

MINNESOTA'S IMMENSE ACHIEVEMENT GAPS

The Untapped Promise of Vouchers



By Mitch Pearlstein

Center of the American Experiment develops and promotes policies which encourage economic growth and a culture of individual, family and civic responsibility. Our work—firmly rooted in conservative and free market principles—focuses on original research, op-eds, public forums, legislative briefings, and various other means for turning essential ideas into tangible action.



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by Mitch Pearlstein, Founder & President

Executive Summary

- When it comes to elementary and secondary education in Minnesota and especially the Twin Cities, vouchers represent the single most promising approach for reducing immense achievement and attainment gaps between white and many minority students.
- Solid research clearly suggests that many low-income and minority students would do better if afforded a chance to attend a private rather than public school.
- **A definition:** Vouchers give parents the freedom to choose a private school for their children by using all or part of the public funding set aside for their boy or girl's education. Simple enough.

How Big are the Gaps?

- The National Assessment of Education Progress—known colloquially as “NAEP” and the “Nation’s Report Card”—reported these results for eighth grade students *reading* either proficiently or at advanced levels in Minnesota in 2013:

| | |
|---------------------|------------|
| ▶ White students | 51 percent |
| ▶ Black students | 17 percent |
| ▶ Hispanic students | 21 percent |
| ▶ Asian students | 37 percent |

- NAEP results for Minnesota eighth graders who were either proficient or advanced in *math* in 2013:

| | |
|---------------------|------------|
| ▶ White students | 71 percent |
| ▶ Black students | 17 percent |
| ▶ Hispanic students | 26 percent |
| ▶ Asian students | 58 percent |

- The overall four-year high school graduation rate for students in Minneapolis Public Schools in 2013 was a far-from-adequate 53.9 percent. It was 72.1 percent for white students and 68.0 percent for Asian students. But in the words of MPS itself: “While notable gains were made for students of color in the school district, a consistently low graduation rate of *less than 40* percent for African American, American Indian and Latino students continued to persist.” (Emphasis supplied.)

What Does the Research Say?

- Twelve empirical studies have examined academic outcomes for voucher participants using random assignment, the “gold standard” of social science. Of these, eleven find that vouchers improve student outcomes—six in which all students benefit and five in which some benefit and some are not affected. One study finds no visible impact. No empirical study has found a negative impact.



- Twenty-three empirical studies (entailing all research methods) have examined vouchers' impact on academic outcomes in public schools. Of these, twenty two find they improve public schools and one finds no visible impact. No empirical study has found that vouchers harm public schools.
- Six empirical studies have examined vouchers' fiscal impact on taxpayers. All six find they save money for taxpayers. No study has found a negative fiscal impact.
- Eight empirical studies have examined vouchers and racial segregation in schools. Of these, seven find that they move students from more segregated to less segregated schools. One finds no net effect on segregation. No empirical study has found that vouchers increase racial segregation.
- Seven empirical studies have examined vouchers' impact on civic values and practices such as respect for the rights of others and civic knowledge. Of these, five find that vouchers improve civic values and practices. Two find no visible impact. No empirical study has found that vouchers have a negative impact on civic values and practices.
- A 2012 study jointly released by the Kennedy School at Harvard and the Brookings Institution found that college enrollments for low-income African American students who, years earlier had won vouchers to attend private elementary schools, were 24 percent higher than a socioeconomically identical group of students who had not won them.
- States that have adopted vouchers of one kind or another: Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Utah, Wisconsin, and the District of Columbia (via acts of Congress).

What Do the Politics Say?

Roundtable Voices

- “In 2011 we passed education bills in both the House and Senate that included vouchers, but we ran into a buzz saw that was the governor.

The good news was there was an appetite for vouchers in the Legislature. The bad news is that there was an appetite for them because one party, Republicans, was in control of both chambers. I think it was a complete party line vote in both the House and Senate.”

- “I just wonder if [the previous speaker] sees the irony of having the party which resists vouchers being the same party which most explicitly says it's defending the rights of people who don't have many choices?”
- “The union bureaucratic complex is protecting its franchise. That's absolutely the reason we don't have vouchers.”
- “The political solution is to cultivate more Democrats who are pro-school choice among both existing elected officials and those coming up through the grassroots.”

What Do Matters of Faith and Morality Say?

- More than most children, boys and girls growing up in fragmented families often need the kind of education that fills, not only their need to know algebra or Colonial history, but also the kind that nourishes and helps fill the holes in their hearts where their father or sometimes where their mother should be.

What Does Early Childhood Education Say?

- Low-income parents in Minnesota can use state-backed “scholarships” in choosing where their pre-K boys and girls attend pre-school, including religious programs. But are not “scholarships” in this instance the fundamental equivalent of “vouchers” for older kids?

What Does the Future Say?

- We need to take far greater advantage of digital learning: lessons and courses of which can be “unbundled” in ways that will significantly change how schools are organized, how teachers teach and, not incidentally, how unions seek to organize and influence.

Introduction

When it comes to elementary and secondary education in Minnesota and especially the Twin Cities, vouchers represent the single most promising approach for reducing immense achievement gaps between white and many minority students. Gaps which are just about the biggest in the country and which pose greater threats to economic and individual progress here than perhaps in any other major metropolitan area in the nation.

What's the main reason why Minnesota, in contrast to a growing number of other states and cities, doesn't have K-12 vouchers for low-income children? The easy answer has been the unyielding and well-financed opposition of teacher unions in particular and the educational establishment more broadly, resulting in ceaseless pressure on mostly DFL legislators to perpetually vote NO. This is not just the easiest answer, it's the most accurate. But let me suggest a reinforcing factor.

