy people ran charity schools and provided scholarships for talented children who needed help. State subsidies to Catholic schools were also available in the 19th century when public schools were few and the state governments, notably New York, wanted to increase access to education. But when the public school societies began channeling money to public schools, funding to private ones was cut off. And up until the 1950s, many Catholic elementary schools were free to parishioners' children; a service provided by the expanding diocesan school system in the U.S., a kind of private "religious voucher" that the parish provided for its children.

It was not until the "free school societies" and state legislatures began to funnel local and state tax funds exclusively into "common" or public schools that private schools were isolated from general public support. And only parents with means or Catholics who happened to live in a parish with subsidies could avail themselves of private schools. Thus, the wall of separation between tax support and private, religious schools grew taller and thicker as the public school monopoly consolidated its control and private religious schools became less likely to receive public financial help.

But isolation was never complete: Private not-for-profit schools—both religious and nondenominational—received tax-free status, paying neither property taxes on their buildings nor income tax on their funding. And the great compromiser, Democratic President Lyndon B. Johnson, included religious schools in the nation's first major federal aid to education program, Title I (also called Chapter 1) of the historic Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965. Services guaranteed to poor children in public schools (remedial math, reading, speech, equipment, and books) were also shared with students in private schools, although no direct funding was allowed (the "compromise"), with only publicly-provided service available from public staff.

The arrival of vouchers is the 21st-century version of these earlier subsidies for children attending private schools. In their book, Howell and Peterson provide a comprehensive, somewhat balanced analysis of voucher research that should be read by those interested in the development, quality, and reform of American education. The book treats a number of complex interrelated issues, which form the basis of this review.

1. Liberty, Democracy, and Education. The book is launched with a philosophical chapter on vouchers as related to liberty, equality, and democracy. A quote from political philosopher John Rawls captures the bridge between beliefs and vouchers: "Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty, compatible with similar liberty for others" (1971, p. 16). Education since Horace Mann has been the "great equalizer," helping poor children, children of color, and less able children to gain an equal opportunity.

But since schools may not be of equal quality, the argument goes, families should have the choice to select a school appropriate for their child—a right enjoyed by the middle class who can move to (1) a suburb with good public schools, as millions have done; (2) a better urban neighborhood with better public schools; or (3) a fee-charging private school of choice. It is the poor who cannot easily exercise their liberties, which is where vouchers come in.

Thus, at the conclusion of the first chapter, Howell and Peterson get to the point: that because poor families of color have the most limited set of choices, living in segregated, isolated neighborhoods with some of the worst public schools, “blacks are more likely to support vouchers than other ethnic groups. In a 1995 survey, African American parents were 4 percentage points more likely to support vouchers than Hispanics and 12 percentage points more likely than whites” (Moe, 2001, table 7.3; see also Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, 2000).

2. Evaluating Voucher Programs. The next chapter explores what we know and don’t know about existing and previous voucher experiments that were both publicly and privately sponsored. All programs, for example, involve religious schools. Most of the nation’s 60,000 voucher recipients, some 83% (about 50,000), received *private funds* from 68 different programs—private scholarships to attend private schools. The real controversy, however, is prompted by the remaining 12,000 students supported by publicly funded voucher programs. Howell and Peterson seem to overlook the essential differences between privately and publicly supported vouchers and the controversies surrounding the possible entanglement of church and state inherent in the latter. For as van Geel and Boyd (2002) recently editorialized rather pessimistically in *Education Week*:

Given the constitutional context, it seems unlikely that many states and localities are going to embrace vouchers. And if they do, the entanglement issues and divisive controversies that ensue may come back to haunt them. Voucher advocates may have won a battle in *Zelman*, but the Supreme Court may have cost them the war. (p. 49)

Howell and Peterson in this book failed, in my opinion, to explore fully the controversy surrounding spending public tax money for children to attend private, religious schools—programs currently available in just three places:

- **Milwaukee** had the first state-funded and currently the largest voucher program, passed in 1990 for children from families who qualify for the federal food stamp program in Milwaukee. It was originally quite limited to: (a) only nonsectarian private schools; (b) only 1% of Milwaukee’s public school students; (3) only \$2,500 per voucher; and (4) no family contributions could be

made to the school's costs. But in 1996, the program was expanded: Now 15% of Milwaukee's poor students could receive a voucher; religious schools could accept the voucher students; and the amount per voucher jumped to \$5,326 per year. Challenged in court, the Milwaukee voucher program was finally declared constitutional in 1998 in *Jackson v. Benson* by the Wisconsin courts, and the U.S. high court let the state court's decision stand.

