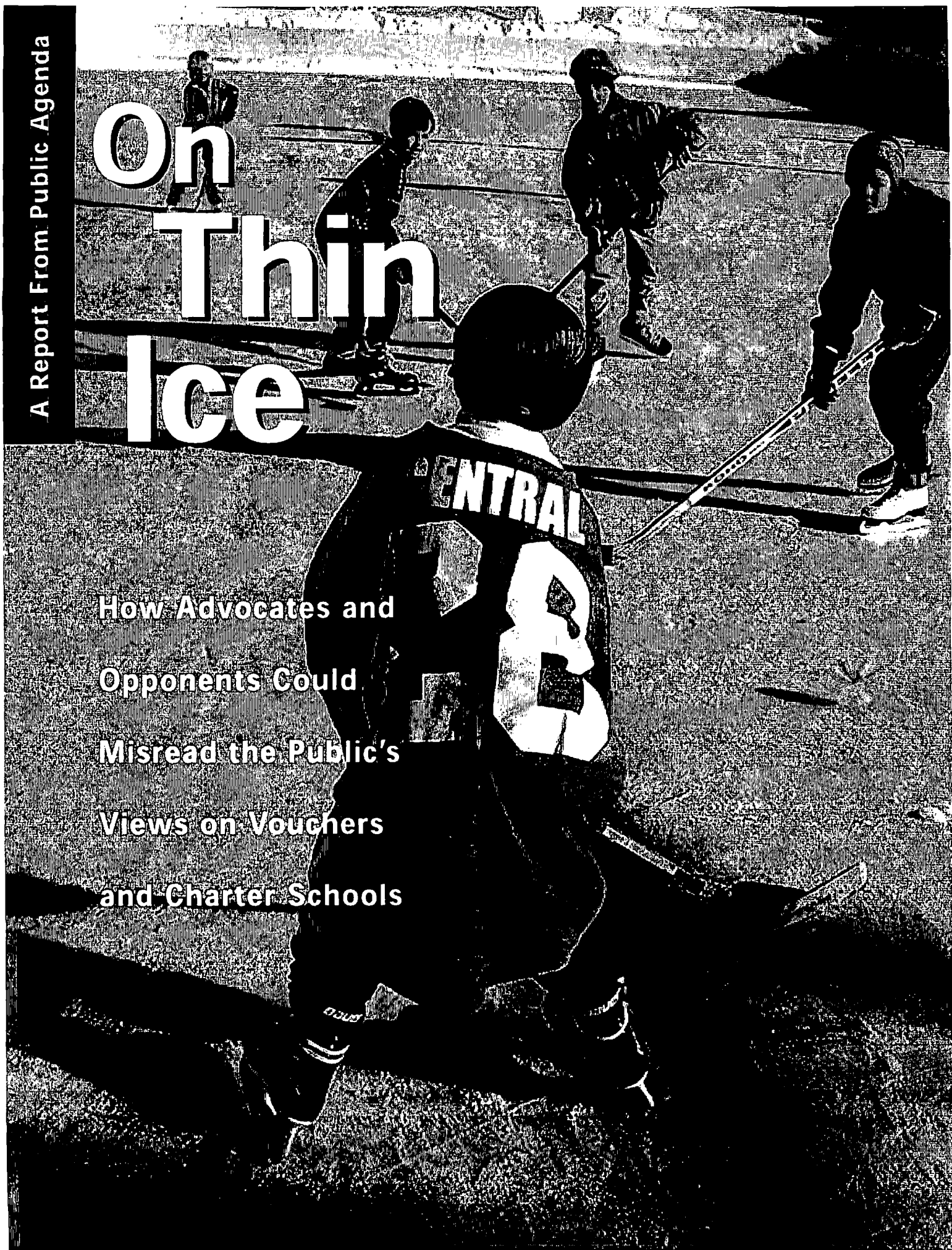


A Report From Public Agenda

On Thin Ice

How Advocates and Opponents Could Misread the Public's Views on Vouchers and Charter Schools