The drive for vouchers in Minnesota also has been stymied by the success of other efforts on behalf of educational freedom. The reference here is to cross-district open-enrollments, Post-Secondary Enrollment Options, alternative schools, home schooling, digital programs, and most importantly charter schools. Charters, in fact, started in Minnesota, as did open-enrollments and Post-Secondary Enrollment Options (PSEO). With many Minnesota families, consequently, already having more avenues than most families around the country, it's not wholly surprising that voucher campaigns in the state have never gained the same traction they have elsewhere.

Or if you will, vouchers here have been the paradoxical victim of other victories on behalf of educational freedom—not that the old Minnesota Education Association or the Minnesota Federation of Teachers¹ were the least bit enthusiastic when PSEO, open-enrollments, and charter schools were first introduced by brave governors, DFLer Rudy Perpich and Republican Arne Carlson, and passed by intrepid legislators in the 1980s and early '90s.

The same pattern of forcefully antagonistic unions held for tax credits for certain education expenses, which became law in 1997, during Carlson's second term.

No matter how interesting the ironies, an unacceptable current and continuing fact about K-12 education in in the Twin Cities remains: Huge numbers of low-income and minority boys and girls are doing very poorly. Yet as solid research clearly suggests, many of them would do better if afforded a chance to attend a private rather than public school. This, I emphasize, is not a facile slam at public schools, of which I'm an exclusive product and which often do excellent jobs under exceedingly difficult circumstances. Rather, it's to argue that many kids simply would do better in different settings and that the present situation is more than bad enough to allow by-rote opposition to vouchers stand in the way of their adoption.

An acknowledgment and definition before going on: I do in fact appreciate that a lot of voucher supporters prefer terms such as “scholarships” or “opportunity scholarships,” as they correctly recognize that the word “vouchers” scares some people away whereas their preferred term may not, or at least not so viscerally. And if it were to help, I would have no problem at all if eventual legislation referred to scholarships rather than vouchers. But in an analysis like this it's important to be clear, and the clearest description and name for what I have in

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mind is “vouchers.” And no, I’m not giving away any secrets or ammunition to opponents, as they would have figured things out less than a nanosecond after first hearing advocates use various euphemisms for what they really were talking about.

As for a definition, this is what I mean by vouchers: Vouchers give parents the freedom to choose a private school for their children by using all or part of the public funding set aside for their boy or girl’s education. Simple enough.

How Big are the Gaps?

I learned a long time ago, actually 34 years ago in doing field research for my dissertation at the University of Minnesota, that while well-educated men and women knew that differences in academic achievement between white and most non-white high school students were large on average, they were consistently taken back once they learned how large they were in fact. Such gaps in reading and math across the country have decreased in the last third-of-a-century, but not terribly much.

As for Minnesota, the National Assessment of Education Progress—known colloquially as “NAEP” and the “Nation’s Report Card”—reported these results for eighth grade students in the state who were *reading* either proficiently or at advanced levels, as broken down by race, in 2013:²

- ▶ White students 51 percent
- ▶ Black students 17 percent
- ▶ Hispanic students 21 percent
- ▶ Asian students 37 percent

NAEP results for Minnesota eighth graders who were either proficient or advanced in *math*, in 2013, read like this:³

- ▶ White students 71 percent
- ▶ Black students 17 percent
- ▶ Hispanic students 26 percent
- ▶ Asian students 58 percent

In regards to graduation rates, Minneapolis Public Schools, for instance, announced with some fanfare in February 2014: “Graduation rates up 7 percent over two years in MPS.” Putting aside how appreciably looser statewide graduation requirements for the Class of 2013 might have had *something* to do with the increase,⁴ good news is good news and warrants praise as well as congratulations to many teachers and administrators who work very hard and who passionately want their students to succeed. And praise and congratulations as well, of course, to many students who have worked diligently. But what were the actual numbers involved?

The four-year high school graduation rate for MPS students in 2013 was a far-from-adequate 53.9 percent. But keep in mind that was an overall proportion. How did numbers break down by race and ethnicity? It was 72.1 percent for white students and 68.0 percent for Asian students. But in the words of MPS itself: “While notable gains were made for students of color in the school district, a consistently low graduation rate of *less than 40 percent* for African American, American Indian and Latino students continued to persist.”⁵ (Emphasis supplied, though I trust readers don’t need the extra help in immediately recognizing how bad and dreadfully sad “less than 40 percent” is.)

In the words of [Minneapolis Public Schools] itself: “While notable gains were made for students of color in the school district, a consistently low graduation rate of less than 40 percent for African American, American Indian and Latino students continued to persist.”

It's essential never to lose sight of data like these the next time someone suggests we can eliminate (not just reduce) achievement gaps if only we really cared. If only we got really serious. If only we greatly expanded early childhood education. If only we cut class sizes. If only we adopted some special curriculum. If only we held teachers more accountable. If only we spent more money. If only we did this or that.

Given the size of these differences, specifically between white and black students, it challenges comprehension to see how they will be erased any time in the foreseeable future. This very glum fact is both reinforced and fueled by enormous differences in the way in which different groups of children come into this world and the homes in which they are raised. Just two national numbers: About 30 percent of white babies across the country are born outside of marriage; the ratio is over 70 percent for black boys and girls. The parallel proportions for Hennepin County are 18 percent for white babies and 84 percent for African American infants.

So why might vouchers do a better job than other educational strategies in helping students overcome such high obstacles? A first and honest answer is that they won't in all instances. This is the case for no other reason than no one educational approach is best suited for all young people. Many kids will thrive, say, in a Catholic school, or in a Lutheran school, or in a private nonreligious school, while many others won't. All granted. But more precisely, what have top-tier scholars conducting gold standard research learned about the connections between vouchers and the educational, social, and life fortunes of thousands of low-income and minority students in other cities and states?

What Does the Research Say?

