

---

---

# CHARTING A PATH TOWARD CHARTER SCHOOLS

## NAVIGATING THROUGH DISCONTENTED WATERS

---

---

BY JOHN ROBSON

### THE PROPOSAL

Why, despite its apparent success in practice, can't we seem to get more choice in education? Parents in many countries have long been unhappy with centralized public education monopolies and in 1955 Milton Friedman offered what seems the obvious answer: the state should pay for education but not deliver it. Instead, it should issue vouchers "redeemable for a specified maximum sum per child per year.... Parents would then be free to spend this sum and any additional sum on purchasing educational services from an 'approved' institution of their own choice."<sup>1</sup> His suggestion spawned a bewildering assortment of reform schemes,<sup>2</sup> but they have been undermined and misrepresented because on the one hand, many people do not really understand the central idea at all and on the other, some inside the public system understand it all too well.

### MISCONCEPTIONS

Let us deal in order with misconceptions, genuine problems and the subterfuge of the self-interested. The first surprisingly important misconception is that what something is called matters more than what it does. The state giving a "voucher" to a parent to give to a "private" school they choose, or handing the money directly to a public "charter school" parents choose, is a difference only an accountant could love and an activist could hate. What matters is whether public money follows students to wherever parents put them, instead of students continuing to follow public money wherever the government puts it. The former arrangement is the key to real reform, because it means parental dissatisfaction will systematically snip away underperforming schools from below. By contrast, any ostensible reform that does not incorporate this vital mechanism will not automatically redirect resources from bad schools to good ones.

A second misconception is that voucher-style reforms necessarily reduce the state's ability to regulate education. But whether teachers' paycheques are signed by the Minister of Education, a charity or Brains 'R' Us, the state can stipulate what is taught, and how, as easily as it can regulate trucking without

subsidizing it or getting behind the wheel. For example, the Alberta government happens to regulate private schools heavily,<sup>3</sup> not because of terminology or funding arrangements but because politicians decided to. Governments can let parents control the curriculum in public schools, or dictate it in subsidized private ones (as in Manitoba).<sup>4</sup> All vouchers necessarily do is give parents veto power over really bad teaching.<sup>5</sup> So unless there is some specific, special problem in monitoring a less centralized school system, monopoly in education is to be avoided for all the usual reasons monopolies ought to be avoided anywhere. Monopolies habitually put too much emphasis on the comfort and convenience of current employees and too little on delivering a quality product at a decent price. Anyone who has driven a Lada will understand.<sup>6</sup>

### GENUINE PROBLEMS - MEASURING THE THREE R'S

Insofar as we can test the matter, school choice does improve teaching for precisely those reasons. The "insofar" is important, because even after brushing aside tiresome partisan polemics for and against testing, we encounter real methodological problems. On the "Three Rs" (reading, writing and 'rithmetic), the towering measurement problem isn't poorly designed tests. It's that the student samples aren't homogeneous.

We can avoid obvious blunders. First, do not compare systems with similar names but different rules. Thus, voucher systems under which private schools have to employ members of the public teachers' union and follow the state curriculum should be compared with charter schools with similar rules, even though the funding mechanism is technically different. They should not be compared to other voucher systems with fewer strings attached just because their bank statements look similar.

Second, if choice is provided primarily to disadvantaged students, or those with a particular interest in, say, the fine arts, compare them to similar students in public schools, not the general populace. If choice is broadly available, it seems first to attract parents of kids in trouble and bright kids, differences that cancel

out at least partially. But regardless, there is a colossal problem.

In all cases you end up comparing kids whose parents seized educational alternatives with those whose parents didn't, a significant difference when education is the issue. Doesn't a persistently smaller-than-usual gap between wealthy and poorer students in charter schools prove such schools work better? Not if poor parents who care more about education have kids who do better at it.

It's not much help comparing jurisdictions, either. If you measure Chile with vouchers against Canada without, are you comparing vouchers to monopoly or Chile to Canada? As a partial solution, international comparisons may exclude East Asian countries with a huge cultural emphasis on education.<sup>7</sup>

The best alternative, though expensive and politically problematic, is to introduce choice and see if overall test scores improve. Especially if scores improve at the lower end, and in public as well as alternative schools, it vindicates competition.