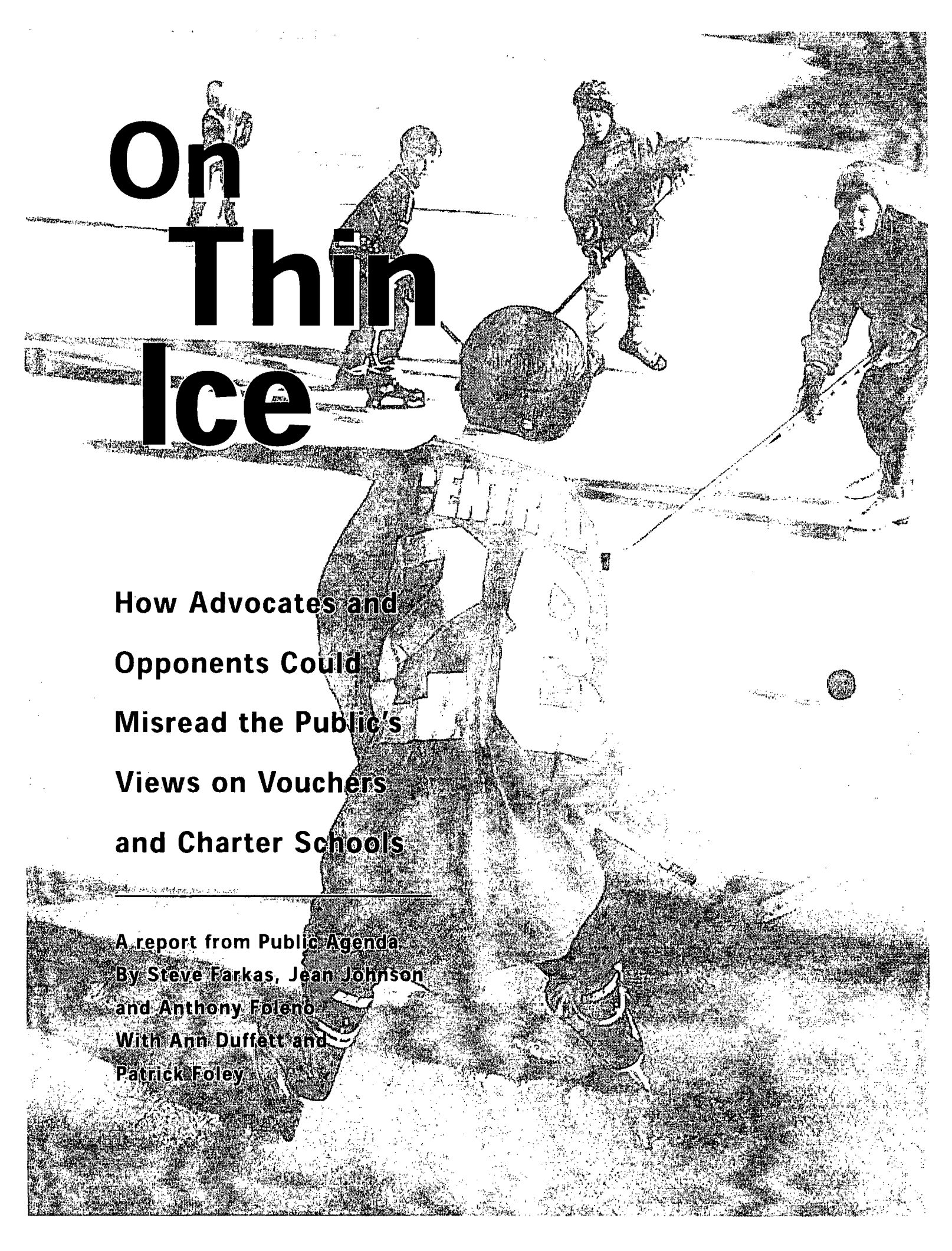


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On Thin Ice

How Advocates and Opponents Could Misread the Public's Views on Vouchers and Charter Schools

**A report from Public Agenda
By Steve Farkas, Jean Johnson
and Anthony Folenó
With Ann Duffett and
Patrick Foley**

ABOUT PUBLIC AGENDA

Founded in 1975 by social scientist and author Daniel Yankelovich and former U.S. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, Public Agenda works to help average citizens better understand critical policy issues and to help the nation's leaders better understand the public's point of view. Public Agenda's in-depth research on how citizens think about policy forms the basis for extensive citizen education work. Its citizen education materials, used by the National Issues Forums and media outlets across the country, have won praise for their credibility and fairness from elected officials from both political parties and from experts and decision makers across the political spectrum.