Much of the following draws on summaries compiled by Greg Forster of the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice in Indianapolis and Patrick J. Wolf of the University of Arkansas. On the chance you're of the mind that it's questionable whether a researcher associated with an organization

which advocates for vouchers or a faculty member at a university other than an Ivy can be credible on the subject, and at the risk of being unacceptably unfair to Drs. Forster and Wolf, I would only point out that Forster's Ph.D. is from Yale and Wolf's is from Harvard. Better than that, it's hard for me to think of many scholars with whom I've worked or otherwise admired over the years who have written about the effectiveness of vouchers who have *not* either earned their doctorates at Yale or Harvard or who have *not* taught either there or at Stanford: Superb academics such as John Chubb, Chester E. Finn, Jr., Jay Greene, Eric Hanushek, Frederick Hess, William Howell, Carolyn Minter Hoxby, Terry Moe, Paul Peterson, and Martin West. Point being, many of the research findings I'm about to report were discovered by some of the most talented scholars in the field.

Forster notes that that critics of vouchers routinely claim that they damage public schools, cost taxpayers, increase segregation, undermine democracy, and ultimately don't benefit participants. In fact, he argues, the empirical evidence consistently shows that vouchers improve academic performance by participants. Do the same for students in nearby public schools. Save taxpayer dollars. Move students into more (not less) integrated classrooms. And for very good measure, strengthen the "shared civic values and practices essential to American democracy."

Vouchers do this by enabling students to better match their academic and other needs. By increasing competition, thereby helping schools stay focused on their missions. Reducing administrative bloat and rewarding good stewardship. Breaking up barriers of residential segregation. And by "allowing schools the freedom to sustain the strong institutional cultures that are necessary to cultivate democratic virtues such as honesty, diligence, achievement, responsibility, service to others, civic participation, and respect for the rights of others."

More specifically, Forster writes:⁶

- Twelve empirical studies have examined academic outcomes for voucher participants



using random assignment, the “gold standard” of social science. Of these, 11 find that vouchers improve student outcomes—six in which all students benefit and five in which some benefit and some are not affected. One study finds no visible impact. No empirical study has found a negative impact.

- Twenty-three empirical studies (entailing all research methods) have examined vouchers’ impact on academic outcomes in public schools. Of these, 22 find that they improve public schools and one finds no visible impact. No empirical study has found that vouchers harm public schools.
- Six empirical studies have examined vouchers’ fiscal impact on taxpayers. All six find they save money for taxpayers. No study has found a negative fiscal impact.
- Eight empirical studies have examined vouchers and racial segregation in schools. Of these, seven find that they move students from more segregated to less segregated schools. One finds no net effect on segregation. No empirical study has found that vouchers increase racial segregation.
- Seven empirical studies have examined vouchers’ impact on civic values and practices such as respect for the rights of others and civic knowledge. Of these, five find that vouchers improve civic values and practices. Two find no visible impact. No empirical study has found that vouchers have a negative impact on civic values and practices.

Students who received vouchers in a federally funded voucher program in Washington, D.C. had graduation rates 21 percentage points higher than students in a control group.

As for Patrick Wolf, in a 2010 study he led for the U.S. Department of Education, he and his team found that the students who received vouchers in a federally funded voucher program in Washington, D.C. had graduation rates 21 percentage points higher than students in a control group.⁷

Moving on from high school, when it comes to the effectiveness of vouchers in spurring young people on to college, a 2012 study jointly released by the Kennedy School at Harvard and the Brookings Institution in Washington was (putting matters mildly) encouraging. Paul Peterson of the Kennedy School and Matthew Chingos of Brookings (Ph.D., Harvard) found that college enrollments for low-income African American students who, years earlier had won vouchers to attend private *elementary* schools, were 24 percent higher than a socioeconomically identical group of students who had not won them. Or more precisely, the only difference between the low-income children in New York City who won vouchers and those who didn’t was the latter’s misfortune of not having their ping pong ball or equivalent called during the lottery in which the privately funded scholarships were dispensed in 1997.⁸

Do results like these suggest that a voucher program might, just might help students of color in Minneapolis graduate high school at rates above 40 percent? Might they be worth at least a try?

Before going on, what other states have adopted vouchers of one kind or another? The list below⁹ is tightly defined, as it excludes, for example, education tax credits in general as well as tax-credit scholarship programs in which individuals and/or businesses receive tax credits for contributing to nonprofit organizations which, in turn, provide private school vouchers. Roundabout as they can be, these programs provide real opportunities for students and Minnesota would be well-served to have one in addition to a voucher program, though they’re not our focus in this instance. Also excluded are age-old voucher programs in rural parts of New Hampshire and Vermont, as they prohibit religious schools from participating.

Students eligible to receive vouchers in the following locales are either low income, or they're disabled, or they attend a failing school, or they live in a designated city, or they fall under some combination of these headings.

Arizona
District of Columbia
Florida
Georgia
Indiana
Louisiana
Mississippi
North Carolina
Ohio
Oklahoma
Utah
Wisconsin

In closing off this section on what the research says, it's important to note that while vouchers generally lead to good and sometimes very good academic results, they also enable students to attend schools that often are safer. By no means is this a small matter and it's just one of the reasons why research consistently shows that parents (in Wolf's one-word description) tend to "love" voucher and other choice programs.¹⁰

What Do the Politics Say?

In writing recently about choice and competition as a significant key to improving American elementary and secondary education, Stanford economist Carolyn Minter Hoxby argued that her goal was to "outline what is *feasible* given the resources we have and what we know about methods of raising achievement." In that sense, she said, hers was a "realistic paper." From another angle, however, she also said her aim was not to be "constrained by the bastardized policies that fallible politicians often enact when they bow to pressures from lobbyists, public sector unions, fundraisers, and other interest groups."¹¹ With immense respect for the brilliant and tough-minded Professor Hoxby, this paper enjoys no such escapist luxury, as it dwells in political reality, Minnesota style.

