

# Sweeten the Pot For Middle America

To make school vouchers truly popular, make sure there's something in them for suburbanites

By Frederick Hess

**T**he Republican gains of November have prompted renewed calls for action on school vouchers and choice in education. In the past, supporters fretted that the Bush administration had abandoned school vouchers too readily in the face of fierce Democratic opposition in 2001 and that pro-voucher governors were not committed enough in the face of resistant legislatures.

The political calculus has clearly changed. In Washington, D.C., voucher supporter Judd Gregg of New Hampshire is the new chair of the Senate committee overseeing education. In Colorado, Texas, New Hampshire, and South Carolina, Republican gains have produced new enthusiasm among school choice proponents.

Meanwhile, voucher enthusiasts have gone on the legal offensive following the Supreme Court's June 2002 *Zelman v. Harris* decision, which ruled that religious schools could Constitutionally be included in voucher programs. In states like Massachusetts, Maine, and Vermont, they are challenging state constitutional strictures that prevent state monies from supporting religious schools, on the grounds that these violate First Amendment protections for the exercise of faith. Should voucher supporters win these battles, the field will be wide open for voucher programs.

**N**onetheless, voucher proponents could be inadvertently steering themselves off a cliff. Proponents of school choice today find themselves in much the same position that the social-engineering Left inhabited after LBJ's sweep a generation ago. Their ideas are ascendant, they stand on the side of social justice, they have strong allies and spokespersons, and are winning prominent legal battles. Yet amidst the fruits of victory, something is missing: full approval from the mass of the American middle class.

Like the architects of LBJ's Great Society, voucherites express puzzlement as to why many suburbanites don't share their enthusiasm for school choice. Increasingly, I find myself in education-reform meetings where voucher advocates end up quietly berating white suburban families for showing insufficient regard for the education of disadvantaged urban children. Conservative school choice

proponents nod along as compelling advocates for the urban underclass—like Howard Fuller, Robert Aguirre, and Floyd Flake—voice frustration that suburban whites have not fully embraced choice as a way to free minority children from failed urban schools.

That's no way to win a policy fight. Thirty years ago, the Great Society's champions berated and nagged middle-class America smack into the arms of the opposition. Enthralled by their own virtue and the elegance of their domestic policy prescriptions, Great Society liberals forgot about simple democratic notions like self-interest, concern about unintended consequences, and the public's natural risk aversion. They tried to guilt-trip the public into supporting their bold reforms. But showing the caution and good sense typical of a democratic majority, voters eventually opted for Republicans and moderate Democrats who were less likely to belittle their reservations.

Conservative advocates for school vouchers risk repeating this mistake. The dominant wings of the voucher movement are free-marketers on the one hand, and urban minorities tired of waiting for public school improvement on the other. The result has been a sometimes awkward marriage that has permitted conservatives to claim the potent language of civil rights, and tempted Republicans into believing they could make political inroads with black and Latino voters.

What these advocates have overlooked is the resistance to vouchers and other choice plans among suburban homeowners. While vouchers routinely win the support of 70 percent or more of urban populations, support levels are barely half that in the suburbs, even in favorably worded polls. This resistance has made voucher proponents increasingly frustrated. Are suburbanites just too naive and timid to see the problems with today's inefficient school monopolies? Or do they not care about issues of equity and equal opportunity?

It's time for choice proponents to recognize that suburban resistance to school choice is entirely rational, based largely on self-interest, and unlikely to go away. Otherwise the political

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clumsiness of voucherites could eventually create an unfortunate suburban backlash against school choice—in much the same way that ramrodding the Great Society programs through did in the late 1970s.

Imagine a hard-working couple, the Grays, who own four season tickets on the 40-yard line for the local pro football team. They invested lots of money and sweat in obtaining the seats, and now use them to share a special experience with their two children. The Grays value these hard-won tickets highly.

Now imagine that the Grays show up one Sunday to find that the stadium has adopted a first-come, first-served seating pattern. What do you predict their reaction is likely to be? Will they smile and say, “Oh, then that’s all right!” after the stadium management explains, slowly and in few words, that the old system had produced inequitable results for the poor? Seems unlikely, doesn’t it?

A great deal of American family life is now driven by the quality of the public schools in the district where a family happens to live. Parents who have sacrificed to purchase an expensive, heavily taxed home in a better school district have often done so largely because it confers a ticket to the local classrooms for their children. From their perspective, school choice proponents are suggesting that their tickets be torn up.

School choice has many merits and would, in the long run, make America’s educational system much more competitive and impressive. But it’s important to recognize that choice-based reform has severe distributional consequences. Those who own homes in districts with good schools risk losing tens or even hundreds of thousands of dollars in home equity (as Duke University economist Thomas Nechyba has illustrated). These parents worry they may no longer be able to assure their children access to the educational services they’ve already purchased. They may find that local schools no longer get the first crack at quality teachers, or provide as uniformly desirable a peer group.

These are not small concerns. One can be troubled by the inequities of our existing system without pulling the rug out from under suburban families who have worked hard to get their children into decent schools. It is a simple reality that these families are unlikely to look benignly upon measures that might undercut the educational security they have struggled to achieve. This is why cities with troubled public school systems like Cleveland, Milwaukee, Philadelphia, Dayton, and Washington, D.C. have embraced choice or charter schooling, while suburban communities with more successful schools have remained skeptical.