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And Public Agenda's Executive Director, Deborah Wadsworth, whose dedication to the issues and remarkable insight guide our organization.



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	7
Finding One: Some Catching Up to Do	9
Finding Two: Vouchers—No Eureka, No Alarm	13
Finding Three: First Impressions	17
Finding Four: Charter Schools—So Far, So Good	21
Finding Five: Will Parents Shop Around?	24
Finding Six: No Gold Stars for the Status Quo	28
An Afterword by Deborah Wadsworth	32
Supporting Tables	34
Endnotes	39
Methodology	41
Appendix	43
Related Public Agenda Publications	44

INTRODUCTION

For corporate executive Ted Forstmann, the public education system needs a dramatic shake-up. “[It] commands and enforces a 90 percent market share while providing a clearly inferior product.” Education should “embrace the same open, free-market environment” that “now flourishes in virtually every other aspect of American life,” Forstmann says,¹ and he feels so strongly about this idea that he has co-founded a private philanthropy, the Children’s Scholarship Fund, to help poor children attend private schools.

Others, making a similar critique of public education, have called for government-financed vouchers that would allow parents to send their children to either public or private schools. Voucher advocates argue that their approach will give low-income parents the choice affluent families have exercised for years, and, in so doing, create a system where competition and choice produce better schools for all.

“That Sucking Sound You Hear...”

But what some see as a force for good, others see as the death knell for a beleaguered and beloved ideal of *public* education. Author Frank McCourt, whose most recent memoir recounts his experiences as a New York City school teacher, fears that vouchers could “kill public education.” “That sucking sound you hear,” McCourt warns, “is the sound of public schools collapsing with the voucher system.”² For defenders of public schools, vouchers (and, to some extent, charter schools) will lead to a two-tiered system: The well-informed and the lucky will attend private schools; the most neglected and troubled kids—kids with no one to “vouch” for them—will be relegated to underfunded, socially abandoned public schools.

Once confined mainly to the pages of *Education Week*, the debate over vouchers, charter schools, for-profits and other alternatives to traditional public education is now at political center stage. It is already a conspicuous theme in the year 2000 presidential campaign. Indeed, any candidate—aiming for the presidency or Congress, the governor’s mansion or the state house—can expect to be questioned by journalists and challenged by opponents on this set of issues. Many, if not most, already have their own positions well staked out. And the debate extends far beyond educators and those running for public office. Opinion leaders in business and philanthropy, religion and the arts have also begun to make their voices heard.

While the debate at the top levels of national leadership is crisp and well-defined, the public’s views are more mysterious.

Confused Marching Orders

But while the debate at the top levels of national leadership is crisp and well-defined, the public’s views are more mysterious. Polls show variously that Americans think private schools offer a better education, that parents would prefer to send their own children to private schools, and that support for vouchers has risen since the early 90’s.³ But other findings show that most Americans (parents especially) think local public schools do a good job, and most say that they would be willing to pay higher taxes to help them improve.⁴ To a philosopher, these viewpoints might not be mutually exclusive, but to an elected official in today’s political climate, they offer a pretty confusing set of marching orders.

On Thin Ice attempts to disentangle public thinking in this controversial, sometimes complicated realm. It summarizes findings from an in-depth national opinion survey, conducted in summer 1999, of 1,200 members of the public, including 394 parents of school-age children. The study also takes a look at parents’ attitudes in several areas where alternatives such as vouchers and charter schools are now operating—Milwaukee and Cleveland, which have functioning public voucher programs, and metropolitan regions in Arizona and Michigan that have well-developed charter school programs. Finally, the views of the general public are compared to the views of 833 “community leaders”—political, civic and business leaders at the local level—who were also surveyed (see Methodology for details).

The Basis for the Research

Public Agenda, a nonprofit research organization that regularly reports on public attitudes on major policy issues, designed the survey following a series of one-on-one interviews with experts and decision makers with different points of view on the topic (see Appendix). Public Agenda also conducted a series of focus groups with citizens in five communities around the nation, groups that included parents with children in public schools, charter schools and parochial and other private schools, in addition to members of the general public. This research was sponsored by the Charles A. Dana Foundation.

