

7 Reasons Christians Should Support School Vouchers

While it took Vice President Mike Pence casting the deciding vote, Betsy DeVos was confirmed earlier today as the secretary of education.

The opposition to DeVos was vehement, and based on a number of objections to her getting the job. But a primary reason why she was deemed by many to be unacceptable was her unwavering support for school vouchers programs.

School vouchers—which are often conflated with the broader term “school choice”—are certificates issued by the government, which parents can apply toward tuition at a private school (or by extension, to reimburse homeschooling expenses) or to a voucher-accepting public school, rather than at the state school to which their child is assigned.

There is nothing in the Bible that directly says Christians should support vouchers or any other educational arrangement. But here are seven reasons based on prudence and other biblical principles for why Christians should at least consider supporting school vouchers:

1. Because you already support homeschooling.

While it took decades to convince us, most Christians in America now see the value of homeschooling. We disagree with the absurd claims made by teachers’ unions, such as the National Education Association, that homeschooling “cannot provide the student with a comprehensive education experience.”

The teachers unions opposed homeschooling because, for better or worse, that form of educational choice reduced public school teachers’ power and control over America’s students.

The same is true today, and we should reject their opposition to vouchers for the same reason we rejected their opposition to homeschooling: Because while we care about the welfare of teachers, we are much more concerned about the welfare of our children.

2. School choice students graduate at higher rates.

In 2004, Congress authorized the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program (DCOSP), a federally funded voucher program serving low-income students in the nation's capital. A study found that voucher-using students achieved a graduation rate of 91 percent, compared to 70 percent for non-voucher students.

3. It gives parents the opportunity to choose a safer school.

In the same DCOSP study mentioned above, parents of voucher students were more likely to describe their children's schools as safe and orderly. (I've always been baffled that parents who wouldn't send their own children to a public school that was clearly unsafe, yet have no qualms about forcing low-income children to stay in such schools.)

4. It alleviates the problems of income inequality.

Income inequality is an overrated issue of concern. But in some areas, such as education, it is a legitimate problem.

If you really care about income inequality, notes John Goodman, you need only focus on one thing—the inequality of educational opportunity:

The topic du jour on the left these days is inequality. But why does the left care about inequality? Do they really want to lift those at the bottom of the income ladder? Or are they just looking for one more reason to increase the power of government?

If you care about those at the bottom then you are wasting your time and everyone else's time unless you focus on one

and only one phenomenon: the inequality of educational opportunity. Poor kids are almost always enrolled in bad schools. Rich kids are almost always in good schools.

5. School vouchers increase college attendance for black students.

If you care about the disparity in education for African-American students (and if you're a Christian, you should), then you have a strong incentive to support school vouchers. Research suggests that school vouchers have a greater impact on whether black students attend college than on small class sizes or effective teachers.

6. Vouchers can help alleviate segregation of public schools.

You don't need Jim Crow laws, or even racial animus, to cause racial segregation in housing. All it takes is for people to have a "mild preference" for neighbors who share their race or ethnicity. In the majority of school districts in America, children are sent to local schools based on their address. When neighborhoods are racially homogeneous, we should expect to find the same lack of diversity in the schools.

Attitudes toward racial diversity (whether for or against) don't appear to be an important factor in parents choosing private schooling for their kids. Likewise, it is unlikely to be a significant factor in the decision to use a voucher program to send a child to another public school.

When parents are allowed to send their children to the school of their choice, they are more likely to base their decision on factors that are related to educational concerns. Because this reasoning is shared by parents of all races, the effect can be a mitigation of racial segregation. For example, a study on Louisiana schools found that vouchers programs improved racial integration in public schools in 34 districts under desegregation orders.

7. Parents are happier when they have options.

As economist Tyler Cowen says, “Let’s not forget the single most overwhelming (yet neglected) empirical fact about vouchers: they improve parent satisfaction.”

Since the money for public schools is funneled through the government, the issue is often framed as if the government is the “buyer” of educational goods and services. If the faceless, impersonal bureaucracy is the “customer,” then it might make sense to use metrics like standardized testing—which lumps all students together and reduces them to a statistical metric—as the criterion for school success and satisfaction. But if we believe children belong to parents, and not the state, then we should allow the true customers of public education to determine if they are satisfied with the “product.”

Michelle Rhee, the former chancellor of Washington, D.C., public schools, one of the worst districts in the country, said she changed her mind about vouchers after she considered a question all school officials should ask themselves: *“Who am I, I thought, to deny this mom and her child an opportunity for a better school, even if that meant help with a \$7,500 voucher?”*

That’s a good question—and one more Christians should ask themselves. {eo}

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