- **Cleveland's** Scholarship Program, established by the State of Ohio in 1996, included religious schools from the onset, but it was limited to younger students (K-3). The voucher was worth just \$2,250 and covered 90% of tuition, limiting income to private schools to \$2,500 for these students. The program reached 500 children the first year, rising to about 4,000 in the next 6 years. Challenged in court under the now-famous *Zelman* case by the Ohio Federation of Teachers, the Ohio Courts called for new legislation that was later supported by the U.S. Supreme Court.
- **Florida**, under Governor Jeb Bush, passed the nation's first state-wide voucher program, whereby children attending "failing schools" anywhere in the state, not just the largest cities, were eligible to receive a \$2,500 voucher usable in any private or religious school that would take it. So far, only about 85 students in Florida have qualified and accepted a voucher, and mostly religious schools, Catholic in particular, have admitted these students.

The chapter ends with an exhaustive account of the Randomized Field Trials that were used to study the effects of vouchers on students and their families. RFTs come from the biomedical sector, whereby "subjects are randomly assigned to a treatment group or control group" (Howell & Peterson, 2002, p. 39)—a matching of subjects (students) who received a voucher with those who applied for them and would have accepted them had they been offered the opportunity in a lottery drawing. This method is preferable to comparing voucher students with public school pupils who were unable or unwilling to apply for a voucher since their effort may reflect a family's interest and drive, a factor in student attainment.

3. Skimming: Seeking and Using Vouchers. In this chapter, based strictly on their research on the private Children's Scholarship Fund (CSF) research, Howell and Peterson examine the "skimming effect": the result of schools seeking to admit only the better students. Skimming may be a feared effect of vouchers, whereby public money might be used to discriminate against the poorer children of color who may not pass admissions standards to private schools even with a voucher. Or they may qualify for admission but not enroll because they are unable to pay the extra costs not covered by the voucher and be left out of the program.

Missing from this chapter, however, are any data or analysis of admissions policies and effects in the three *public* (tax-based) voucher programs (Milwaukee, Cleveland, and Florida), since these sites tended to use lotter-

ies, which limited skimming. And even in these privately-funded sites, only moderate effects accumulated over time. For example, the authors explained: "In NYC, being on welfare decreased the probability that someone would take a voucher by 8% and decreased by 7% the likelihood that users would remain in a private school for two years" (p. 85).

4. Attending Urban Schools. The next step in the analysis was to see which and what kinds of schools voucher students attended, since the range of types, quality, and exclusivity of the nation's private schools is enormous: from the richest, fanciest schools for the scions of privilege, to inner-city parish schools who accept the poor, immigrants, and children of color.

Howell and Peterson "use results from the RFTs in NYC, Dayton, and Washington, DC, and the Children's Scholarship Fund (CSF), all *private* voucher sites, to compare the private schools attended by voucher students with the public schools attended by students who would have switched to private school if they had been given a voucher" (p. 91). However, even among the more modest private and religious schools used by students in cities with the Children's Scholarship Funds, the private schools attended by Black students were smaller, had smaller classes, and gave greater senses of satisfaction to parents.

The book presents data comparing private (voucher) schools and families with those parents who applied but failed to gain admissions: comparing their perceptions, satisfaction and children's test results. The data are interesting, although not always what Howell and Peterson might have predicted. For example, parental satisfaction measures showed that private school parents were "very satisfied with academic quality" by 68%, while the randomized set of public school parents indicated only 23% felt that way about their schools; "Proud of their school" found that private parents were at 70% and public, 25%; and "Give their School an A," 72% for private parents and 16% for public ones.

5. The Urban Test Gap. Measures of students' test scores showed that privately supported vouchers accounted for improvements in National Percentile Rankings (NPRs) that were moderate overall; however, when Howell and Peterson isolated the impact of "switching to a private school on test scores" (p. 146) for African American students in New York City, growth in Year I was 5.4 NPRs; Year II, 4.3; and Year III, 9.2, all indicating significant improvement.

Overall, when data are compared for children receiving private vouchers in Dayton, New York, and Washington, DC, the authors conclude in a balanced fashion that:

In the three evaluations, students of one ethnic group appeared to benefit from school vouchers while all others remained unaffected. After two and three years, African American students in the three cities who switched from public to private schools scored, on average, approximately 6 percentile points higher on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills than comparable African American students who remained in public schools. We find no evidence, however, that vouchers significantly improved the test scores of students from other ethnic groups, either Hispanics in NYC or whites in Dayton. (Howell & Peterson, 2002, p. 166)

6. Satisfaction with Urban Schools. A final concern of this book was parental satisfaction with schools and the levels of school involvement. Here the data are confusing, for the authors found that parents in private schools were actually less involved with school projects, attending activities, discussing their child's experiences, working on homework, and other activities, than parents of students in public schools (non-voucher families). The authors explained that "our nationwide survey of Children's Scholarship Fund found little impact of vouchers on parents' involvement; neither did the Milwaukee voucher program" (p. 116; see Witte, 2000, p. 119).