For Public Agenda, *On Thin Ice* is the latest of more than a dozen opinion studies on public education conducted over the last decade. This body of research has examined a wide variety of educational topics including student achievement, academic standards, curriculum, safety and discipline, integration, accountability, parental involvement and bilingual education among others. During this time, we have looked closely at the views of the general public, parents, teachers, students, employers and college professors, along with those of key subgroups such as white, African American, Hispanic and foreign-born parents.

Hearing Opinions from Las Vegas to Hattiesburg

Enriching this formal research is Public Agenda's involvement in dozens of education-related public engagement projects over the last half-dozen years. These community-based meetings aim to stimulate more thoughtful, inclusive discussions of schools—discussions that reach beyond parents and teachers (as important as they may be) to include local employers, college faculty, senior citizens, “empty nesters,” the religious community, taxpayer groups and law enforcement. We have launched meetings in more than 50 communities nationwide, from San Jose (CA) and Las Vegas (NV) to Des Moines (IA), Hattiesburg (MS), Bridgeport (CT) and Grey (ME). These real-life discussions give us regular feedback from individuals in diverse communities with very different points of view on how the country's schools are working.

Don't They Know? Don't They Care?

As you will read in the following pages, most citizens are not as familiar with the debate over vouchers and charter schools as the policy makers and policy watchers among us might hope. For many Americans, debates about “systemic reform” and the virtues of a competitive public-private system versus a public one are abstract and confusing. Discussions about education are more likely to focus on what children should learn, how they behave, what teachers and parents ought to do, and whether schools are safe and orderly enough for learning to take place. Many Americans seem genuinely befuddled when asked for their opinions on how the educational system should be organized and which approaches are likely to produce the best results for most families and kids.

Walking the Extra Mile

Some readers will no doubt be alarmed at the level of public inattention to the specifics of this debate. After all, these issues have been “in the air” for a number of years, and there have been countless news reports about them. But the public's lack of focus does not mean that people don't care about how this debate is resolved or that their thoughts, concerns and questions do not merit consideration. In fact, this research suggests a challenging job for leaders in education, politics and the news media—bringing the debate that now engages them to communities and families nationwide. This is no small task, but it is of fundamental importance. Our hope at Public Agenda is that *On Thin Ice* can serve as a guidepost for those who recognize the public's stake in this debate and are willing to “walk the extra mile” to invite the American people to join in it.

FINDING ONE: Some Catching Up to Do

Most Americans know very little about vouchers,* charter schools or for-profit schools, and most have a limited grasp of the essentials of the expert debate. Experts and advocates may hold carefully thought-out positions, but the public has barely begun to learn how these proposals might work. Even parents in areas with school choice policies in place are surprisingly unaware of the pros and cons of this debate.

For the past decade or so, education experts, partisans and politicians have engaged in sharply drawn debate over alternatives to the traditional system of K-12 education in America. By now, communities and districts can be expected to face a recurring scenario: proposals to implement school vouchers, charter schools and for-profit schools are floated; advocates vigorously argue their positions; warnings and appeals are issued; data are hashed and rehashed; media coverage amplifies the debate. In short, the expert debate has all the earmarks of a highly evolved discussion in which each side has made up its mind and hopes to rally the public to its position.

A Pervasive Lack of Awareness

But even as the vociferous debate swirls all around them, ordinary Americans react as if they have been locked in a soundproof room that little noise—or information—has penetrated. It is not that people are undecided as much as that they are unaware. The vast majority knows very little about proposals to implement school vouchers, charter schools or for-profit schools. Moreover, this lack of familiarity is pervasive across the nation's regions and across demographic groups. It extends to parents with kids in school as well as to nonparents.¹ With minor differences, it even extends to parents in areas where vouchers or charter schools have been in place for some time—Cleveland, Milwaukee, Michigan and Arizona. This level of awareness and understanding is only marginally higher among leadership at the local community level.

*Throughout this report, the term "vouchers" refers to publicly-funded voucher programs.

¹Throughout this report, unless otherwise specified, the word "parents" refers to parents with children who are living with them and who are in any grade from kindergarten through high school.