Much of the rest of this essay draws on two roundtable discussions involving a total of seventeen Minnesota education and other leaders that I moderated in March 2013, all of whom, I might add, are fond of vouchers.¹² My opening questions each time got right to the point: "Why doesn't Minnesota have vouchers? Why especially since our state led the way in the 1980s into the 1990s in expanding educational freedom, and not just for low-income students, but for all children and young people? We helped drive the locomotive back then. Why are we now closer to the caboose?" Rep. Kelby Woodard, one of the lead Republicans in the Minnesota House of Representatives when it comes to education, put matters starkly:

In 2011 we passed education bills in both the House and Senate that included vouchers, but we ran into a buzz saw that was the governor [DFLer Mark Dayton]. The good news was there was an appetite for vouchers in the Legislature. The bad news is that there was an appetite for them because one party, Republicans, was in control of both chambers. I think it was a complete party line vote in both the House and Senate, with Republicans voting for vouchers and DFLers voting against them.

In conversations with the governor, he indicated he knew he was going to have to swallow some reforms we wanted, so we were somewhat optimistic that vouchers would be one of them. But the bold truth of it is that organizations such as the superintendents association, the school board association, and the teachers union, Education Minnesota, in particular argued very hard against vouchers. They were part of getting him elected in the first place and were adamant that vouchers not be part of our education finance bill. Unfortunately, this is a very partisan issue in Minnesota and I know it's not in some other states. With the DFL now in charge of the House and Senate as well as the governor's office, there's very little hope for vouchers until that changes.

To which Curt Johnson, who has been intimately involved in education reform efforts in Minnesota for decades, going back to his work with DFL Gov.



Rudy Perpich in the 1980s and long before that as well, asked, “I just wonder if Kelby sees the irony of having the party which resists vouchers being the same party which most explicitly says it’s defending the rights of people who don’t have many choices?” (Actually, recalling who was around the two rectangular roundtables, most of the participants also had been involved in education reform efforts in Minnesota for decades.)

To which Woodard responded: “We had kids from Christo Rey [Jesuit] High School in Minneapolis testify on behalf of a bill and that was exactly their point when they heard some of the questions from DFL legislators about vouchers. Many of them were low-income Hispanics and they didn’t understand it.” After a further exchange, Johnson said, “It has always struck me as ironic that the partisan split takes place the way it does because it makes no intellectual sense at all.”

To which I jumped in: “But it makes perfect *political* sense,” when viewed in terms of the intransigence of groups such as Education Minnesota which get DFLers elected. Or as Keith Downey, a former legislator who was to be elected chairman of the Minnesota Republican Party a few months later put it, “The union bureaucratic complex is protecting its franchise. That’s absolutely the reason we don’t have vouchers.”

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Paralleling other ways in which political partisanship has grown more severe regarding a wide variety of issues at both national and state levels, Johnson recalled, for example, how PSEO became law during the Perpich administration in the mid-1980s with bipartisan support, especially

that of Republican Rep. Connie Levi, probably the legislation’s prime mover.

A partially sidestepping question when it comes to partisanship: Toward the end of that first roundtable conversation, Curt Johnson wondered, “How much difference would it make if the Itasca Project came out swinging for vouchers all the way up and down?” The thought being that an endorsement from the high-end, largely business-led group might be viewed as having nonpartisan (or at least less-partisan) potency. Or, I might add, what if Generation Next, the most prestigious of the new groups focusing on achievement gaps—the one in which University of Minnesota President Eric Kahler and former Minneapolis Mayor R.T. Rybak are major voices—similarly came to the conclusion that research about vouchers is compelling and that it’s at our tangible peril if we continue rejecting them? What if they took the lead? Organizations such as the Itasca Group and Generation Next notwithstanding, are there any individuals in town, exceptionally well-respected men or women who have made their mark outside of politics, who might effectively champion vouchers? Suggestions anyone?

In the second roundtable, two days later, David Strom, an American Experiment Senior Fellow, answered the question as to why Minnesota doesn’t have vouchers with, “Two words: teachers unions.” In each of the two days, though, causes and conversations quickly broadened beyond Education Minnesota.

Jon Bacal, who is one of the most prolific and optimistic educational entrepreneurs I know, argued that Education Minnesota might be the “immediate” obstacles to vouchers, but that there’s a “fundamental public lack of urgency around the education crisis in Minnesota. We’ve had it pretty good for the last 50 years. It’s a ‘Lake Wobegon Effect.’ To most people it doesn’t matter how much data you throw at them, because we’re still above average.”

“It’s a ‘Lake Wobegon Effect.’ To most people it doesn’t matter how much data you throw at them, because we’re still above average.”

Morgan Brown, an official of Charter School Partners and formerly with both the Minnesota and U.S. Departments of Education (and Center of the American Experiment), took political matters further. “The issue of whether a particular state gets vouchers is primarily a function of political will and smart political organizing. Every single state to date that has gotten them has had some combination of a governor willing to champion the issue and at least one house of their legislature with a voucher majority, but usually both chambers. And if they were missing one of those components,” Brown continued, “they had a well-organized, urban grassroots movement with community leaders and parents. Also in each instance there was a real sense of crisis about the inequity of urban education that propelled the movement, as in Milwaukee, which was a prime example.”

Brown then moved on to the eight years Tim Pawlenty, a conservative Republican, served as governor, starting in 2003. Keep in mind here there wasn’t a single Republican legislator during those years (or still) from either Minneapolis or St. Paul.

“Arguably, under Governor Pawlenty we had a governor who I think was willing to champion the issue, but he was reluctant to do so in the face of what he saw as little chance of success in either the House or Senate. We never had all the necessary components together. We’ve certainly had support for school choice in the core cities, but it has never specifically been for vouchers or private school choice. As a result, increasing interest and broadly bipartisan support for charter schools, specifically quality charter schools, has been a release valve for pressure that would have gotten pushed into vouchers in other cities.”

