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# VOUCHERS AND THE PRIVATISATION OF NEW ZEALAND EDUCATION

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**ABSTRACT** *There has been increasing discussion regarding the place of educational vouchers in the resourcing of New Zealand schools and whether their introduction could lead to the privatisation of state schools. This article examines the issues associated with the introduction of a voucher scheme in New Zealand and the potential for the privatisation of state schooling that could occur. Examples of some voucher schemes implemented overseas are examined and arguments both for and against the use of vouchers for schooling are presented. These arguments, when considered within the current economic context of New Zealand schooling, suggest that the adoption of vouchers in New Zealand would be both fiscally and socially detrimental.*

## Why Consider Privatisation and Voucher Schemes?

"The New Zealand tradition has traditionally been one of regarding education as a public good mediated through a publicly provided service" (Grace, 1990, p. 27). This tradition has come under increasing challenge with, perhaps, the greatest challenge coming rather unexpectedly from the New Zealand Treasury in its 1987 publication *Government Management: Brief to the Incoming Government Volume II: Education Issues*. In this document, the ideological view of education moves from education being seen as in the public good, best exemplified by Fraser's 1939 oft-quoted statement, to being viewed as a public good, a commodity in the market place, subject to economic and quantitative analysis, and therefore open to free-trading on the open market. State intervention and control in the market system is seen as limiting educational freedom and choice, and as requiring an expensive and inefficient bureaucracy to manage it. The removal of the state as provider and manager of education in New Zealand would lead to the full privatisation of the education system.

The present economic climate in New Zealand lends itself to discussion of voucher schemes and moves towards privatisation. As social and political unrest grows, along with fears that society is to some extent starting to get out of control, so does the demand on schools to provide answers to societal problems – public education being seen as an "engine to material progress" (Molnar, 1997, p. 37). The result of a good education is seen as a good job, and a good education system somehow contributing to full employment. When the education system is questioned, voucher schemes are often proposed as "a quick-fix solution to New Zealand's current schooling challenges" (McKenzie, 1997, p. 163). Hawley (1995, p. 741-742) gives three other societal concerns that could lead Americans to move towards the privatisation of their education system, concerns that may also be prevalent in New Zealand. These are firstly, a feeling of alienation from, and growing distrust towards the government and politicians which is accompanied by what Brighouse calls "a loss of faith in the state as a provider of public goods and basic needs" (1994, p. 211). Secondly, there is a desire by individuals to "re-seize" control over their lives and their children's lives in a time of change and

upheaval; and, third, the increasing multi-culturalisation of society leads to people wanting the option to choose a school for their children that will reflect their personal culture, beliefs, values and even skin-colour.

One of the key intermediate steps in the privatisation of education is the implementation of a voucher system. Vouchers can be defined as "tuition certificates that are issued by the government and are redeemable at the school of the student's choice" (Snook, 1996, p. 8). However, although the political propaganda often refers to *the* voucher system – implying that there is only one form – there have been many types of voucher systems proposed. The Association of Consumers and Taxpayers (ACT) party's education policy (1996, p. 7) proposes the introduction of a voucher system where each student receives \$3,100 a year for primary school. Under this model schools are funded that amount of money per year for each student attending regardless of the type of school attended. The state's role in this case is only the provision of funding. Schools become accountable to the "consumers" of education – at primary school, the parents – for what is delivered as curriculum. This system opens the door to privatisation as it then becomes easy for the monetary value of the voucher provided to be gradually reduced, with parents needing to make up the shortfall required in the form of school fees. Eventually, the voucher is totally removed and the parents bear the full cost of their children's education. Other voucher systems have been proposed, for example what Snook calls the more "Leftist" version, where the value of the voucher is inversely proportional to parental income. In this case, the system of education remains in the hands of the state, but parents are assisted in being able to access entry to private fee-charging schools through the vouchers provided.

### **Steps to Privatisation of the Education System**

Full privatisation has not been explicitly stated as the agenda of the current government. However, some steps have been either taken or mooted which could be seen to be part of the privatisation process. The process of privatising state systems has been outlined by Snook (1996, p. 4-5). The first step, which occurred in 1989, was the devolution of the then current system of school governance and the elimination of agencies such as Education Boards. The second step is the bulk funding of schools on a per pupil basis, a current government initiative, which helps create a situation where the government increasingly withdraws from the provision of education. The concept of bulk funding has met with considerable resistance from teacher unions and individual schools, but the government continues to show its commitment to bulk funding by the current offering of inducements and bonuses to schools who choose this funding option.