The sharp contrast between the highly evolved expert debate and the public's nearly total lack of focus was painfully obvious from the very first focus group Public Agenda conducted for this study. Blank looks and a deafening silence greeted the moderator when he asked participants in Westchester, New York, if they had heard the term "school vouchers," and what they knew about it. It was clear that virtually none could venture anything more than a wild guess as to what school vouchers meant. After encouragement, one woman was willing to try: Were school vouchers store credits students could use to buy uniforms, she wondered.

Were school vouchers store credits students could use to buy uniforms?

Even in Milwaukee

Indeed, we quickly learned that we could not begin a worthwhile conversation without first handing out a sheet that briefly summarized the key elements of school vouchers. With only one exception, this pattern repeated itself across the country in the five focus groups that were held from Westchester to Redwood City, California. Amazingly, even in Milwaukee, where school vouchers have been in place for nearly a decade and where the focus group was composed of parents with kids in the public schools, the low level of familiarity required the moderators to bring out the cheat sheets.

Nor was this circumstance an artifact of the focus group method. Responding to a telephone survey of 1,200 randomly selected members of the general public, more than 6 in 10 (63%) acknowledge they know very little or nothing at all about vouchers. What's more, the vast majority (80%) readily admit they need to learn more about vouchers before they can form an opinion about them. When survey interviewers asked respondents what comes to mind when they hear the term school vouchers, only 17% were able to say something that closely resembled a full and accurate description; another 11% could say something that showed they understood the general idea. Most of the remainder could think of nothing to say, or else said something so vague as to be meaningless or downright wrong.

Aren't Parents on Top of This?

Ordinary citizens are not the only ones who seem unfamiliar with the bare essentials of the issue. Even parents, who would seemingly have a direct stake in vouchers, are fundamentally inexperienced with the debate. Their response to questions measuring comfort level with the voucher concept is virtually identical to that of the general public: most (66%) acknowledge they know very little or nothing at all about school vouchers; 81% say they need to learn

more before they can form an opinion about them.

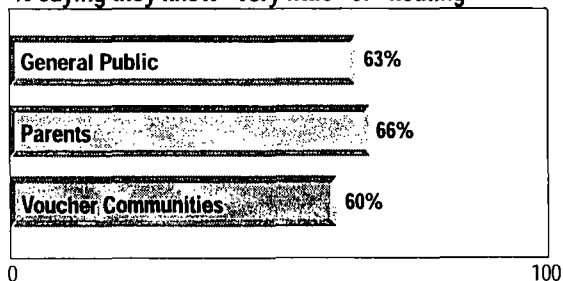
Even parents living in Cleveland and Milwaukee—presumably the epicenters of voucher activity—are virtually as unfamiliar with vouchers as everyone else. After years of program implementation, court challenges and intense media coverage, most parents in Cleveland and Milwaukee (60%) still know very little or nothing at all about vouchers; an even greater number (75%) say they need to learn more about them before they can form an opinion. One parent interviewed in Milwaukee was worried about his teen daughter, who started getting into trouble in school, not showing up for classes. He wanted to send her to a parochial school, thinking the discipline and academic focus would get her back on track, but he was poor and the cost held him back. Vouchers? He had never heard of them.

It is natural to wonder whether these low levels of knowledge indicate widespread apathy—an example of people tuning out or dismissing the policy debate. If this were the case, one might expect community leaders—such as local elected officials, heads of civic organizations and business people—to be much better informed. But their responses to a separate survey hardly show an overwhelming knowledge of the issue. About half (53%) of the community leaders say that they know enough to have an opinion about vouchers,

School Vouchers: Unfamiliar Terrain

How much do you know about school vouchers and how they work?

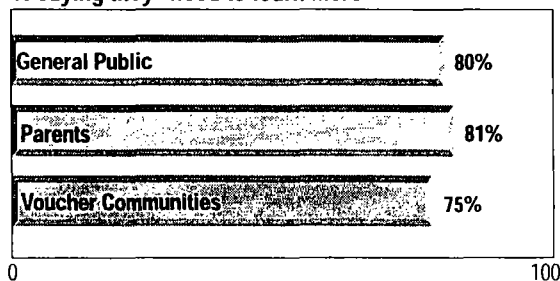
% saying they know "very little" or "nothing"



NOTE: Question wording in charts may be slightly edited for space. Percentages may not equal 100% because of rounding or the omission of some answer categories.