Let’s stipulate that homeowners in good suburban districts will often start out with reservations about school reforms that hand all parents fully paid vouchers, negating the sacrifices they made to get their own children into functional schools. Like it or not, this sprawling bloc of educated and influential voters will prove pivotal to the fate of choice-based reforms. Even copious amounts of morally superior nagging won’t change their minds.

What are the implications for voucher proponents? Quite simply, the concerns of these suburbanites need to be addressed, rather than dismissed. Specifically, efforts must be made to provide suburban parents with incentives, compensations, or limits on possible ill effects of publicly funded school choice. This can help ameliorate fear and opposition.

One approach would be to convince suburban voters that even their “better” schools are much worse than they think, and that the system-wide benefits from choice will create a rising tide that lifts all schools. There is much evidence that suburban public schools, while not dysfunctional, could be much more effective and could benefit from competition. But such an effort will have to confront public skepticism. It risks being undercut if overly rosy instant benefits are promised and not delivered.

A second approach would be to compromise to mitigate possible negative side effects of choice plans. A favorite strategy so far has been to limit the area affected by school choice to urban districts, so as to immunize suburban voters from the change. The Milwaukee and Cleveland voucher programs stipulate that city students can only use their vouchers to attend suburban schools if the suburban districts approve (which they rarely do). Establishment of char-

ter schools has also been limited in suburban communities. Reformers have used gradual changes and half measures, like choice among existing public schools only, to acclimate parents to the idea that the longstanding link between where you live and the schools your children attend is gradually dissolving. Of course, this limits the speed and effectiveness of choice-based reform.

A third approach has barely been considered. This would involve appealing to the reasoned self-interest of suburban parents by sweetening the potential of choice for their families. School choice laws might explicitly encourage new schools to provide options hitherto unavailable even to suburban parents—like alternative daily school schedules or annual calendars, or advanced courses that are currently not available or oversubscribed.

A more radical appeal to self-interest might involve using financial compensation to mitigate, or even undo, perceived negative effects of school choice. Homeowners who feel that the state has constricted their property rights through publicly funded school choice might be offered a tax deduction for the amount of assessed value a home loses in the aftermath of choice-based reform. Permitting homeowners to write this deduction off against current income over a period of time would temper their concerns. This would be analogous to authorities compensating the Grays for nullifying their stadium tickets.

For school choice supporters, self-righteous indignation is not the ticket to winning popular support. Heading down that path will eliminate any chance of broad political victory. Whether educational choice succeeds is ultimately in the hands of America’s suburban middle class, so it is that group which advocates must now address—with respect, reason, and rational incentives.

**Fix our education system  
without pulling the rug out  
from under suburban parents  
who worked hard to get their  
children into decent schools.**





# Last Holdout Against Educational Freedom

**Every modern nation except the U.S. allows school choice. Here's how our allies make it work.**

**By Charles Glenn and Jan de Groof**

**O**ver the last decade, we conducted a major study of how school systems operate in leading industrialized nations. We found that in every one of the two dozen countries we surveyed (which ranged from Canada, Britain, and Germany to Greece, Russia, and New Zealand), private citizens and religious organizations may operate non-governmental schools. Each country likewise permits parents to meet mandatory schooling requirements by sending their children to these private or religious schools.

The freedom to send one's children to non-government schools is well established in international law and educational practice, in the written constitutions of most free countries, and in the social norms of virtually every nation with universal schooling. Moreover, public funding is provided in virtually every country we surveyed to allow parents to send their children to whatever school they choose.

A right to public funding in support of school choice has emerged as the international standard, largely in response to popular demand. The United States is one of the few advanced countries that still mostly blocks public funding for non-government schools. This is a result of adamant opposition from teacher unions, as well as vestigial provisions in many state constitutions (written amidst nineteenth-century anxiety about Catholic immigrants) that block tax monies from going to religious schools.

The barriers to educational choice in the U.S. are clearly weakening, however. Opinion polls now find strong popular support for "a system giving parents government-funded vouchers to pay for tuition at the public, private, or religious school of their choice." This support is particularly strong (77 percent in

favor, 14 percent opposed) among low-income parents in inner cities whose children attend public schools. Despite the strong opposition in certain elite circles, voucher funding for religious schools also enjoys strong support from the public (79 percent to 11 percent). This holds true for Democrats (74 percent to 15 percent in favor) as well as Republicans (83 percent to 10 percent), and even for those who report they have no religious affiliation (76 percent to 17 percent).

While in most Western countries there is now great interest in measures that promote autonomy and diversity among schools, every government takes pains to provide a framework of regulation and accountability within which this educational freedom is exercised. The extent of this oversight varies a great deal from country to country. The limited autonomy of schools in France is in marked contrast to the wide autonomy that subsidized schools enjoy in Denmark.

But the last decade has been marked by a growing concern in many countries for effective systems of accountability. Willingness on the part of policymakers to allow both public and subsidized private schools to function more autonomously has usually been accompanied by a heightened demand for measurable academic results. In the U.S., researcher Terry Moe has found that though most Americans support public funding for the schools that parents choose, 88 percent are in favor of teacher certification requirements, 80 percent support curriculum requirements, 83 percent favor financial reporting and auditing

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