Freedom and Equality in Education: A Private School - Publicly Funded Voucher Education System

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FREEDOM AND EQUALITY IN EDUCATION:
A PRIVATE SCHOOL – PUBLICLY FUNDED VOUCHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

by

JONATHAN J. RAVENELLE

Under the Direction of Andrew Jason Cohen, PhD

ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I argue that a nationalized private school – publicly financed voucher system (PRS / PFV system) of education provides a solution to the current problems plaguing the American public education system. Although previous arguments focus on a privatized system being more efficient than the current public system, I will not focus on this issue in my discussion. Despite criticism of privatized education systems by multiple empirical analyses, I do not fully engage the empirical literature here. As there has never been a nationalized private school – publicly funded voucher system like the one supported here, there is no direct empirical evidence that provides reason not to support such a system. Rather, my discussion is purely theoretical and will only briefly address some of the prospective theoretical concerns that are raised by the empirical research.

INDEX WORDS: PUBLIC EDUCATION, SCHOOL CHOICE, FREEDOM, EQUALITY, VOUCHER SYSTEM, PRIVATE SCHOOL
FREEDOM AND EQUALITY IN EDUCATION:
A PRIVATE SCHOOL – PUBLICLY FUNDED VOUCHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ............................................................................. Error! Bookmark not defined.

1 INTRODUCTION................................................................................................. 1

1.1 Background................................................................................................. 1

1.2 Introduction................................................................................................. 2

2 OUTLINE OF THE PRS / PFV SYSTEM ......................................................... 4

2.1 System of Vouchers.................................................................................... 5

2.2 System of Schools....................................................................................... 14

3 TWO CONCERNS REGARDING THE PRS / PFV SYSTEM ......................... 21

4 BENEFITS OF THE PRS / PFV SYSTEM OVER CURRENT PUBLIC
EDUCATION SYSTEM......................................................................................... 23

4.1 Benefits of Greater Freedom of Choice...................................................... 24

4.2 Benefits of Greater Educational Equality.................................................. 25

5 POTENTIAL OBJECTIONS TO THE PRS / PFV SYSTEM ......................... 27

5.1 Objections to the Diversity of Education Created in the PRS / PFV System 27

5.2 Objection from the Ability for a Child to Lead an Open Future ............... 30

6 CONCLUSION .................................................................................................. 31

REFERENCES.................................................................................................... 33
1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

The proper role of the state in educating its youth has been a widely contested topic dating back to the classical economists of the eighteenth century. The issue became even more prominent in contemporary debate following the publication of “A Nation at Risk: The Imperative of Education Reform” in 1983 by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, which highlighted the growing gap in the educational achievements of America’s youth. With the release of this report, the American political dialogue became centered on how to improve America’s failing public education system. President Reagan offered support for numerous proposals of a tuition tax credit and introduced a plan to reorganize the federal government’s major compensatory education program, in favor of a voucher plan. The support for a voucher system of education was first introduced by Milton Friedman, an economic advisor to Reagan, and further advocated during the administration of President George W. Bush.

Of the 38 suggestions offered by the National Commission on Excellence in Education for the improvement of education in the United States, only a small number have been widely implemented, while others still remain unutilized. The crisis of the American public school system still remains, as educational achievement among students continues to decline. Although the current effects of this steady underachievement have yet to take full force, there are growing signs that the lack of academic attainment by United States children will eventually have

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2 http://www2.ed.gov/pubs/NatAtRisk/index.html
4 http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2056723,00.html
hazardous effects on both national security and the economy. Even with this looming threat, current political dialogue has been refocused to other issues of the economy, stemming primarily from the Great Recession of 2008. It is important, though, that this topic remain at the forefront of America’s focus, as its importance will ultimately play a major role in the long-term success and stability of the United States as a nation.

1.2 Introduction

In this thesis, I will argue that a nationalized private school – publicly financed voucher system (PRS / PFV system) of education provides a potential solution to the current problems plaguing the American public education system. Although previous arguments focus on a privatized system being more efficient than the current public system, I will not focus on this issue in my discussion. I admit that it is only through the actual implementation and subsequent examination over time of a PRS / PFV system, that its actual efficacy can be determined. Also, despite criticism of privatized education systems by multiple empirical analyses, I will not fully engage the empirical literature here. As there has never been a nationalized private school – publicly funded voucher system like the one supported here, there is no direct empirical evidence that provides reason not to support such a system. Rather, my discussion will be theoretical and will only briefly address some of the prospective theoretical concerns that are raised by the empirical research. Further, even if it were to be determined that the privatized voucher system were only equally as efficient as the current education system, I would ultimately argue that the privatized voucher system is still favorable because of the autonomy and equality it gives both parents and children.

5 http://www.forbes.com/sites/jamesmarshallcrotty/2012/03/26/7-signs-that-americas-educational-decline-is-jeopardizing-its-national-security/

My support for the PRS / PFV system rests on the grounds that it (a) provides greater autonomy to both parents and children in determining the path of a child’s development and (b) it will promote greater educational equality amongst all citizens. I hope to demonstrate that despite the prevailing tendency to focus on ways to improve the current public education system as it is, there are viable alternatives to educating our children. It is my belief that the PRS / PFV system may ultimately offer greater benefits to person’s taking control of their own individual development and provide greater justice in the education of all citizens.