Do you need to learn more about vouchers before you can have an opinion, or do you know enough already?

% saying they "need to learn more"



NOTE: "Voucher Communities" consists of parents of school children in Milwaukee, WI, and Cleveland, OH.

but a surprisingly high number—42%—say they need to learn more.

The Charter School Mystery

Charter schools seem to be an even greater mystery to people than school vouchers, and almost 9 in 10 (89%) members of the general public and parents alike admit they need to learn more about the charter school issue before they can have an opinion about it. About 8 in 10 members of the general public (81%) and parents (79%) alike say they know very little or nothing about the issue. Even among community leaders, the knowledge level is still low: 54% say they need to learn more.

The broad public's unfamiliarity with charter schools may not be surprising: the issue is newer and it has stirred less media coverage. Moreover, charter schools themselves take so many forms that it is difficult to convey the meaning of the term. But what about places such as Arizona and Michigan, where a relatively large number of charter schools have been operating for some time? Are parents living in those areas particularly attentive to the issue?

In Their Backyard

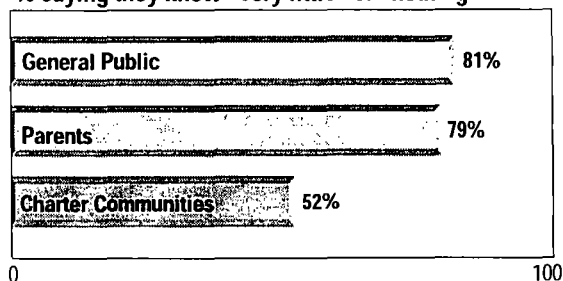
Just as with vouchers and the oversample of parents in Milwaukee and Cleveland, Public Agenda sought to systematically gauge parents' knowledge about charter schools in areas where such schools are far more prevalent. One hundred and five randomly selected parents were surveyed from metropolitan areas in Arizona and Michigan that had the highest concentration of charter schools. A focus group conducted with parents in Phoenix was suggestive: it was the only group where the cheat sheet on charter schools was not needed and the participants easily engaged the issue.

It came as a surprise that even in Arizona and Michigan, a majority of parents are unacquainted with the issue. Although parents in these areas are more likely to be informed, lack of knowledge is still widespread. About half (52%) of parents living in areas rich in charter schools still know very little or nothing at all about them; across the nation, 79% of parents are in that position. Two-thirds (68%) of Arizona and Michigan parents say they need to learn more about charter schools to have an opinion about them; across the nation, 89% of parents say the same.

Charter Schools Even More Unfamiliar

How much do you know about charter schools?

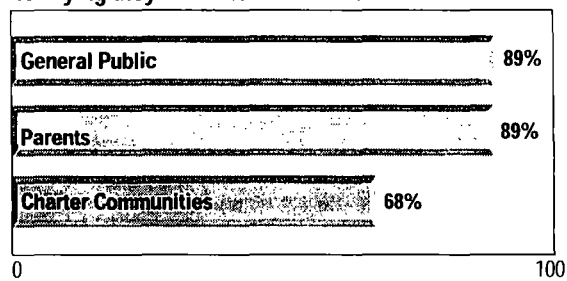
% saying they know "very little" or "nothing"



NOTE: "Charter Communities" consists of parents of school children in metropolitan areas in Arizona and Michigan.

Do you need to learn more about charter schools before you can have an opinion, or do you know enough already?

% saying they "need to learn more"



But Polls Show . . .

For some time now, credible surveys on vouchers have shown that the public's thinking fluctuates depending on the year the questions are asked and how they are worded. The latest Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll, for example, shows that opposition to allowing parents to choose a private school at public expense dropped from 65% in 1995 to 50% in 1998 and then rose in 1999 to 55%.⁴ Some questions test public reactions to partial versus full funding of private school tuition; some pollsters prefer to use the word "vouchers" while others do not.

Partisans, journalists and policy makers debate the significance and credibility of these shifts in responses. But they would do well to consider the implications of this bottom-line finding: ordinary Americans are far from ready to render a verdict on the merits of vouchers, or charter schools for that matter, either at the polls or through a poll.