According to Snook, three further steps are now required for full privatisation of the state schooling system. First, independent schools need to be funded at the same rate as state schools, which will lead to the establishment of more independent schools. As the number of independent schools grows, the amount of funding for existing state schools declines, requiring these schools to raise money by other means, particularly by charging fees. The final step to the full privatisation occurs as the state, for fiscal and ideological reasons, progressively reduces the grant paid per pupil, until eventually parents are required to meet the full costs for educating their children.

### Who is in Favour of Vouchers/Privatisation?

In New Zealand, the call for a voucher system has remained the policy of "Right Wing" parties. Ruth Richardson, on behalf of the National Party in 1987, campaigned in favour of the concept of educational vouchers. However, although this concept has not remained part of the National Party's expressed educational policy, the changes to administration brought about by the introduction of *Tomorrow's Schools*, and the current push towards the full implementation of bulk funding, could be considered steps towards privatisation.

There is also mixed public support for privatisation, and in particular for vouchers, as a preferred form of privatisation. Polls conducted in the United States by the journal *Phi Delta Kappan* in 1993, 1995 and 1996 have each time questioned respondents on state funding of private schools, introduction of vouchers, and the replacement of the existing public school system with private schools (Elam, Rose & Gallup, 1996). The support for the funding of private schools grew between 1993 and 1996. The 1996 results also showed that the general American public opposed voucher schemes by 54% to 43%, although non-public school parents and Catholic parents were in favour of these schemes. This same poll showed that the American public were also opposed to replacing the existing public system with private schooling by an almost three to one margin (69% to 25%). When teachers' and educators' opinions were isolated out the results followed the trend (Langdon, 1996, p. 244-250), with a majority of teachers (76%) opposing any form of voucher scheme.

### Overseas Examples of Voucher Schemes

The two major overseas voucher systems most often referred to are Sweden and some districts in the United States. The current ACT education policy states "the system we propose [all schools funded solely through vouchers] already works brilliantly in practice overseas" (1996, p. 6). This claim somewhat overstates the case. Snook (1987) has already argued that the evidence of success from the implementation of voucher systems internationally is inconclusive and incomparable. Both the voucher systems employed and the politics of educational governance were not directly comparable with those in New Zealand.

Miron summarises the introduction of vouchers to the Swedish educational system in an article entitled "Free choice and vouchers transform schools" (1996, p. 77). After elections held in Sweden in 1991, a new coalition government of four Centre and Right Wing parties came to power. This government declared a "free-choice revolution", allowing parental choice in both independent and municipal (state) schools and greater choice of subjects and attainment levels within subject areas. A voucher scheme was proposed where independent schools received 85% of the average per-student cost for attendance at a municipal (state) school per pupil. The main types of independent schools are those with special pedagogical approaches or those with religious affiliations. After the 1994 elections, the Social Democrats returned to power, and the voucher was lowered to 75% of the average per-student cost. There were some limitations within the "free choice revolution" though. Municipal schools were required to provide places for students within their own zone before offering places to others, and a school does not need to satisfy a student's request to attend another school if it will create economic or organisational problems.

Miron sums up his discussion of these reforms by saying, "the nationwide voucher scheme has not brought about dramatic changes to the country as a whole" (p. 79). There has not been a widespread increase in the number of enrolments at independent schools, their rolls rising from 1% to 2.1% of the school population. Many of these schools still charge fees, although the average school fee for independent schools has dropped a little. Segregation and disparities between schools have also become increasingly common, with a few reports of ethnic sorting of students, that is students of Swedish origin, along with children of well-educated immigrants, moving from schools with large numbers of immigrant children. There has also been a decrease in the amount of support being provided for children with special needs, including nearly a quarter of the special needs teacher positions in Stockholm being cut.

The Swedish voucher system is referred to in the ACT education policy document (1996, p. 5) although it does not make clear that the system proposed by ACT is quite different from the system implemented in Sweden. In the Swedish system vouchers were provided to enable students to attend independent private schools if they wished. If they did not wish to change schools, they continued in the state schools as before.

Another voucher system worth examining is "The Milwaukee Parental Choice" programme in the Milwaukee metropolitan area of the United States of America. This is a small programme that was established in the summer of 1990 and is the only operative private-school voucher system in the United States. A black legislator, Annette (Polly) Williams inspired the programme. Vouchers are available to families on the Choice programme if they have low incomes, and to students who had been enrolled in the Milwaukee public school system in the previous year. Schools may refuse to take students if they cannot provide services for a disability but cannot refuse a student on the basis of race, religion, gender, prior achievement or past behaviour. The number of Choice students in a school was capped at 65% in 1994. A very small proportion of students are involved in the scheme. For example, in the 1993-4 school year approximately two-thirds of the 95,000 students enrolled in the Milwaukee Public School system were eligible for the programme. Of these, there were 1,049 applicants and 968 students were accepted; however only 742 students actually participated in the scheme.