### MEASURING THE TWO Cs

If education were only about literacy, the results we can get despite these measurement issues would be quite persuasive. But education is generally meant to make students better and smarter, teaching character and civics in addition to literacy.<sup>8</sup> And even if we could measure whether schools taught that in "1492 Columbus sailed the ocean blue," how, in principle, could standardized tests show whether they sensitize pupils to native issues? Especially if students are clever about giving answers they know teachers want, highly desirable in math class but problematic in civics.

### BODIES IN SEATS

Such concerns go to the heart of the debate. Many critics of school choice make only a half-hearted stand against testing not just because they value critical thinking over so-called "rote learning," but because they think the key contribution of public schools is elsewhere. In 2003, then-Governor General Adrienne Clarkson addressed the Canadian Club of Ottawa, praising the "decency and openness to others...expressed in our public education system – without which, if I may insert a note of dire warning, we cannot possibly have a successful immigrant society."<sup>9</sup> And Heather-Jane Robertson, author and public education advocate, has written that "a shared public commitment to achieving greater equity is the only reason for public schools to exist."<sup>10</sup> This argument is largely sociological; it's not what you learn in class but who you learn it with that shapes you. And choice is bad because it lets people huddle with their own kind instead of living our shared humanity.

Ironically, this claim is comparatively easy to test and we know it is wrong. Public schools can't make the rich sit with the poor because the rich can afford private schools. And they can't make the middle class sit with the poor either because the well-off can afford houses in expensive neighbourhoods near decent public schools. So giving the poor and marginalized choices would increase the sociological equity of education.<sup>11</sup> By contrast, the largest practical experiment in fostering goodwill by making people from different neighbourhoods sit together, interracial "bussing" in the United States, clearly exacerbated hostility.

### WORDS IN LECTURES

If what matters is the content of the lessons, not the neighbouring desks, things get more complicated. Despite fashionable chatter about competitiveness,<sup>12</sup> the main reason governments interest themselves in teaching the times table, the Golden Rule or even the virtues of democracy, is that most citizens strongly feel that no child should have to grow up ignorant. And while charity might suffice for the poor, for children of careless or wicked parents, the government must not only compel attendance but also set standards and monitor results. Schools must not be able to cash the voucher, split it with parents and plunk the little nippers in front of a TV all day.

It goes further. Just as the majority insists that deviant parents must teach their children something, it forbids their teaching them just anything. Views differ on Darwinian evolution, intelligent design or both. But almost no one thinks any school should be allowed to teach that blacks are inferior. Not any subsidized school. Not any school.

Of course the state can't control what people tell their children at the dinner table. Nor is it clear that we want it to. But the fact that we can't stop parents from ranting about *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* doesn't mean we should tolerate it as a textbook. And while governments can pass any regulation they want about curriculum (New Zealand expressly requires subsidized private schools to inculcate patriotism) we must not confuse what governments tell schools to do with what schools actually do. If voucher-style choice makes it easier for schools to preach jihad, it is bad, period.

Granted, we can't be sure how effectively public schools teach civics either; if "gay" has become the schoolyard insult anecdotal news stories suggest, even after years of teaching tolerance towards homosexuals, presumably they do it badly. But if we cannot measure outputs, must we not just control inputs and hope for the best? If governments can't figure out what students are learning about history, they can settle for knowing what teachers and textbooks they let into the class. The apparent inability of governments to measure the results of civics education puts the kibosh on all forms of choice, not merely those involving private schools. Alberta, for instance, favours objective-based management of public schools, a system in which state institutions are largely told what they must accomplish rather than how.<sup>13</sup> But if the provincial government can't measure how well any school achieves objectives, it shouldn't allow leeway to public schools either.

### BACK TO THE VOUCHER

Fortunately, we do have a way of measuring results. It is in the judgment of parents, without which voucher-style reforms wouldn't make sense even on reading, writing and arithmetic. Provided the mandated civics curriculum bears some resemblance to the wishes of the majority, and in a democracy it should,<sup>14</sup> parents' decisions to pull their children out of schools because they think the school teaches civics badly – that effectively measures the key variables we can't get at any other way.