Some might argue that public school parents must be more involved to ensure that their children are well taught, while enrolling in a private school relieves some of that pressure. Or, as Howell and Peterson conclude, vouchers did not radically change the interaction of students, their parents' behavior, or their involvement—indicating tentatively that voucherizing education in the U.S. would not have dramatic effects on parents or students.

This research also looked at other effects of vouchers. Do they, for example, negatively affect students' sense of acceptance and tolerance? Voucher students seemed to voice greater openness and tolerance than their public school counterparts, flying in the face of the argument that vouchers will resegregate, isolate, and cause greater social conflict and intolerance.

This book has obvious strengths. It applies a scientific methodology in a rigorous fashion, comparing randomly selected field trials of voucher students with a similar group who "would have accepted the voucher, had it been offered," to determine the comparative results for the two subgroups of parents, students, and schools (public and private). The book treats a hot topic, vouchers, just when the U.S. high court has legalized the use of public, tax-supported vouchers for attending religious private schools.

And the book sets the issues into a wider social and historical context, invaluable in understanding that vouchers are both the hottest new reform and as old as the republic itself. The church-state issues were profound at the drafting of the U.S. Constitution (First Amendment) and the many state constitutions (Blaine Amendments), and are current today.

The weaknesses of the book are also obvious. It analyzes *private* vouch-

ers in NYC, Dayton, Washington, DC, and elsewhere; but fails to measure the same effects in the publicly funded voucher communities of Milwaukee, Cleveland, and Florida. Private contributions to help children attend private schools, privately managed, have never been controversial or illegal. The rich have been paying for the education of the poor as far back as the Colonial era. Missing, unfortunately, are data on those thousands of children using public money to attend private and religious schools, the basis of *Zelman* in Cleveland and *Jackson v. Benson* in Milwaukee.

However, the Howell and Peterson book lays the groundwork for future studies of voucher effects, providing the method (randomized field trials), the analyses, and the benchmarks against which to compare findings in private schools receiving public vouchers. The challenge ahead, it seems, is to explore how states will pass and implement voucher policies: who will be eligible to receive these grants, whether the poor, a proportion of the poor, or everyone “means tested” to their income. And, importantly, which private or religious schools will have the willingness, space, and programs to accept the thousands of voucher candidates who will undoubtedly seek a place? Here the Florida experience is best. With rather meager grants (around \$2,500 per child per year), only the frugal, lower-cost Catholic schools could afford to educate a poor child on such a small voucher, greatly limiting the voucher markets and effects.

Economist Milton Friedman, Nobel Prize laureate and grandfather of the voucher (1962), argued persuasively in *The New York Times* (2002), just after *Zelman* was settled, that the only real way to create a true “education market,” not one exclusively with cheaper religious schools, is to fund vouchers at the national average for public education, which is about \$7,000 per student, not at the lower \$2,500 often used. Friedman wrote that under a more generous voucher grant, “most private schools accepting vouchers would no longer be religious. A host of new nonprofit and for-profit schools would emerge. Voucher-bearing students would then be less dependent on low-tuition parochial schools” (2002, p. A-31). This larger sum would stimulate both more consumers to seek a voucher and more providers to open new schools for the poor or to expand existing schools. A whole new group of private schools would be created to meet the heightened need.

The Howell and Peterson book is essential reading for anyone interested in the future of U.S. public and private education. It is rigorously done and interestingly presented, and it raises as many issues and questions as it answers. How many states will pass public voucher policies? Will such public funding increase government regulation over private religious schools? Will vouchers deplete public schools of their more aggressive, activist parents and students, reducing funding for public schools? Or will the voucher-driven market actually improve public schools as they become more competitive? Could vouchers lead some public school districts to seek voucher fam-

ilies and encourage parents to “tuition” their children into public schools in better neighborhoods, schools, or districts, acting as a windfall for public schools, instead of their downfall?

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THE IMPOSSIBLE DREAM: EDUCATION AND THE SEARCH FOR PANACEAS

THOMAS C. HUNT, PETER LANG PUBLISHING, 2002.

Reviewed by Timothy Walch

Tom Hunt has been thinking and writing about the history of American education for more than 30 years. The author or editor of 10 books in the past 20 years, Hunt has stimulated students, scholars, and educators to think intensely about the problems that seem to plague our educational system. His new book, *The Impossible Dream*, brings together between two covers some of his best and most provocative ideas on the historical contours of the present state of our schools. It is a book that should be read and reread by every school superintendent in this country.

The Impossible Dream traces its roots from two classic works of educational history: Henry Perkinson's *The Imperfect Panacea* (1968) and David

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