A few moments later, David Gaither, who served for a period as Governor Pawlenty’s chief of staff, explained why Pawlenty had not gone full-out in support of vouchers. “There really are only a couple of lobbying groups that could move the needle at the Legislature. One of them is Education Minnesota. That’s no joke. When you’re sitting in the governor’s office going, “OK. We’ve got about a three-vote majority in the House. We don’t have the Senate. And we’re going into a reelection campaign in a pretty bad year. What dog do we want to kick? Education Minnesota is not the dog you want to kick.” The further context for all this, Gaither argued, and as noted several times already, was the reality of Minnesota parents already having a number of choices and voters’ routine assumption that schools in the state are stronger than they actually are.

Gaither also cited how “dynamics at the Legislature are different with the advent of social media and the national scope of things.” This was largely in response to Jon Bacal’s reference to partisanship. “When you look at the most creative period of educational policy leadership in Minnesota,” Bacal had argued, “it was between 1985 and 1997 when Rudy Perpich and then Arne Carlson were governor. Neither was hyper-sensitive to their core political allies, and they also had advisors and informal kitchen cabinets. Non-partisan ‘do-gooder types’ such as the Citizens League were able to advance all kinds of creative ideas in a relatively less-hyper-partisan environment.”

The twelve years between 1985 and 1997 saw Minnesota, as noted at the top, lead the nation by making it possible for high school juniors and seniors to take college courses at state expense; students to attend public schools in districts other than their own; students to attend new institutions called charter schools; and for lower-income families to receive tax credits (not just tax deductions) for certain educational expenses.

Sondra Samuels enlarged the conversation, bravely, by first talking about a “lack of education on the part of communities that would benefit most from



increased school choice.” Samuels is president and CEO of the Northside Achievement Zone in North Minneapolis, which is a “Promise Neighborhood” in the spirit of the Harlem Children’s Zone, led by the celebrated Geoffrey Canada.

“When we commissioned a randomized survey of about 400 families, we found residents in the Zone giving their children’s respective schools [about 100 schools overall, both in and out of Minneapolis] over 90-percent approval ratings. The United Negro College Fund did their own survey in cities around the country that have large African American and Latino populations, as well as a disproportionate number of failing schools, but they too found parents having about 90-percent approval ratings for their children’s schools.” Samuels continued:

Many of the young moms in our program—we have some fathers, as we’re doing better in getting men involved—had terrible educational experiences themselves. This is just the way things are. If they like their child’s teacher, there’s no problem. They don’t even know if their kids are at grade level. We coach our parents to ask their teachers about things like this, but first we have to explain what “grade level” means. There’s a lot of education that needs to happen and you’re not going to fight for something if you don’t see a problem.

The other thing is partisan politics. If you support “scholarships”—I’m not going to use the “V” word anymore—for low-income children to go to any school you want, you *cannot* be a Democrat. You have to turn in your card. People don’t fear change. They fear loss. I’m a Democrat who supports vouchers and there are a lot more who also do so, but they don’t come out because of the hostility.

“Might I infer,” I asked, “that there isn’t the greatest warmth towards Republicans in African American communities?”

“Oh, yes,” she shot back, seemingly before I finished the question.

“I’m a Democrat who supports vouchers and there are a lot more who also do so, but they don’t come out because of the hostility.”

I noted at this point that Sondra Samuels’ husband, Don Samuels—who at the time of the roundtables was a member of the Minneapolis City Council as well as a mayoral candidate—had graciously written a foreword for another paper of mine on vouchers about a half-dozen years earlier, and while he had not come out for them in his piece, he paid a political price nonetheless.

David Strom again put matters directly. “The African American community is tied to the hip of the Democratic Party, which has no reason to give in on this. DFLers get benefit from their relationship with the teachers’ union and they pay zero price for screwing African American kids on vouchers. I don’t know how to deal with that fundamental problem. The only people carrying water on this are white Republicans who see it essentially as a moral issue. The politics are terrible.”

Samuels said what she did above in the second roundtable, but what Kristin Robbins said in the first one follows perfectly. Robbins is executive director of the Economic Club of Minnesota and served, from 1996 to 1998 (when educational tax credits were passed) as the exceptionally effective and universally trusted (not an everyday gift) executive director of Minnesotans for School Choice, of which I was the chairman.

“People of color,” she said, “were very suspicious until they got to know us. Why are these white people all of a sudden in our neighborhood? Why are these white people trying to talk to us and get us involved in this? There’s just a lot of fear about being used as a pawn in some political game, which we had to be very careful of. I was always

conscious of that. We had a couple of people,” she went on, “from the African American and Latino communities who were working with us, making introductions and giving us ‘street cred’ in the community. But they would never completely be with us publicly because of the political pressure they felt as DFLers. So it wasn’t only suspicions about our intentions and their fears we were trying to railroad something through their communities. It was that there are political prices to be paid in their communities if they go against the establishment, which is very strong DFL in these cities.”

To which Morgan Brown, back at the other roundtable, seemingly finished what Robbins was saying: “I’m fairly convinced the political answer here is not to figure out how you can create some kind of alliance between Republican conservative legislators and inner-city parents and leaders. The political solution is to cultivate more Democrats who are pro-school choice, among both existing elected officials and those coming up through the grassroots. That’s been a key part of the recipe where there hasn’t been a Republican governor or Republican legislature to push it through.” By Minnesota “inner-city parents,” of course, the reference increasingly entails not just African Americans and Latinos, but also Hmong, Somalis, Ethiopians and others.

What Do Matters of Faith and Morality Say?