So the critics are right about one thing. The effectiveness of school choice is not an econometric question. In the end we should rely on the judgement of ordinary parents.

## SELF-INTERESTED SABOTAGE

True, in a voucher-style system some schools will undoubtedly drift away from whatever rules are imposed. But the state can step in and shut down any that clearly fall below elementary standards of competence or decency, and it only takes a few disgruntled parents to bring such cases to light.

Meanwhile, there are good reasons for assuming that a public education monopoly does not even try to reflect the wishes of most parents.<sup>15</sup> Anecdotally, most people understand that governments are complex, unwieldy and often seem to devote as much attention to frustrating as to satisfying the wishes of the public. It's not news to most parents that a state educational apparatus often becomes hostile not just to citizens (teaching their kids to hector them about recycling<sup>16</sup>) but to the elected government that employs them; in the 1990s Ontario unionized teachers brought bizarre polemics against then-premier Mike Harris into classrooms.<sup>17</sup>

Lately economists have helped us to understand why and how, even in a democracy, various parts of the government are likely to develop and vigorously defend agendas for which they have no popular mandate. Under the forbidding moniker "public choice theory," they stress that people in the public as well as the private sector respond to incentives. But the incentives are different; the ability of the state to compel people (for instance not to sell eggs without a licence), whereas private companies can only try to persuade them (for instance that these eggs are fresh and delicious enough to be worth a quarter each), offers rich rewards to special interests. A small number of dairy farmers who each get tens of thousands of dollars a year from cheese tariffs are far keener to defend them than the multitude of consumers who each lose a few bucks a week at the supermarket are to get rid of them. And public school teachers with decent pay and great job security have strong reason to oppose parental choice that puts both at risk.

But self-interest can be philosophical as well as personal. Public education monopolies are a highly tempting target for political "capture" by zealots who don't trust the average parent. And public sector teachers' unions are where personal and philosophical special interests naturally meet.<sup>18</sup>

The capacity of opponents to resist choice frontally is nevertheless limited. Parents care a lot more about their children than the price of cheese, and make highly sympathetic figures in public debate. Where the monopoly has struck back is in fiddling the fine print so most ostensible choice systems actually tightly restrict the right of dissatisfied parents to take their children and their money elsewhere.

One way of fiddling is to persuade governments to create an uneven playing field to begin with. Thus four Canadian provinces (B.C., Alberta, Manitoba and Quebec) offer what can be called "partial vouchers"<sup>19</sup> to parents of private school students, worth about a third of the public system cost per child. It's better than nothing, but having to come up with two-thirds of the cost themselves remains a significant financial barrier especially to parents who are less well off. Other times it gets tilted in a hurry: Sweden's public schools consider it harmful to give marks before grade eight. But when independent schools started doing so, it was quickly made illegal lest, the then-minister of education said, it give those schools an unfair advantage.<sup>20</sup> All sorts of similar devices exist, from restricting vouchers to the poor or those

in truly awful schools to making all schools hire members of militant unions. And all are supported by people who understand very well that public education monopolies tend not to reflect the wishes of voters/parents. For educational reform to work, we must prevent such sabotage and insist on the substance, not the shadow, of state-funded parental choice.

## DO IT

Milton Friedman's 1955 proposal that instead of running education the state should provide parents with vouchers good for a year's schooling at the approved educational institution of their choice, remains fundamentally sound. It gives normal parents a bit more say about what children are taught and a lot more say about how well. The practical results are difficult to measure partly for methodological reasons but also because most actual voucher-style reforms have been watered down. But the less citizens and politicians misunderstand why and how they work the less scope there will be for obstruction by those who understand it all too well.