In Section 2, I will provide a detailed outline of the Private School – Publicly Funded Voucher system (PRS/PFV system). I will begin by establishing the necessary goals for any type of public education system (whether either publicly funded and run or just publicly funded), followed by the corresponding goals of the PRS/PFV system. The outline of the PRS/PFV system will focus on how the system of vouchers will work, and how the system of private schools will run. Section 3 will focus on two concerns that arise regarding the PRS/PFV system specifically, potential problems posed by inadequate access to transportation and inadequate access to information. Both issues present major threats to the PRS / PFV system’s ultimate goal of achieving equal opportunity to a quality education among all children. After identifying and explaining these issues I will then attempt to offer potential solutions that may be able to be used to successfully overcome these issues. Finally, in Section 4 I argue for a number of the advantages that the PRS/PFV system would have over the current public education system in America. Ultimately, I will conclude that the PRS/PFV system provides students with greater autonomy in determining the student’s path of development, as well as greater equality within the overall education system.
2 OUTLINE OF THE PRS / PFV SYSTEM

Any effective system of public education must offer two things. First the education system must be effective in achieving a certain minimal level of academic achievement among the majority of its students. Second it must offer equal opportunity to all students to reach this minimal level, while at the same time providing students with the skills and attributes necessary for them to pursue their own interests upon graduation. Whether run by the government or by a private organization, any publicly funded school system must meet these requirements.

The design of the PRS / PFV system attempts to achieve three things. First, as it will be a system that is funded by public revenue, it will be created with the intention of achieving equal opportunity for all citizens to attain a certain minimal level of academic achievement. Note though, that this is not the ultimate goal of this system, but merely a requirement that all schools will be required to meet in order to be eligible to admit students using vouchers. Second, the PRS / PFV system is constructed in such a way as to try to allow for the greatest amount of choice by individuals, both parents and students, with the emphasis on student choice gradually increasing as children become older.

Of course, students at young ages will be unable to make the direct decision of which school they attend. This leaves the decision of where children will attend school, especially for younger children, primarily with a child’s parents. Still it seems reasonable to assume that as students become older, they will be able to offer greater feedback about their interest and desire to attend a particular school. In addition, because the PRS / PFV system does not necessarily follow the traditional model of grade levels currently in place, it is possible that education levels

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7 Whether the current system of education actually does provide an equal opportunity education to all students is an open question; nevertheless, I believe that it is safe to assume that any properly functioning publicly funded education system must attempt to achieve this to the greatest extent possible.

8 This limitation does not impose limits to the kinds of schools that will be available to students, but rather imposes limits on the success of such schools.
could be structured in such a way as to allow for a greater number of educational decisions by children as they progress and mature. This would lead to decisions of where to attend school, similar to current decisions made about where to attend college, being left up to students at younger ages than currently is the case. So, although the PRS / PFV system does not offer outright autonomy to children, it does offer greater opportunity for autonomy in the sense that students in conjunction with their parents have a greater ability in determining their development through education; with the student ultimately gaining more responsibility for the decision of where to attend school as he or she gets older.

Third, in order to ensure both (1) and (2), the PRS / PFV system will be constructed in such a way as to minimize and hopefully entirely prevent inequalities and limitations on freedom due to location, income status or lack of information. That is, the system will offer students and parents the ability to be fully aware of all options available to the child. In addition, the system will provide students with adequate access to a variety of schools regardless of a child’s parent’s means. As a result, the PRS / PFV system will offer all individuals equal choice (to the greatest extent possible) in the determination of their own development.

2.1 System of Vouchers

The current system of public education is usually funded primarily through local and state governments. These governments determine a spending amount that will be used for each student’s education for that year. This amount takes into account the direct cost of teacher salaries, as well as other necessary costs such as supplies, books, and the maintenance of school buildings. Aside from this direct determination of educational spending, governments also must account for the administrative costs associated with running the school system. Included in these costs are the salaries of principals, superintendents and any other administrative staff deemed
necessary for the functioning of the schools. The majority of these costs are typically paid for through tax revenue generated by the local governments (primarily through property taxes) or state governments, with some school systems (usually those underperforming on a particular student achievement merit) receiving additional aid from the federal government.

Unlike the public school system widely in place in the U.S. today, the PRS / PFV system would decentralize the education system allowing only for private schools. Under the PRS / PFV system, though, education will still be funded publicly, but these funds will be allocated to individual students (through their parents) to be used at private institutions that will then provide the service of education for the student. The vouchers, that is, are used by the student and the student’s parents to pay for their schooling based upon the choice of which private institution they believe is best suited to their own needs.

A major difference between the PRS / PFV system and the current public school systems is their funding source. As the current system typically finances schools based primarily on the local level, there is often a wide variety of spending from locality to locality. In areas where the overall tax base has relatively lower incomes, the generation of a vast amount of funds to finance the cost of education can be difficult; in wealthier areas, generating these funds can be relatively easy, especially if resident’s in the community place a heavy emphasis on their tax burden going towards education. This obviously can create undesirable socio-economic inequalities in the financing of education in different geographical areas.\(^9\) Although it may not necessarily be the case that student’s in these lower income communities receive a worse education, the mere fact that students in these areas do not have the same amount of money spent on their education seems to place them at an immediate disadvantage. Often it is the case that the state or federal

\(^9\) For recent insight into the inequities of education funding and spending in upper versus lower income areas see: http://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/title-i/school-level-expenditures/school-level-expenditures.pdf
government subsidizes these lower income areas, in order to ease the burden of financing the education of these children in a less potent tax base. Some think that if lower income areas were given a greater level of funding by state or federal governments so that the per-pupil spending of those education districts was more than other moderate to upper income areas, we would have another undesirable form of inequality.\(^{10}\)

In order to remedy such inequalities, the funding of vouchers within the PRS / PFV system could work in a variety of ways. First, funding for vouchers could be individually determined by each state after examining the average cost of education offered by private schools in the state, and the amount of tax revenue that is available to be allocated to such spending. Another approach would be to have funding for the vouchers determined solely by the federal government after the average or median costs of schooling across the country are taken into consideration, as well as how much tax revenue is apportioned toward education. There could also be a mixed approach between these two, with voucher’s being partially funded by state governments and partially funded by the federal government, with each taking into account the previously mentioned considerations.

