

Are Private School Vouchers Good or Bad for Utah?

In 1975, a famous and now retired columnist, Jimmy Breslin, coined a phrase once used by carnies people as slang for magic acts. Since then, the term "smoke and mirrors" has been a mainstream description of someone intentionally deceiving the public in believing in promises they cannot deliver on. Undoubtedly, the slang for magic acts applies today to the proponents of private school vouchers. Proponents, such as Families For Choice, are promoting statements that anti-voucher advocates are full of rhetoric and misinformation. However, PFC only advertises the benefits of vouchers, but has neglected to inform us about the problems vouchers have created in other states.

For example, voucher proponents constantly use the example of the Milwaukee voucher program and how the public schools have benefited from families using vouchers.

Unfortunately, the voucher program has had some major problems. A few years ago, the vouchers were providing tens of millions of dollars to private schools in the Milwaukee area. Since that time, the public schools have constantly faced multi-million-dollar budget deficits. As a result, according to a 2001 Wisconsin Legislative Fiscal report, 237 school districts in Wisconsin lost \$2.7 million in state aid. In addition, local property taxes were raised to help pay for the Milwaukee voucher program. Similar conditions of public school budget deficits have also occurred in pro-voucher areas such as Florida and Cleveland, Ohio. Plus, California proposed vouchers a few years ago, but a study by a group from Berkeley provided a disheartening analysis for California Education and warned that voucher benefits would not be aimed at disadvantaged families. As a result, the target demographic to receive the voucher tax dollars would be affluent families.

Consequently, voucher programs lead to a two-tier system of education, increase student stratification based on income and divides communities due to a segregated school system. In other words, voucher proponents promote their cause by exploiting low-income families with promises that vouchers are created to help them. Proponents also make the claim that children in troubled public schools now would have a way to escape. However, as in the case with the Milwaukee voucher program, many voucher kids are were private schools before "choice".

Another pro-voucher claim is that the free market should, not government, should let schools "compete". But any private school accepting vouchers will be more inclined to be profit driven. In other words, these voucher ventures will have revenue drives, cost-cutting budgets and possible creative accounting schemes, ahead of educating our children.

Add to the problems of accountability for those private schools that participate in the voucher program. HB 148, the current voucher bill in the Utah Legislature, gives loose requirements in teacher certification, student testing, or curriculum content. In addition, there is no reference to comply with open meetings and open records laws. Furthermore, vouchers does nothing to address and an audit will not be conducted on the voucher program until after the 2013-2014 school year.

It is unfortunate that PFC has been using smoke and mirrors with their real intentions of only helping themselves by convincing Utahns to pay taxpayer money in helping a few. What's more, a few Republican Legislators are using strong-arm tactics and backroom deals to assure passage of HB148. In the 2006 election year, PFC spent over half a million dollars to campaign contributions and promotions. Imagine how that money could of helped the very children they claim to be helping. Even with a voucher program, low-income families will always have a difficult time in being equal in education when competing with families who have far more resources.

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