## endnotes

- 1 Friedman, M. (1955). *The role of government in education*. As cited in Solo, R.A. (ED.), *Economics and the public interest*. New Brunswick: N.J. Rutgers University Press.
- 2 Milton & Rose D. Friedman Foundation. (2006). *The ABCs of school choice (2005-06 ED)* [Brochure]. Indianapolis, IN: The Heartland Institute.
- 3 Hepburn, C. (2005). *Public funding of school choice in Canada: A case study*. As cited in Salisbury, D. & Tooley, J. (EDS.), *What America can learn from school choice in other countries*. Washington, DC: The Cato Institute.
- 4 Robson, W., & Hepburn, C. (2002). *Learning from success: What Americans can learn from school choice in Canada*. Vancouver: The Milton & Rose D. Friedman Foundation & The Fraser Institute.
- 5 Thus in Chile, where regulations prevent much academic innovation, private subsidized schools attract parents by offering better discipline. See Sapelli, C. (2005). *The Chilean education voucher system*. As cited in Salisbury, D. & Tooley, J. (EDS.), *What America can learn from school choice in other countries*. Washington, DC: The Cato Institute.
- 6 On its gruesome failure in Britain. Tooley, J., Dixon, P., & Stanfield, J. (2003). *Delivering better education: Market solutions for educational improvement* (Better education project, p. 5). London, England: The Adam Smith Institute.
- 7 Robson, W., & Hepburn, C. (2002). *Learning from success: What Americans can learn from school choice in Canada*. Vancouver: The Milton & Rose D. Friedman Foundation & The Fraser Institute.
- 8 On this view, expressed by everyone from Aristotle to Chesterton and from John Milton to John Adams to John Ruskin, see Smiles, S., *Self-Help* (New ed.). McLean: IndyPublish.com. (2002) and Seneca, L.A. Epistle LXXXV III: On liberal and vocational studies. As cited in *Letters from a Stoic*. Markham: Penguin Books Canada. (1969).
- 9 Address to the Canadian Club of Ottawa. *A vision of the imagination*. (January 2003). Retrieved September 25, 2006, from <http://gg.ca/media/doc.asp?lang=e&DoCID=1088>
- 10 Tooley, J. As cited in Hepburn, C. (ED.), *Can the market save our schools?* Vancouver, BC: The Fraser Institute. [emphasis in original]. (2001).
- 11 This conclusion is reinforced by the historical research of E.G. West and international studies of Third World slums by James Tooley regarding the poor, and American findings about choice and the disabled.
- 12 MacKinnon, J. (2003, January 16). Two-tier education is scary [OP ED]. *Globe and Mail*, p. A19. MacKinnon is a University of Saskatchewan professor and former Saskatchewan NDP finance minister. But it is a great deal easier to assert the existence of externalities in this regard than to demonstrate them.
- 13 Hepburn, C. *Public funding of school choice in Canada: A case study*. As cited in Salisbury, D. & Tooley, J. (EDS.), *What America can learn from school choice in other countries*. Washington, DC: The Cato Institute. (2005).
- 14 Sowell, T. (1993). *Is reality optional?* Stanford: Hoover Institution Press.
- 15 Thus this summer Britain's Qualifications and Curriculum Authority proposed that public schools no longer try to teach "right and wrong" but only "secure values" and not have to try to instill British culture, two changes it is impossible that most parents would endorse. Retrieved from <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,591-2292741,00.html>. As Thomas Sowell asks in *Is reality optional?* about radical sex and death education and other ghastly fads: "The real issue is: Whose children are these?"
- 16 Conquest, R. (2001, May 12). Reflections on a ravaged century. *Globe and Mail*, p. A13.
- 17 Robson, W. (1999). *Could still do better*. Toronto: The Ontario Coalition for Education Reform.
- 18 Thus, the quaintly fiery polemics in the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives' Spring 2006 edition of *Our schools/Our selves* series publication *Education's iron cage: And its dismantling in the new global order* come overwhelmingly from teachers' union authors while 14 of 16 ads at the back are by unions.
- 19 Hepburn, C. *Public funding of school choice in Canada: A case study*. As cited in D. Salisbury & J. Tooley (EDS.), *What America can learn from school choice in other countries*. Washington, DC: The Cato Institute. (2005).
- 20 Sandström, F.M. As cited in Salisbury, D. & Tooley, J. (EDS.), *What America can learn from school choice in other countries*. Washington, DC: The Cato Institute. (2005).