These types of approaches offer certain difficulties, as citizens living in different areas may find the allocated voucher amounts by each of these funding systems more or least feasible depending upon their circumstances. For example, in the system where vouchers are determined exclusively by state governments, children living in areas bordering a different state might find themselves at a disadvantage in attending an out of state private school, because of differences in the voucher amounts of other states. Similarly, in the federal funding system, children who live

\(^{10}\) It would seem that this would only be an undesirable form of inequality if this additional funding offered greater overall opportunity to those in low-income areas. Again whether this is actually the case is an empirical question—though it is prima facie unlikely. Regardless, both cases of these funding inequalities would be removed by the PRS / PFV system.
in areas where education costs are higher than the average or median costs of other areas throughout the country might find themselves struggling to find desired schools that are affordable merely through the funding of the voucher. Furthermore, these approaches are also vulnerable to variations in states’ views on education as well as variations in political administrations over time. In the strictly state allocation approach, state governments will determine how much money is to be allocated towards each child’s education, so the vouchers will be susceptible to different state’s valuations of education. Likewise, in each of these proposed funding systems there is additional vulnerability to different political administrations over time valuing education to different degrees. Such vulnerability could cause funding through the voucher system to fluctuate, possibly leading to negative effects on students’ ability to choose their desired school.

The solution to this problem would be to have a third-party private objective and impartial entity or agency evaluate the costs of the private schools across the country. After reviewing all of the relevant data, this entity would then submit a proposal to the federal government for how much students should receive via the voucher. Based on this proposal, the federal government would then be in charge of dispersing the vouchers to students based on the amounts specified by the private third-party. Voucher amounts would also be guaranteed not to change more than a certain percentage in any given year. Holding voucher amounts somewhat constant within these constraints would allow for parents and students to have reasonable assurance that the value of the voucher would not change so drastically that it would prevent a child from continuing at his or her current school. In addition, the federal government, rather than state or local governments, would manage the collection of taxation for the funding of the voucher system.
The private third-party entity’s proposal could include an indexed voucher amount based on the cost of education in divisions of particular areas. Indexing the voucher amounts based on geographical area would offer students adequate funding to attend schools within their local vicinity and would limit gaps between voucher amounts and tuition costs. Since some areas will inevitably have higher tuition costs than the national average, because of higher costs of living and as a result higher teacher salaries, indexing voucher amounts could be a viable solution to limiting inequalities across different geographical areas.

Providing indexed vouchers however, is not absolutely necessary to ensuring that gaps between tuition costs and voucher amounts were minimized. Rather than indexing vouchers, voucher amounts could be standardized nationally providing the same value for each student regardless of where that student lived. Allowing vouchers to be uniformly standardized would allow the market to determine how higher costs of living were incorporated into teacher’s salaries. If it became the case that teacher salaries across the United States became more uniform, this could have positive benefits over the long term. For example, standardized vouchers leading to more consistent salary bases across different areas could ultimately encourage teachers to locate to schools in lower income areas, where costs of living were cheaper. Since living in these areas would provide teachers with lower living expenses, standardized salaries in these areas could provide teachers with greater purchasing power. Not only would this be of greater benefit to the teachers but more importantly, it could provide greater competition for teaching positions in low-income areas. While it might not necessarily be the case that these areas actually will have a majority of lower-income students because the

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\(^{11}\) I leave open exactly how third-party private entity determines the geographical area distinction. These distinctions I think would best be determined through an analysis of the variation in cost of living and educational costs among different areas and populations.

\(^{12}\) As evidence through the “Comparability of State and Local Expenditures Among Schools Within Districts: A Report From the Study of School-Level Expenditures” report there is a clear need for this kind of attention.
PRS-PFV system is based on choice, it would provide better incentives for schools to locate and attract students from these areas. Furthermore, by allowing for a private third-party to evaluate the costs, it prevents the government from curtailing the estimation so that it aligned with the fiscal or economic policies of any given political administration. Additionally, funding the vouchers through the federal government would prevent inequalities from arising through differences in state allocations towards education.

Perhaps a simpler solution to the potential inequalities created by the indexing of vouchers and variations in school tuition in the PRS/PFV system would be to hold tuition costs constant among all schools. Rather than indexing the voucher based on location as proposed in the original option, the federal government could provide a standardized base tuition voucher amount to each student’s parents. These vouchers would then be directly transferable to any private school within the PRS/PFV system providing for the full cost of the student’s education. As a result, each school would be required to hold the cost of education constant for each student at the school and the tuition cost would be standardized at the same level as the voucher. There would be no limitations as to how the schools would be required to spend the funds given to them through the student vouchers, effectively allowing schools to determine how to most efficiently utilize the funds they are being given. Under this format, the vouchers provided by the federal government for each student would act as a block grant provided to the school of each student’s choice, to be used any way the school deemed fit in order to effectively educate that student.

By holding the tuition cost constant among all schools, students would be able to attend any institution solely on the financial assistance of the voucher, while allowing schools to determine how best to use those funds. The only variable within the system would be the number
of students each school would admit on a yearly basis. Standardizing tuition in this way would eliminate the need for indexing vouchers based on areas or cost of living, creating a simpler system for a process and administration perspective. Also, in equalizing the tuition from across schools, it eliminates any disincentives for students and parents desiring to attend a particular school because of costs considerations. At the same time, the private schools are still provided with significant freedom in choosing how they spend those funds on students, allowing them to determine the best educational program possible under that funding provided in order to achieve the necessary and desired outcomes for each student, as outlined earlier.