In arguing for vouchers, most advocates usually go light in framing the issue in moral terms. This is the case since focusing on morality is often viewed as moralizing, which usually doesn’t work well, rhetorically or otherwise, in politically, ideologically and certainly religiously mixed settings. But with the understanding that I do not question the decency of anyone who truly does believe vouchers are an intrinsically bad deal for children, including very poor ones, I must admit I’ve always thought of vouchers more as an ethical necessity than merely a pedagogical, economic, or political priority.

The libertarian Milton Friedman introduced the idea of vouchers in 1955 as a market-driven way of improving education and expanding educational opportunity, and I’m very much a free market fan. But frankly, what has gotten me metaphorically out of bed over the last 25 years-plus when it comes to vouchers has never been their market features, but rather (at the risk of sounding grandiose) their potential for helping save whole generations of American kids.

Of a piece with this, and aided by the fact that I’m a religious minority, I have been freer and quicker than most other voucher advocates to talk about why private and religious schools work better for many (certainly not all) low-income and minority boys and girls than do public and secular schools. (“Freer and quicker,” being blunt about it, because I’m less likely to be seen as “one of those conservative Christians.”)

Here’s an overriding reason—beyond what the empirical research above says—why I believe vouchers are a very good idea. Or if you will, a morally powerful idea.

Other than educational issues, most of my own research and writing over the decades have focused on families; more specifically, on how the United States, for whatever reasons, leads virtually the entire industrial world in family fragmentation. This, suffice it to say, can be painfully and damagingly hard on many millions of children. Question: What’s perhaps the first word that comes to mind about the kind of education that might work best for many of these young people?

For me, it’s “nurturing.” More than most kids, those in often jumbled homes need the kind of education that fills, not only their need to know algebra and Colonial history, but also the kind that nurtures and helps fill the holes in their hearts where often their father or sometimes where their mother should be. Or in some instances where both of their parents should be. The kind of education, getting right down to it, regardless of denomination, where it’s more explicitly understood that Someone infinitely more senior than any teacher, principal,

or superintendent loves them infinitely and wants them to do great. Might vouchers for such schools be constitutional, which also is to say respectful not only of the separation of church and state but also America's vast variety? Completely, the United States Supreme Court has declared, if they respect certain reasonable and not-hard-to follow bounds.¹³

Fine, a voucher opponent might grudgingly concede to a point. But getting right down to it, are private schools really interested in enrolling low-income, disproportionately minority children? I had doubts of my own about 15 years ago, as witness when I rather rudely suggested to a number of Minnesota religious leaders that while they said the right things about opening up their schools, their invitations sounded more like the Oriental dismissal, "Big noise. No one coming down stairs." Or the Occidental slam, "Big hat. No cattle." But when I put the question to the first roundtable, Kelby Woodard emphatically claimed, "The Minnesota Catholic Conference is wholeheartedly supportive."

I might note that in a study conducted by highly respected Wilder Research for the Minnesota Independent School Forum in 2012,¹⁴ it was estimated that private schools in the state have the capacity to serve about 25,000 additional students, with most available seats in the Twin Cities metropolitan area. For the 2010-11 school year, 443 private schools, enrolling about 75,000 students, were eligible to participate in the study.

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I might also note here that the privately funded New York City voucher program quickly described above, the one with very high college participation rates, grew out of an invitation by a then-

archbishop to the then-chancellor of NYC public schools to "send the city's most troubled public school students to Catholic schools" and that he would assure they received a good education. Kids subsequently wound up in scores of private schools, both Catholic and not.

And a final point about mobility, which is high profile these days. It can sound like the most old-hat cliché to claim that the best way of working oneself up economic and other ladders is to get a good education. But I would only ask, what better route is there for most people, especially those who start out on lower rungs?

What Does Early Childhood Education Say?

Here are questions for you. Voucher advocates like pointing out that vouchers are just like the GI Bill, the only real difference being the latter is used in post-secondary education while the former are used in elementary and secondary education. What's the big difference? Or why is the GI Bill universally honored and credited with helping create a wide and deep middle class whereas vouchers are sometimes condemned for endangering the educational futures of large numbers of middle class (and other) students?

Or what about the way in which Minnesota currently enables low-income parents to take advantage of subsidized early childhood education? Much to the state's credit, low-income parents can use state-backed "scholarships" in choosing where their pre-K boys and girls attend pre-school, including religiously flavored programs. But are not "scholarships" in this instance the fundamental equivalent of "vouchers" for older kids? And are not "GI benefits" what military men and women have been using to attend places like the U of M and Mankato State, as well as St. John's and St. Kate's, for generations likewise the fundamental equivalent of vouchers? Bingo and Bingo.

I was about to say there are two mostly unspoken fears among politicians and others where these similarities are concerned, but in fact they're not unspoken at all.

Among voucher opponents, the fear is that thousands of parents of young children will grow so fond of the freedom they now have in picking the right pre-school for their children they will come to expect and demand no less in picking the right elementary and then secondary school for them as they grow up.

The flip-side fear of voucher advocates is that given enough time, special interests and organizations, starting with Education Minnesota, will grind down supporters to the point where opponents can annex early childhood programs as their bureaucratic own. This is not an immediate threat since great champions of early childhood scholarships, as currently conceived, such as economist Art Rolnick and other key political and business leaders are determined that it won't be. But what happens when they and their resoluteness, for whatever reason, pass from the scene? Will they not be outlived by Education Minnesota and other old-time K-12 lobbies?

Republican Keith Downey framed the dynamics and risks well during the first roundtable. "The reason I sat on the Senate's early education subcommittee was because I saw the Rolnick scholarship model as another way of getting choice into the system."

We looked at that as a possible entrée for choice into the system, with parents wanting that kind of choice all the way through K-12. They will have had scholarships for two years for early education. Why couldn't they get it for Kindergarten? I can tell you Democrats see it as a Trojan horse aimed at preventing them from unionizing the entire early education apparatus. So there's a titanic battle underway. Voucher supporters actually lost the first round because we allowed the state Department of Education to define the rating system. I still like the idea of scholarships, but if the program continues to be run by the Department, I fear for where it may be

going. It's high risk and we actually may wind up losing more than we gain.