Mrs Williams was invited to New Zealand by the Business Roundtable to speak on (and presumably endorse) the proposed New Zealand voucher system, but "she let them down" (Snook, 1996, p. 10). Mrs Williams declared she was not particularly interested in vouchers per se, but in poorer children being given access to high quality, wealthy schools. She also stated "there's a history of vouchers being used to 'harm, exclude and deprive'" (Snook, 1995, p. 10). It is interesting that although Mrs Williams is quoted in the ACT policy document on her views of choice, (1996, p. 6), her views on vouchers above are not quoted. The implication is that vouchers were successful in Milwaukee, without the difference between the two schemes being made explicit.

Voucher systems were also trialled in the United States in the 1970s and there is now information available on student achievement under these schemes (Snook, 1987). Eight school districts were offered financial incentives to consider the implementation of voucher schemes, all communities except that of Alum Rock chose not to try out vouchers after conducting feasibility studies. In the Alum Rock district, no private schools and only six out of 24 public schools chose to be involved. In these six schools, choice in the form of "mini-schools" (departments within the school itself) was provided. Two evaluations of the effect on student

achievement were carried out: one by Robert Klitgaard found that grades dropped in the schools where the voucher systems were in place; the other by Pierre Barker concluded that the voucher system had “little or no effect, positive or negative, on academic achievement as measured” (Snook, 1987, p. 31). When the results were re-analysed in 1978 by Wortman and others “the results reveal a significant superiority of the non-voucher programme” (Snook, 1987, p. 32).

As can be seen from the examination of the above voucher schemes, care needs to be taken when applying overseas models to the New Zealand situation. Not only does the New Zealand education system and political climate differ from those found overseas, but the nature and application of the voucher schemes implemented elsewhere differs quite significantly from that proposed by the libertarian right.

### **Arguments For the Use of Vouchers**

Arguments in favour of vouchers are summarised as follows:

1. Parents are given choice concerning their children’s education. Voucher schemes are strongly identified with the ideal of parental choice over which schools their children will attend. There are calls for a variety of options within the education system and mechanisms to be put in place which will give parents power to decide which option best suits their child. “Advocates [of choice] say that greater variety among schools will increase the likelihood that parents will find a school that matches their educational values and their children’s learning needs” (O’Neil, 1996, p. 6). ACT (1996, p. 6) states “the principle of choice is at the heart of ACT’s policy – it gives parents the power to choose which school to send their children to”.
2. Choice can support educational innovation. Parents choosing schools of differing types and quality could “spur school officials to create more schools that consumers favour” (O’Neil, 1996, p. 6), or to close or revamp programmes with little support. Ruth Richardson claimed vouchers would enable “schools to be free to develop programmes that would satisfy the demands of parents and students. The schools would become accountable to their clients” (Snook, 1987, p. 29).
3. Greater community participation in schools. Ms Richardson also suggested that vouchers would lead to parents and others having greater interest and involvement in their children’s education. Parents are more likely to be committed to the school they have chosen than to the one they have been assigned to by school authorities (O’Neil, 1996, p. 6).
4. Vouchers also provide the mechanism to reward good teachers. ACT holds that “good teachers would get more money, and more encouragement to retrain and would perform better” (1996, p. 7), a view supported by Friedman (cited in McKenzie, 1997, p. 162) who says that “poor teachers are grossly overpaid and good teachers are grossly underpaid”.
5. Increased choice leads to a diversity of institutions (Snook, 1987, p. 29). Schools will develop to reflect different aspects of society such as race, religion, different academic strengths or pedagogical emphases.
6. Improved educational quality and standards. The 1993 ACT policy states “Choice in the educational system will raise our standards of achievement” (1993, p. 24). Friedman (cited in McKenzie, 1997, p. 167) likewise thought that competition for students would lead to experimentation that “can bring tomorrow’s laggards above today’s mean”. Competition would also lead to



an increase in the quality of instruction by forcing public schools to provide the same programmes as private schools; weak schools would be eliminated (Hawley, 1995).