If the PRS/PRV were to adopt the standardized voucher and tuition approach, there would be a number of additional implications that would need to be addressed. First, rather than taking the average cost of tuition from the supply side, the third-party agency would be providing its own determination of the basic cost of education in setting the standardized voucher amount distributed to students and their parents. Doing so would open the process to having the third-party agency input its own values and assumptions into the costs associated with providing education to students, whereas in the previous option the entity was simply analyzing the average of the costs already determined by schools. To overcome this obstacle, the third-party agency would hold an initial request for program proposals from each private school within the PRS/PFV system. These proposals would provide an outline for how each private school would educate its students and would include the costs associated with providing that program of education. In doing so, the third-party entity could gain a baseline cost projection for what each school would need in order to provide their desired programs of education.

Through a review of the proposals by each private school, the third-party entity would aggregate the cost information and then determine what the adequate voucher amount would be.
While there could be a number of ways to do this, one way that seems best would be to fund the median cost level requested in the proposals in order to eliminate or minimize the effect of outlying schools who have either high or low cost projections. It is likely that through this process, schools will submit proposals that have “projected” costs that are higher than will be necessary. Higher than actual projections is a frequently used strategy in governmental budget requests and something that will likely become prevalent in this process, as schools attempt to gain the highest level of voucher available from their students in order to maximize the resources they have available to use. Providing a voucher that is geared toward the median program cost of the proposals submitted by the private schools will reduce the amount of “excess” projection included in proposals that makes its way into the final voucher amount given to students and their parents.

Another portion of the review process that will prove important is each school’s budgetary justification for the cost of their program. The third-party entity will attempt to minimize excess tuition costs within proposals by analyzing, comparing, and scrutinizing the proposals for areas that may not actually require the funds associated with the activities outlined within the programs. Through this auditing process, the third-party entity will remove any school’s proposal that is determined to include inflated or false costs, in attempts to help improve the final voucher amount and standardized tuition level. Not only does the auditing process work to remove inflated costs associated with program proposals by schools, but by eliminating those inflated proposals from consideration it adds a further element in incentivizing schools to match program costs as closely as possible to program projections.

In addition to the projected costs for educational purposes, costs for extracurricular activities such as sports, drama, or music should also be included in the program proposals. For
those schools that plan to incorporate these types of activities into their main academic programs, these costs should be included within the voucher provided to students. As a result, it becomes necessary that these costs be built into the median funding level determined by the third-party entity and provided to students. These types of specialized programs will be elaborated upon later on in this work; however it is not beyond the scope of schools within the PRS/PFV system to incorporate athletics, arts, drama, or music into standard basic curriculum or promoting one of these activities as a primary specialty of the school. Alternatively, other schools might include these types of activities as extracurricular activities rather than strictly incorporating them into the academic curriculum per se. Like the schools with specialized programs included in the first case, these activities that are treated as extracurricular activities should also be included into schools’ program proposals. Since these types of programs serve to aid students growth (whether as part of a school’s main curriculum or as an extracurricular activity) it is important that they be factored into the standardized voucher amount and uniform tuition cost determined by the third-party entity.

Finally, as part of the standardized tuition proviso, schools in the PRS/PFV system are not permitted to receive any additional funding from outside or private sources. The only outside private funding that schools may receive are donations from alumni who previously attended and graduated from the school. By limiting eligible private donors to schools in the PRS/PFV system to former graduated students, it provides strong incentive for schools to facilitate students’ education towards them achieving the greatest future success. Limiting private contributions in this way prevents outside influence from altering the level of funding provided to some schools over others. While varying levels of funding for schools is not inherently bad, it leaves open the possibility for schools to be met with perverse incentives in the type of students it attracts.
Leaving open the ability for any person or entity to donate to the school could incentivize schools to focus efforts on attracting students who are of higher economic backgrounds. For example, if private individuals are able to donate to schools without limitation then, schools with students from higher incomes can solicit or encourage donations to gain higher funding levels. Allowing this to take place would create inequalities within the PRS/PFV system as it is unlikely that schools that attract lower income students would be able to attract similar levels of private funding. Preventing private donations across the board creates a level basis for pushing the private schools to maximize efficiency with the funding provided by the vouchers under the restriction of standardized tuitions. By opening private donations only to students who are alumni of the schools it creates a significant incentive for schools to become invested in students' long term success, as well as provide an additional layer of accountability for student success into the PRS/PFV program.

2.2 System of Schools

Unlike the allocation of publicly funded vouchers, the system of schools in the PRS / PFV system will be loose in the sense that schools will have fewer government imposed limitations on them. The structure, focus, and style of schools will primarily be left to the individual institutions. There will only be minor limits established for the purpose of providing a minimal baseline of expectations for schools using public funds in education. Below I will outline those necessary minimal expectations and indicate my expectations for the development of schools in the PRS / PFV system.

The first major issue of uniformity that must be addressed are the different levels of education within the PRS / PFV system. Allowing for the private schools to offer different levels of education during different years will create a coordination problem between schools. For
example, if School Alpha offers elementary education from grades one through four, while School Beta offers elementary education from grades one through six, students at either school will be prevented from transferring schools because of the disconnect in levels of grade attainment between both institutions. This will result in children being prevented or at least discouraged from changing schools if they determine that a particular school no longer fulfills their needs or meets their expectations; thus nullifying one of the main purposes of the PRS / PFV system.