What Does the Future Say?

The two roundtables focused a lot on the future, at least as much long term as short term, as in this further comment by Keith Downey: "We've used the term 'long term' a handful of times today. That is *absolutely* true. We need to have a long view and strategic approach, realizing this is a 20-year project." After referring to how conservatives had largely lost "cultural institutions" such as the media, the social service delivery systems, and both K-12 and higher education systems, and speaking in party terms, he asked how Republicans might gain a sustainable majority in Minnesota. "Well, it's not going to be by sending out a new brochure in September 2014 saying something like, 'We care about Latinos.' It's a long haul. We've got to get back to listening to them and other minorities, offering legislation, advocating for them, understanding what their issues are, participating in their parades, and being at their picnics and schools. It's not going to happen short of that." This is the case, he added, even though Minnesotans, by and large, are aligned with conservative principles.

To which Kristin Robbins expanded on reinforcing points she made above: "The institutions Keith identified are really important, of course. But even more so are the churches and community centers. Back when I was recruiting parents I didn't go to my home church for about six months, but instead spoke at different churches almost every Sunday, because they're the main gathering places in many communities. I didn't give sermons; they just made a place for me after services. That's how you meet people, at their churches and community centers. Coffee shops can be great places to hang out, too."

Somewhere along the way in the second roundtable, in a question that was mostly rhetorical, I asked if American Experiment should suspend its work on behalf of vouchers and focus on other reforms, at least for a spell, since it didn't appear as if we



would win vouchers anytime soon. “No,” came the reassuring cacophony of responses, with David Gaither taking persuasive lead:

“Should you be pushing for vouchers? Absolutely. Is it a moral issue? You bet it is. Is it going to happen? I believe it will. The landscape will need to change, for whatever reason. Perhaps it will be a pension collapse. There’s a whole series of things that could potentially feed into this opportunity, but when one does present itself, you have to be ready with resources on both sides of the aisle. Because no matter who is in charge, vouchers will become such an important issue legislators will fight to carry the bill if you’re in the right spot and the right crisis hits.”

Around this time I asked if all this might happen in my lifetime.

Yes, seemed to be Gaither’s answer, “Though you’ll have to be nimble. You’ll have to have your playbook ready and groundwork done with folks who might not be in a position to carry water right now.”

Actually, crises or no crises, one can’t deny the fact that all it would take for landscapes to become a lot more amenable to vouchers would be the election of a governor, perhaps regardless of party, sufficiently passionate about them, along with a change in majority in only one legislative chamber, which would afford him or her with potentially sufficient leverage to get vouchers passed. Neither is an unreasonable longshot at any time.

Though also needless to say, unless support for real educational freedom grows wider and deeper than it currently is, as suggested by the importance of 20-year campaigns, political reversals just short spans later can quickly dash whatever might have been won. For no other reason this would be the case as many voucher opponents won’t lose a moment in returning to the fray in a variety of venues, including the courts. Or putting matters more generally, few political victories (or defeats) are forever.

Not unrelated here is also the importance of the state

Department of Education and other offices getting quickly and effectively up to speed in implementing whatever voucher program is eventually adopted, as rest assured, educational and other bureaucracies in Minnesota will not lack for embedded voucher opponents.

Final word goes to education entrepreneur Jon Bacal, who imagines and envisions as persuasively as anyone I know in the field, and who allowed how he was “profoundly skeptical” that the kinds of reforms which have been pursued in our great cities over decades could ever result in sustained progress for students, for no other reason than they hadn’t yet. He introduced the point, which came an hour into the second roundtable, by saying how “pieces of the previous discussion had been reminiscent of conversations in 1985 about ways of creating islands of freedom in Eastern Europe.” Anachronistic, in other words.

In large part Bacal was referring to how different branches of science are increasingly demonstrating how most American schools are set-up and run in far less than cognitively optimal ways and, as such, we’re obliged to take far greater advantage of miraculous technology. Which is to say, we need to take far greater advantage of digital learning: courses and lessons of which can be “unbundled” in ways that will significantly change how schools are organized, how teachers teach and, not incidentally, how unions seek to organize and influence.

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Especially if schools and students continue to founder, Bacal concluded, “Teachers’ unions across the country, as well as school board associations, administrator associations and other advocates of the educational status quo—including much of the

general public—might have much bigger fish to fry than worrying about voucher plans.”

I choose to interpret his speculation as encouraging.

Endnotes

1 The old Minnesota Education Association and Minnesota Federation of Teachers merged in 1998, becoming Education Minnesota.

2 “The Nation’s Report Card: Reading: 2013 State Snapshot Report: Minnesota: Grade 8: Public Schools.”

3 “The Nation’s Report Card: Mathematics: 2013 State Snapshot Report: Minnesota: Grade 8: Public Schools.”

4 Joe Nathan, “Did different standards help increase Minnesota’s high school graduation rate?” *Stillwater Gazette*, March 1, 2014.

5 “Graduation rates up 7 percent over two years in MPS,” News release, Minneapolis Public Schools, February 19, 2014. The news release cited “percent” changes when it really was talking about “percentage point” changes, making for another bad news/good news situation. The bad news being that whoever wrote and cleared the news release evidently didn’t know the difference between the two. The good news being that graduation rates actually went up a bit more than MPS claimed.

6 Greg Forster, *A Win-Win Solution: The Empirical Evidence on School Choice (Third Edition)*, Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, Indianapolis, IN, April 2013, p. 1.

7 Patrick Wolf, Babette Gutmann, et al., *Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Final Report, NCEE 2010-4018, U.S. Department of Education, Institute for Education Sciences*, 2010.