7. Greater efficiency in schools. Because school funding would be limited to the amount generated by vouchers, schools would need to become more cost-effective, but because of competition between schools for the voucher this would be accompanied by lifted output at the most efficient price (McKenzie, 1997).
8. The present system penalises parents whose children already attend private schools. These parents are paying twice for their children's education: once through taxes and then through school fees.
9. Improved access. Vouchers are also held to give all children access to the best schools. They will remove inequalities of provision. "Choice offers a ticket out for students stuck in a low-performing school" (O'Neil, 1996, p. 7).

### **Arguments Against the Use of Vouchers**

The following are arguments in opposition to vouchers:

1. There is no evidence to suggest that competition, parental choice or voucher systems improve school performance or student achievement (Hawley, 1995; Kohn, 1998; Snook, 1996). If anything, the empirical evidence gathered from the Alum Rock voucher scheme suggests that student achievement decreased rather than increased with the implementation of the voucher scheme.
2. There is also widespread concern that rather than providing a level playing field, choice can exacerbate inequities (Brighouse, 1994; Gordon, 1994; Hawley, 1995; O'Neil, 1996). Some schools, particularly those that are perceived to be the "best" will remain selective, thus limiting choice. This will generate schools with waiting lists, and, in order to control enrolments, these schools will raise their fees, so some families will not be able to choose them. Some families, particularly poorer ones, will have their choices further limited because they do not have the same access to information, transportation to schools, time or ability to analyse the options available or knowledge of what to expect from schools. The OECD report of 1994 concludes, "When popular schools fill up, they become better resourced and more popular; when less desired schools lose pupils, they decline. The polarisation of school quality that may ensue is undesirable in itself, and more so when pupils who already have advantages end up in the best schools" (p. 50).
3. Factors which influence parental choice of a school are "deeply social rather than educational" (Gordon, 1994, p. 122). It is very difficult for parents, or anyone, to judge the educational quality of a school (Hawley, 1995; McKenzie, 1997; O'Neil, 1996). Parents pick the kinds of schools that they know best and are influenced by factors such as student characteristics, location, physical facilities, religious preferences and ideology. The principle of choice can also be misused. One writer warns that there is a danger of some parents abusing the choice system to ensure success for their children at the expense of others, "effectively sacrificing other children to their own" (Kohn, 1998, p. 569).
4. The major advocates of the voucher system such as Roger Douglas and Milton Friedman have argued that schools which compete for students would become innovative and varied. However, "there is nothing in the

- empirical or analytical evidence to suggest that this 'variety' would ever be likely to be achieved" (McKenzie, 1997, p. 167). The current ACT policy calls for a "bouquet of schools, with different ideas, ownership, specialisation and pedagogical methods" (p. 6); however, in the same document, one of the examples given, damning the current system's failure, is the offering of "optional subjects such as op shopping, massage, Living Left Handed" and so on by Auckland Metropolitan College (p. 5).
5. It has been argued that the voucher system would be detrimental to society as it would lead to increased fragmentation (Hawley, 1996; Withe & Thorn, 1996). The outcome of a widespread use of vouchers which can be used in private schools could be to "sort the nation's children, and thus the country, according to religious beliefs, social class, race, ethnicity, and political ideology" (Hawley, 1995, p. 741).
  6. "Vouchers give parents power over schools only through having the option of exit, and not through the power of voice over the way schools are run" (Brighouse, 1994, p. 216). Rather than empowering parents to bring about positive change in the way schools are run, the voucher system narrows their options to "voting with their feet", moving their child, rather than solving a problem. The avenues for democratic process and collective debate are removed (O'Neil, 1996).
  7. The voices of the "most effective advocates of public spending for education", the educational professionals, are weakened (Hawley, 1995, p. 740). The consumers of this service, the parents, become the only voice on educational issues which is important. Right Wing parties in New Zealand calling for increased privatisation of education already try to stifle the collective voice of teachers – the unions. The influences of other members of the community who are not parents would also be reduced.
  8. It is also argued that the voucher system would undermine teachers' morale and "replace professional collegiality with rival individuals . . . reduce salaries and conditions of employment for most teachers and most certainly destroy teaching as a career structured employment" (McKenzie, 1997, p. 172). Teachers who are affected in this way are unlikely to give their best to all of their students.
  9. Some children are more expensive to educate than others due to disabilities, yet this is not allowed for in the provision of vouchers (Brighouse, 1994). One of the results of the voucher system implemented in Sweden was the reduction in special education services. However, compensatory voucher schemes such as the one proposed by Jencks (1970), where all children receive a voucher sufficient to cover full tuition plus schools which enrolled those from disadvantaged backgrounds or those with handicaps receive further income, could overcome this.
  10. In this system, it becomes very difficult for a school to "come right" once it is perceived as not being as good as another school. There is a "disastrous effect on children who are in a school which is slowly strangling to death" (Snook, 1995, p. 10) and as finances are reduced, it becomes more and more difficult for a school to take action.
  11. There is the initial high cost of setting up and operating the voucher scheme.
  12. Funding of a school based on roll numbers does not make allowances for fixed costs, for example, the range of curriculum resources can be related more to the age groups taught and the topics covered than the number of students present. Also the costs of rates, electricity and school maintenance