To address this problem a standard of skills tested at different age levels should be commonly established in order to ensure that students are able to transition between schools both vertically and horizontally. How exactly the standard of skills is divided and broken down is a task that should be set-aside for developmental psychologists and educators. These skills however can provide a basic minimum standard that each student must achieve at particular ages (reading ability, vocabulary, math skills, and writing ability) that can ensure successful transition to other schools if the student so chooses. Students who meet these requirements are permitted to continue moving forward in their educational process, whereas students who fail to demonstrate that they have such skills must continue working towards meet these benchmarks. Schools within the PRS/PFV system will be responsible for establishing both a program for working with students who fail to meet these age determined benchmarks, as well as a transfer transition program for regulating how to deal with transfer students from other schools. As a result, there will be no standard of grade levels as there are in the current system, leaving open to the schools themselves to educate students as they determine most effective.

\[13\] By vertically here I mean transitioning between different grade levels, while horizontally refers to transferring from one school to another.
The only remaining point that I wish to impress regarding the uniformity of levels among the schools is that any such system that is established should allow for extensive choice by students themselves. As the PRS / PFV system offers a completely new realm of possibilities for the years that students must or could attend (as primary and secondary schools could be blended with institutions of higher education) the dynamics of educational psychology become completely open to change in favor of what generates the greatest potential for student achievement as determined by each individual school.

A second serious issue that arises within the PRS / PFV system is the function of curriculum with the private schools receiving publically financed vouchers as revenue. It is thought that one of the benefits of the PRS / PFV system is that institutions are given the freedom to determine what to teach and how to teach it. This provides a valuable educational pluralism, which allows students to pursue their own interests and ultimately be the sole bearer of responsibility for their own development. Nevertheless, it has been successfully shown that based on the current system of public education, greater variety in schools lowers achievement among students, particularly those of lower socioeconomic backgrounds. As the PRS / PFV system offers different alternatives that attempt to equalize the inequality gaps that are currently created before students even enter today’s public schools, this evidence may or may not be applicable to this discussion. Still, it seems necessary that there be some form of general basic curriculum in order to justify the use of public funds going towards the revenue of private schools.

Although this may at first seem to greatly reduce the autonomy originally thought so crucial to the PRS / PFV system, this need not be the case. It seems reasonable to assume that

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there could be a general set of objective standards or achievements that students would need to reach in order to graduate from one particular level or division of schooling to another. These standards could be enforced through private third-party agencies that would endorse schools through an accreditation process, ensuring that this basic “curriculum” or standard was achieved by all students before transitioning to higher levels of education (either at other schools or at a different divisions of the same institution). This requirement could be set at a level that would ensure that students would receive an education that included basic skills necessary to succeed within society, such as the ability to read at high levels, a strong vocabulary, math skills, a functional capacity to write in order to communicate, as well as critical thinking and learning skills necessary to adapt to an ever-changing technological society.\textsuperscript{15}

To determine whether or not these skills have been obtained at certain levels, and whether these schools are maintaining proper accreditation, students could be assessed on an annual basis to determine whether they have reached yearly benchmarks. These yearly benchmarks would be the foundational material that is necessary for the students to withhold knowledge of in order to continue to progress into further years of schooling.\textsuperscript{16} Schools would be required to have all students meet this minimal benchmark level each year in order for that student to progress into following year or topics of education.\textsuperscript{17} If a student does not meet the

\textsuperscript{15} While it seems obvious that particular objective subjects such as reading, math, the sciences and history could have basic knowledge standards upon which students are assessed, I would also like to think that skills such as critical thinking or analytical reasoning and writing would also be able to be objectively assessed as well. Sometimes it is often argued that these areas are more subjective in nature, but I would tend to disagree, and would emphasize their importance as objective skills necessary for being a successful (broadly understood) member in society. Specifically, I think that there is a growing need for an emphasis on critical thinking, especially at younger ages in students that should not be overlooked within the PRS/PFV system.

\textsuperscript{16} These minimal annual benchmark assessments would need to find an equilibrium between (1) holding the private schools accountable, (2) being achievable by a wide variety students, and (3) ensuring that an adequate level of desired knowledge or skill has been acquired and is possessed by the student. The details of these benchmark assessments are outside of the scope of my work, however, I believe that curriculum experts if necessary could determine certain annual benchmarks.

\textsuperscript{17} I do not propose this to be a once a year, “high stakes testing” event that takes place. I am in agreement with John Merrow when he writes; “High-stakes tests have serious consequences for those taking them, and
criteria for each subject, then the school must hold the student back to continue their
development in that particular knowledge or skill area. To ensure that schools are incentivized to
not only provide excellent instruction, but also not to hold students back in order to gain greater
profits, schools will not receive any funding for a student while they are repeating a year because
of failure to meet a particular benchmark in a given year. This type of curriculum system ensures
that public funding for education is not taken advantage of by the private schools, and that each
student is receiving a minimally sufficient education. By forcing the schools to fully fund any
student who does not meet this minimal age level benchmark it forces schools to take
responsibility for the yearly education of the students.

Currently, the public education system fails to maintain responsibility for students who fail to meet yearly expectations of learning outcomes, and rather than holding them back to ensure they have learned the requisite material necessary for future years of schooling, they simply pass unprepared students along to the proceeding grade. Because of the recurring costs associated with holding students back, school systems are incentivized to push students through grade levels despite their under performance and lack of preparedness. The PRS/PRV system allows the government to shift the responsibility and ultimately any cost of students not meeting certain grade levels back onto the schools. As a result, it is ensured that students ultimately gain the educational foundation of each grade necessary to continue forward in school, while the government has no financial liability for holding students back.

sometimes in the careers of their teachers and administrators. A good example is the high school graduation test that students must pass in order to get a diploma. By the turn of the century, 28 states either already had or planned to have such tests. A more rational approach is broad-based assessment, which involves multiple measures of what a student has learned. Assessment relies on teacher-made tests, teacher evaluations, student demonstrations, etc. all over an extended period of time, instead of one score on a single, largely machine-scored test (even if it includes a writing test).” (Choosing Excellence: Good Enough Schools are Not Good Enough) These types of curriculum assessments should be multiple and of different forms to ensure that students are given multiple opportunities and formats through which they can convey what they have learned.
This process would ensure that schools in the PRS / PFV system were given the autonomy to determine how and with what methods they were teaching their students, provided that in doing so students were able to meet these standard achievement goals. In addition, the process used to determine this would dually act as the school’s verification of accreditation ensuring that such goals were achieved. Furthermore, this would also offer the government some assurance and substantiation for giving public funds to private institutions, as it would ensure that each citizen was receiving a basic standard of education while using public finances.