8 Mitch Pearlstein, “With Vouchers, More Minnesota Students Could be Helped,” *Pioneer Press*, September 8, 2012.

9 *The ABCs of School Choice: The Comprehensive Guide to Every Private School Choice Program in America: 2014 Edition*, Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, Indianapolis, IN. Also excluded from the list is a voucher program in Douglas County, CO, pending approval of the Colorado Supreme Court.

10 Patrick J. Wolf, “The Research Facts about School Choice,” Power Point presentation DeLaSalle High School, Minneapolis, MN, January 30, 2013. My thanks to all.

11 Carolyn M. Hoxby, “The Global Achievement Gap,” *Defining Ideas: A Hoover Institution Journal*, March 5, 2014.

12 Yes, time often flies before getting down to writing. Both roundtables were held at American Experiment’s former headquarters in Minneapolis and lasted about 90 minutes

each. The first was held on March 19, 2013 and included Keith Downey, Jim Field, Christy Hovanetz, Curt Johnson, Rhonda Nordin, Kristin Robbins and Kelby Woodard. The second roundtable was held on March 21, 2013 and included Jon Bacal, King Banaian, Morgan Brown, Chuck Chalberg, David Gaither, Kent Kaiser, John LaPlante, David Osmeck, Sondra Samuels, and David Strom, Peter Zeller, American Experiment’s director of operations, also participated in both sessions.

13 In a 2002 case known as *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled 5-4 that Cleveland’s voucher program was constitutional insofar as (1) its purpose was not to promote religion, but rather the secular interest of educating children; (2) the state did not grant aid directly to sectarian institutions, but instead gave vouchers to parents who signed them over to the schools of their choice; and (3) parents had genuine independent choice.

14 Wilder Research. *2010-11 Statewide Census of Private Education (SCOPE): Summary of a Study of Private K-12 Schools in Minnesota*, May 2012. As for whether schools would participate in a “tuition voucher program” for low-income students, 78 percent reported “yes,” 5 percent reported “no,” and 16 percent reported “don’t know.” Yet while a huge majority of nearly four out of five schools said yes, that proportion fell dramatically to 29 percent if “all students” were, therefore, “required to take MCA [Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments] testing to participate in the program,” and even a lower percentage (interestingly) if only voucher students were required to take the MCAs. I read this as (1) a clear sign that private schools in Minnesota want to serve more low-income and minority students; but (2) also a clear and perfectly legitimate sign they don’t want to forfeit their independence in doing so.



About the author: Mitch Pearlstein is founder and president of Center of the American Experiment. He previously made his career in journalism, education, and government in Binghamton, New York and Washington, DC in addition to the Twin Cities. His books include *Close to Home: Celebrations and Critiques of America's Experiment in Freedom* (with Katherine A. Kersten); *Riding into the Sunrise: Al Quie and a Life of Faith, Service, and Civility*; and *From Family Collapse to America's Decline: The Educational, Economic, and Social Costs of Family Fragmentation*. His newest book, *Broken Bonds: What Family Fragmentation Means for America's Future*, will be released by Rowman & Littlefield in August 2014. Formerly chairman of Minnesotans for School Choice and the Partnership for Choice in Education, Dr. Pearlstein did his graduate work in educational administration at the University of Minnesota and is married to the Rev. Diane Darby McGowan, a police chaplain and Deacon of an Episcopal parish.

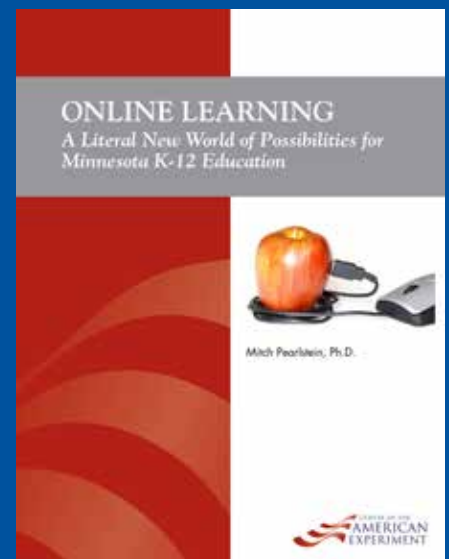
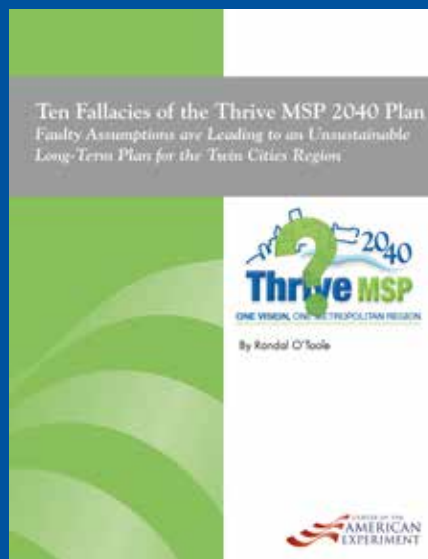
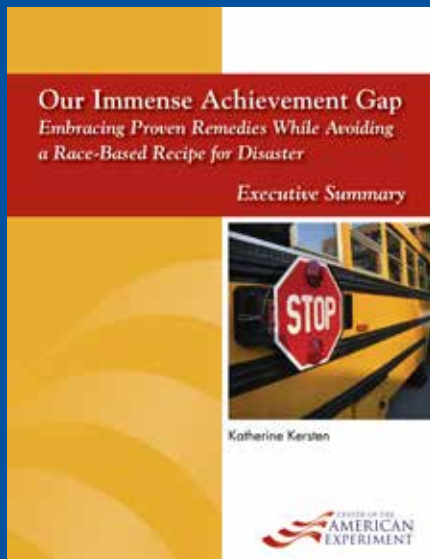


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