A recent survey by NPR/Kaiser Family Foundation/Kennedy School of Government found that when asked if they favored or opposed vouchers, virtually all respondents expressed an opinion. But when respondents were explicitly given the option to say they hadn't heard enough about the issue to have an opinion, one-third (33%) took it.⁵ With charter schools, the "haven't heard enough" respondents surged to 63%.⁶ Our own results tell us this is only the tip of the iceberg. Most Americans barely know that there is a debate over vouchers or charter schools, even when it is taking place in their community. Most have given little if any thought to the fundamental issues it raises.

The Welfare Comparison

There can be no more striking contrast of the state of the public's thinking about alternatives to the tradi-

tional public school system than to compare it with public attitudes toward welfare reform. In 1996, when Public Agenda conducted a study on attitudes toward welfare reform, Americans were far more likely to have spent time thinking about this issue.⁸ Ordinary folks cared deeply about the topic: bringing up the issue in focus groups opened the floodgates, and people leaped into the discussion. Contrast this with the silent, almost timid response vouchers and charter schools provoke. With welfare, people could quickly cut to the heart of the debate, to the values that were at stake. With vouchers and charter schools, they look puzzled—as if to wonder "Why are we talking about this?" With welfare, people had strongly held notions about what should be done: work and time limits coupled with education and child care. With vouchers and charters, little is certain and virtually everything negotiable. With welfare, there was an urgent, emotional push to end an intolerable status quo as quickly as possible; with vouchers and charters, a virtual yawn.

About half of the community leaders say that they know enough to have an opinion about vouchers, but a surprisingly high number say they need to learn more.

On Thin Ice

Throughout, this study attempts to be explicit about areas where the public's voice is clear, where it is uncertain, and where it is so muddled that it can give little reliable direction. But school reformers, educators and policy makers at the local and national levels should take careful heed: to predict the outcome of this debate by relying on public attitudes as they now stand is to skate on extremely thin ice.

FINDING TWO: Vouchers—No Eureka, No Alarm

Americans may—after they learn more about the idea—be open to vouchers, but they tend to see them as a limited solution (and a relatively modest one at that). Few see school vouchers as the ultimate lifeline for American families, nor do they fear them as the death knell of public education. Most people believe vouchers would benefit some students, but they also see possible drawbacks. After careful explanation, most seem positively disposed to vouchers—particularly if other communities have served as guinea pigs—yet people generally see them as a partial solution at best.

Some defenders of the public schools see voucher proposals as a life-or-death struggle where the ultimate stake is the viability of public schools as an institution. They envision abandonment of public schools by middle-class families, cutbacks in school funding, and public schools as the place where the least advantaged members of society are left behind. Voucher proponents, on the other hand, see them as a lifeline, the best hope for students otherwise assigned to failing public schools. Some voucher advocates believe that even if the number of people using them is small, everyone will benefit, because the public school monolith will be challenged and reform-resistant bureaucracies pressed to compete in order to survive.

What Private Schools Offer

Both sides of the voucher debate would seem to have good reason to suspect their ultimate stakes assumption is correct. Across the nation, Americans do believe that the private schools in their communities do a better job than the public ones—and not simply because they are more selective.” People who know they have private schools in their communities believe, by a 52% to 19% margin, that they outperform the public schools. Public school parents agree—so much so, a majority (55%) say that if money were not an issue, they would want their child to attend a private school rather than a public school. “If I had the money, I would love to get to a private school,” said a Redwood City, California, dad.

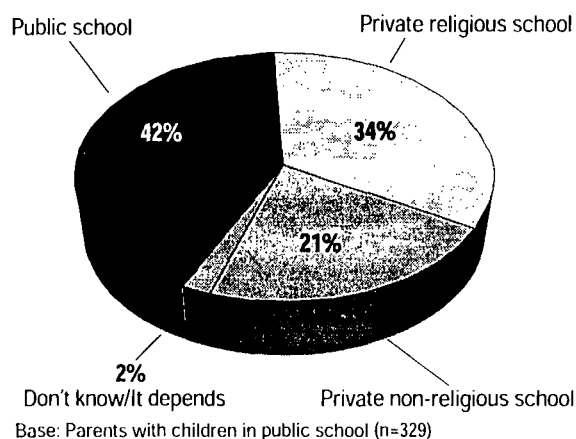
Initially Well-Disposed

Thus it should not be too surprising that even though school vouchers are not widely understood or are not a recognizable part of ordinary citizens’ landscape, people respond sympathetically when they hear even a short description of them. In fact, majorities across all the groups surveyed—members of the general public, parents and community leaders—favor a voucher program described in the survey as one where “parents are given a voucher or certificate by the government to pay for all or part of the tuition if they decide to send their child to a private or parochial school.”