Although schools will be required to maintain the required standards of the PRS/PFV system, schools will be permitted to develop particular focuses and specialties that will train students in areas outside of or in addition to the basic general standards.

Based upon this outline of necessary requirements of private schools within the PRS / PFV system there seem to be endless possibilities of what types of schools could develop. Clearly, one forecast would be that there will be a number of schools with particular specialties (whether in the sciences and mathematics, arts and humanities, music, drama, and others) as well as schools that focus on offering students a solid general education in all academic areas. Other schools for example, might focus on providing special instruction for student’s particular learning styles becoming attractive options for students who are either visual, auditory, or kinesthetic learners.\(^{18}\) Given the nature of our current society, it would also seem plausible to see the formation of educational institutions that had primary focuses on educating and developing students with strong athletic talents.\(^{19}\) The decisions of what focus a school will take, relies on

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\(^{18}\) This also leaves open the option of schools specifically geared toward populations of students with special needs. It is very likely that under the PRS/PFV system, schools that offer services to students with varying degrees of special needs will be developed which will provide a major benefit to these types of students.

\(^{19}\) This may be concerning to some; however, such schools exist today. Given the framework of the PRS / PFV system this would offer both better athletic and academic opportunities to all children as opposed to the present system which serves primarily only those who can afford certain private schools. Furthermore, the PRS / PFV system would have higher standards than many of the current private school athletic academies, offering students
the school’s proprietors’ and administrators’ determination of what type of school it would like to be, and whether there is enough market demand from potential students to create sufficient revenue for the school to be productive.

3 TWO CONCERNS REGARDING THE PRS / PFV SYSTEM

The typical concerns regarding education systems like that of PRS / PFV, are the potential problems posed by inadequate access to transportation and information. Either would present a major threat to the PRS / PFV system’s ultimate goal of achieving equal opportunity for a quality education among all children. In order for the PRS / PFV system to properly function it must offer open access to all students—not only making it physically possible for them to get to the schools, but also in making it that they can understand the benefits and costs of attending one school over another. Unfortunately, families of lower socioeconomic groups may lack the resources and knowledge to evaluate schools. It is extremely vital that these problems be addressed in order to fully achieve the effectiveness of the PRS / PFV system.

The difficulty of figuring out transportation issues for all students is one that may take time to work out. Obviously, as schools begin to form in various locations based on supply and demand along with reputations forming for schools that show exceptional abilities for producing graduates of excellent academic quality, there will be an increased demand by students from wider variations of areas for those schools. Schools could potentially receive applications from students across the country, a few states away, or perhaps in the same neighborhood. Obviously transporting a student far distances every day for school is cost-ineffective and impractical.

Part of the transportation issue would hopefully be worked out in ways similar to how colleges and universities have been able to accommodate students from various locations. This would mean that some schools would find it both feasible and prudent to offer boarding options in order to attract students from places where commuting daily is unfeasible. As transportation
costs will be added into the value of the voucher based on the determination of what the reasonable costs of transportation are for each student by the third-party agency, so too could boarding costs be added or mixed in with the average cost transportation estimates to subsidize costs of living at school for those student’s who wish to travel greater distances. A further solution to the potential costs of boarding options for students would be to provide boarding vouchers to parents whose children are living at a school rather than at home, perhaps as a substitution for the child tax credit. Rather than parents writing children off for returns on their taxes, parents whose children are boarders could instead receive a boarding voucher. This would require the Child Tax Credit to be altered so that the return to parents was a more accurate reflection of the actual costs parents spend towards their children’s needs. Nevertheless, if these changes were adopted, such tax credits could be transferred to boarding vouchers, which along with the education vouchers would allow students to pursue boarding options at schools throughout the country.

Whether a student chooses to pursue such options again depends on that student’s interests. In addition, whether boarding is necessary or prudent for a school will depend on the demand for that school’s services from students traveling great distances. Otherwise, it would seem reasonable that any other types of transportation costs would be included in the private objective third-party’s determination of each student’s individual transportation cost portion of the vouchers, and can then be used by schools to pay for transportation costs of the students.

As with the issue of transportation, a response to the information problem is critical to the success of the PRS / PFV system. Here I think that the best solution would be to require students (along with their parents or guardians) to go through entrance counseling each year before they are eligible to qualify for the education voucher. This education counseling would be conducted
by the third-party accreditation agency and would ensure that both the child and parents fully understand all of the options that are available to them in choosing a school for the child. Counseling could consist of giving the child an aptitude test to measure academic strengths and weaknesses, learning style tests to determine whether some schools would be better for a particular child’s learning methods, offering statistics generated through the accreditation process regarding schools’ strengths and weaknesses, and offering information regarding the benefits and downsides to attending certain schools. Although this aspect of the PRS / PFV system may not be entirely perfect, it does ensure to some extent that the information regarding choices for school is available to all students and requires that students or student’s parents are aware of the decisions they are making.