- are barely affected by the size of the school roll (Brighouse, 1994; Gordon, 1994).
13. A particular problem for New Zealand is the many areas of low population, which are being subject to a per capita funding formula that is unsustainable. Therefore, regardless of the quality of the school and its teachers, the roll cannot keep on growing.
  14. There has not, in spite of the rhetoric, been widespread acceptance of voucher schemes in larger countries of the world. Therefore, it is unlikely "they would be viable in a small country which has a substantial generational tradition of universal school provision through the aegis of the state" (McKenzie, 1997, p. 173).
  15. The final argument presented here is that vouchers provide an ideal mechanism to reduce funding for education. If the budget for education is cut, or just not increased in line with inflation, the student's voucher will buy a smaller and smaller proportion of the service required. It is interesting to note that the voucher proposed for a primary student by ACT in 1993 was \$3,400, but in 1996 the voucher proposed was \$3,100 – a reduction of \$300. It is unlikely that the cost of providing quality education dropped over this time period.

### **Should a Voucher System be Implemented in New Zealand?**

The voucher system proposed by ACT and others of Right Wing persuasion in New Zealand presents one view of a universal voucher system which is supported and defended by quoting overseas examples, particularly Sweden and Milwaukee. However, these cannot be directly related to the New Zealand situation. Firstly, the social and political climate in New Zealand and the education system in place here are very different from those in either of the countries mentioned. Secondly, the voucher system proposed and discussed by ACT differs substantially from that operating in either of the systems described. The information provided by ACT on voucher systems is both selective and misleading.

The arguments in favour of a voucher system are that it would give parents greater choices for the education of their children. Schools would compete for students, and therefore funding, according to a market model. Those that were successful would thrive and provide models for other schools to follow. Those that were unsuccessful would not survive. The market model implies economic efficiency and the best value for the money spent on education. The striving for students would also lead to innovative, quality schooling as schools competed with each other for each student.

The arguments against the introduction of vouchers suggest that the fiscal gains that would occur would come at too great a social cost because the gulf between the opportunities available to the children of wealthy families and children of poor families would widen.

However, a voucher scheme need not be the one proposed by ACT. Voucher schemes could be implemented where certain conditions are met, the idea of "controlled choice" (O'Neil, 1996, p. 8), where systems are put in place that allow parental choice but where harmful affects are mitigated. The following conditions have been suggested for controlled voucher systems that would prevent some schools from being relegated to the position of second class schools.

First, the system needs to be compensatory to provide for some degree of equality as well as some degree of choice (Snook, 1987, p. 33). Parental choice is

controlled to ensure that racial and ethnic diversity is maintained, resource allocation among schools is equitable, and the needs of all students, e.g. students with disabilities, are met (Hawley, 1995).

Second, all schools are included in the system. There cannot be some schools that remain fully private and exempt from accepting a pupil and their voucher (Snook, 1987). There also needs to be active diversification of educational supply (OECD, 1994).

Third, schools cannot be allowed to bar students on the grounds of their characteristics e.g., achievement, character, income (Snook, 1996). The 1994 OECD report recommends that there be choices created for educationally underserved groups.

Fourth, there should be no limitations on enrolments at any one school (Snook, 1995), and there need to be measures to increase the supply of chosen options (OECD, 1994).

Finally, there must be "unlimited resources" to allow students to attend the schools of their choice such as transporting students and boarding rural students (Snook, 1996).

These conditions could be met under a voucher model, although this would then become very expensive and unwieldy to implement.

Should a voucher system, as one step towards privatisation, be implemented in New Zealand? Studies would suggest that the implementation of a voucher scheme such as the one proposed by ACT and other Right Wing elements would be socially irresponsible in that it would lead to a further polarisation in the access to educational opportunities by children of the rich and children of the poor. Should a voucher system be put in place which allowed for equity of access, the government could be charged with being fiscally irresponsible, as the scheme itself and the bureaucracy required to run it would be very expensive. A better alternative would be to use the effort and expenditure required to implement a voucher system in further reviewing and improving the current system for funding education.

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