4 BENEFITS OF THE PRS / PFV SYSTEM OVER CURRENT PUBLIC EDUCATION SYSTEM

The Private School – Publicly Funded Voucher education system offers children a variety of benefits. These benefits include greater autonomy in determining the student’s path of development, as well as greater equality within the overall education system. Currently, the United States education system, despite good intentions, continues to perpetuate inequality and in doing so limits children and parents. Under the PRS / PFV system, a multitude of protective measures are put into place to ensure that publicly funded education is carried out with the parents and children having full control of their choices. At the same time, the PRS /PFV system places significant responsibility on private schools rather than relying solely on government to both fund and manage public education. This helps to eliminate the moral hazards associated with the disincentives that government funding of education has with ensuring quality education

21 Note that these counseling sessions would not be coercing or criticizing students and parents for choosing a particular school, but rather would ensure that they are aware that if they send Student X to School Alpha, he may not improve on his weakness of math because that school focuses more on English and writing.
over time. Ultimately, this creates a system where parents, and eventually the children, become responsible for the child’s development, ensuring that the individual is more responsible for any inequalities that do arise.

4.1 Benefits of Greater Freedom of Choice

The PRS / PFV system offers greater freedom of choice to parents and students as it opens up a quasi-free market system of education with the operation of private schools to carry out the task of public education. Despite the public funding of vouchers, there are only minor restrictions placed on the private schools that can accept these funds, allowing for a larger variety in education focuses and styles. This gives those seeking to use the vouchers greater opportunity to find a better match for the exact needs they are looking for, creating not only a more satisfied customer in the student, but also empowering the individual in the progression of their own development. Rather than being forced to relocate residency in order to change the school that a child goes to (assuming they want to move from one public school to another, in the current system), a child and their parents are instead able to simply find a new school with only minimal limitations. Dissatisfied students of a school in the PRS / PFV system would show their discontent through “dollar votes,” removing themselves from their current school to attend a school that better suits their wants and/or needs.

Based on this greater freedom of choice, students are able to pursue their own interests without being limited or directed by the state. Students and their parents are then able to take it upon themselves to explore the student’s interests, allowing for greater satisfaction once those interests are fulfilled. Ultimately, this gives students the ability to internalize responsibility for their development as individuals, and empower themselves to guide the course of their lives in
ways that were previously restricted by the state. As a result, removing the limits of the current public education system allows for greater individual responsibility in one’s development as well as a greater ability to control one’s own life outcomes.

4.2 Benefits of Greater Educational Equality

In addition, the PRS / PFV system offers a greater element of equality than the current education system in America. With the combination of vouchers and the provisions around tuition and donations to schools, students that come from disadvantaged backgrounds are given far greater opportunity to achieve a quality education. Although a great deal of the effectiveness of this rests on the actual implementation of the PRS / PFV system, if it performed as hoped, it would greatly reduce the inequalities among students.

Students in the PRS / PFV system would no longer be congregated with their peers based on location, but instead would be mixed with peers of various locations and socioeconomic classes. This type of integration would have extremely beneficial effects on students, as they would gain exposure and opportunities to interact with students of a variety of lifestyles and backgrounds. It has been shown that this type of integration has beneficial consequences to children, especially children from lower incomes. The associated peer effects that would develop through the mechanisms established by the PRS / PFV system attempt to provide the opportunities of choice in a way that equitably distributes between all income classes. In so doing, it allows for the education of children to be solely focused on the ability and potential of students rather than other less relevant factors such as family income, race or location.

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23 For examples on the how peer effects positively influence disadvantaged individuals see Kain (1968); Case and Katz (1991); Katz, Kling and Liebman (1999).
Although private schools in the PRS / PFV system will accept applicants based on educational merit, the inequalities that initially carry over from the current system of public education will be reduced over time. Future cohorts of students within the PRS / PFV system will have the choice of their schools at young ages without any of the previous restrictions of location or economic status affecting their education opportunities. By opening up these types of opportunities it will work to effectively eliminate any of the initial inequalities that are often associated with students from more disadvantaged backgrounds in the current public education system. Because students and their parents will be able to choose where they attend school without substantial limitation because of income, coupled with the strict responsibility of private schools to maintain a baseline level of education, there will ideally be a greater equalization of educational outcomes at younger ages. Eventually, this will hopefully lead to greater equality in standard student attainment over time, thus ensuring that overall minimal educational levels in the United States are raised to a substantially higher level.

Over time, it is reasonable to believe that if each school is meeting the required minimum level of education for accreditation, and the determination of potential family contributions is carried out properly, that the majority of inequalities in education will diminish in the United States. Ultimately it is hoped that this will create greater abilities of production by individuals in America, resulting in an overall increase in the quality of living amongst all citizens. Only when there is actual implementation of the PRS / PFV system will the empirical outcomes be assessable. Based merely on its outline above though, the PRS / PFV system immediately targets inequalities in ways that the current system of education entirely ignores or is unable to compensate for. As a result, it would seem that based on structure alone, the PRS / PFV system offers far greater advantages than the current American public education system.
5 POTENTIAL OBJECTIONS TO THE PRS / PFV SYSTEM

Given the deviation of the PRS / PFV System from the traditional education system currently in the United States, I anticipate that there will be three forms of objections to it. The first objection directly focuses on the need for a particular feature of the PRS / PRV system, while the other two concentrate on the system as a whole. Although each of these objections raise interesting questions regarding the PRS / PFV system, as my interaction with them will show, none of them proves detrimental to my proposal.

5.1 Objections to the Diversity of Education Created in the PRS / PFV System
States, as schools in the PRS / PFV system would be able to either individualize or use different teaching techniques to ensure that students were able to achieve the most out of their learning. Furthermore, allowing for variety in the educational material taught forces students to examine what they have learned in comparison with others around them. Through this comparison, students are then able to exchange ideas and learn from others in ways that they could not if educational outcomes were uniformly standardized.

In addition, it can be assumed that individuals will develop varying beliefs in combination with their diverse educational experiences. Based on these different sets of beliefs, individuals in the PRS / PFV system will have the ability to defend and learn from others’ beliefs. This allows for a greater level of overall toleration between individuals, and enables individuals to engage in fruitful dialogue as they attempt to determine true beliefs about the world.

A long line of liberal theorists has historically emphasized the need for diversity in the ideas and beliefs of individuals in a society. John Stuart Mill, for example, placed much importance on the diversity of education. Mill argued that it was only through the exchange and engagement of people’s various ideas that individuals developed their fullest capacities. As the PRS / PFV system would encourage this, it is unclear why it would be perceived to be so detrimental to society. Given the considered benefits offered by such diversity, the PRS / PFV system appears to actually better suite the liberal framework of American society then the current education system.

It may also be argued that although the types of instructional styles used by schools in the PRS / PFV system should be left largely unrestricted, the overall focus of schools may need to

25 Mill, 16
limited in order to protect the common good of society. Specifically, it has been argued that there need to be some limits to the establishment of schools that promote the beliefs of groups such as the Ku Klux Klan or American Nazi Party.

I disagree. As noted earlier in section 3.1, provided that a school meets the three criteria of: [1] offering open and equal opportunity of admission to any child regardless of race, socioeconomic class, etc.; [2] following the guidelines for different grade levels; and [3] meeting the minimum standards required by the accreditation agency, then there is no reason to prevent schools that teach beliefs of groups such as the Ku Klux Klan or American Nazi Party from existing.

Again, by allowing such wide variation in the education and development of beliefs by individuals within society, it forces both those with views shaped by Nazi systems of belief and those with non-Nazi views to engage each other and attempt to objectively defend their views. Ultimately, this leads to greater awareness and toleration of alternative views, as well as the development of each individual's values. It is unclear why schools with affiliations to the Neo-Nazis or Ku Klux Klan should be treated differently by the government than Catholic affiliated schools. Each of these organizations supports restrictive and negative views towards particular groups of persons. The Catholic Church and the schools affiliated with the Catholic Church often support beliefs that discriminate against groups such as homosexuals and promote views against particular acts such as abortion. Although the discrimination and persecution of groups by Neo-Nazi and Ku Klux Klan organizations are more destructive and heinous, it is unclear why these organizations should be treated differently than Catholic affiliated organizations. Provided all these types of schools do not advocate violence towards the groups which they feel are inferior or corrupt, they should be afforded the space in the PRS/PFV system to educate students. As long as these types of extremist schools do not violate the three criteria, or incite and promote the...
A second objection that may be raised against the PRS / PFV system arises from Joel Feinberg’s arguments in his “The Child’s Right To An Open Future.” Here Feinberg argues that children possess “anticipatory autonomy rights” which are violated when children’s future options are prematurely closed, and respected when children’s future options are kept open. Based on the structure of the PRS / PFV system, supporters of Feinberg’s position might argue that the options of choice combined with potential school specializations gives parents greater opportunity to violate a child’s “anticipatory autonomy rights.” As parents make the final decision on where younger children go to school, this may lead to parents choosing a school that effectively limits the available options open to the child, as he or she gets older. Due to vulnerability of children’s “anticipatory autonomy rights” under the PRS / PFV system, a supporter of Feinberg’s position could argue that schools should instead be required to have a strict curriculum that allowed children to retain the greatest amount of open options possible.

It is not impossible to imagine that this type of strict “open options” curriculum could be implemented within the proposed PRS / PFV system while still allowing for school choice. As different schools could offer students a variety of instructional methods for students with different learning styles, school choice could still function even with a uniform open options curriculum. Nevertheless, that does not mean that the open options curriculum or view proposed

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28 Feinberg, 76-78
by Feinberg is necessarily justifiable. Claudia Mills argues, in “The Child’s Right to an Open Future?,” that it is both impossible and undesirable to try to provide children with an “open” future in any meaningful sense. It is unclear exactly what it even means to have “open” or “closed” options and what criteria should be used in order to determine when an option has been closed off from the child.

In so far as possessing open options means holding numerous available paths open for the child, the PRS / PFV achieves this by allowing students to have greater choices in where they attend school, especially as they get older. Although parents may have the majority of influence in where a child attends school while they are young, a child may follow their own interests as they grow older by utilizing the options available to them by the PRS / PFV system. Similarly, if Feinberg’s open option requirement means leaving children with a variety of options available to them as they become older, then the PRS / PFV also succeeds on this account. As a result, it appears that regardless of whether it is really desirable for children to posses such open options in life, the PRS / PFV system is able to overcome the objection by Feinberg’s open future view.

6 CONCLUSION

A Private School – Publicly Financed Voucher system of education provides a better solution to the current problems plaguing the American public education system. Focusing solely on the effects of a PRS / PFV system on the autonomy of individuals in their development and the creation of greater equality of opportunity, it is clear that this system offers a large number of benefits that the current public education system lacks. As there has never been a truly actualized private school, public voucher system like the one supported here, it is difficult to determine the actual effects such a system will have. Based on this proposal though, it seems clear that the PRS

30 Mills, 499
PFV system at least theoretically provides greater autonomy to both parents and children in determining the path of a child’s development and promotes greater educational equality amongst all citizens. This being the case, it seems that at the very least this type of solution should be further examined and introduced in public discourse as a potential solution to the variety of problems surrounding America’s current public education system.
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