Support is strong among parents with children in school—nearly 7 in 10 (68%) favor the proposal. It is

Parents’ Preference for Private Schools

If money were not an issue, where would you prefer to send your child?



Parents More Interested

How much do you favor or oppose the following idea?
Parents are given a voucher or certificate by the government to pay for all or part of tuition if they decide to send their child to a private or parochial school

% responding	General Public	Parents	Community Leaders
Strongly Favor	29	40	26
Somewhat Favor	28	28	25
Somewhat Oppose	13	10	15
Strongly Oppose	23	17	28

lower among the general public (57%) and community leaders (51%). In Westchester, New York, one woman who happened to be a student teacher in New York City said, "I think part of it sounds good because some students really have the capacity to succeed in a good school, but just can't afford it. So I think if they do it for specific students who maintain a good average and give them the opportunity, then that's wonderful." A Phoenix dad felt vouchers were good simply because of who opposed them: "I think the vouchers are a viable solution. After I have seen the bureaucracy so dead set against it, there has to be something to it."

Minority respondents also come out strongly in favor of vouchers. A full 46% of African Americans strongly favor vouchers, compared to 29% of the general public. Hispanics also endorse vouchers in higher than average numbers—41% strongly favor the idea.

Lukewarm Support

Although this survey and others show that a majority of the public favors vouchers, the response was almost invariably lukewarm in focus groups. The participants read their cheat sheets outlining the voucher idea and carefully listened to the pros and cons of the proposal, but few responded to this idea as

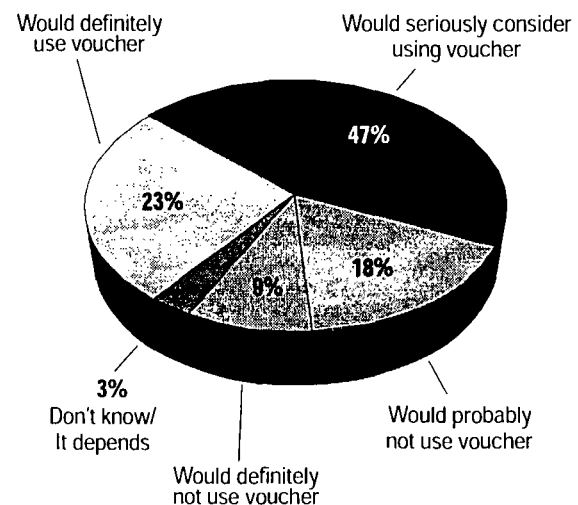
a breakthrough. Even when the moderator presented forceful arguments in favor of them, support was equivocal. People automatically started talking about the drawbacks, and perhaps most tellingly, almost no one said "This is what I've been waiting for." Almost no one saw vouchers as something that would transform the local public schools.

The survey picks up this limited appeal. Only 29% of the public predicts that almost all or most parents in their area would use vouchers if they were available. This matches what public school parents themselves predict they would do: asked how likely they would be to use vouchers if vouchers were available in their community, only 23% would definitely do so, even as another 47% would give it serious consideration.

Yet in response to another survey question, 55% of public school parents said they would prefer to send their child to a private school if money were not an issue. There is obviously a drop-off between parents saying they would prefer to send their children to private school and their predicted use of vouchers. A variety of reasons may explain this disparity. Many parents are familiar with private schools, but

Would Parents Use Vouchers?

If you had the chance to use a school voucher to send your child to a private school, would you use it or not?



Base: Parents with children in public school (n=329)

unfamiliar with the idea of vouchers, and may be reluctant to commit to a program about which they know so little. Parents may also idealize the concept of “private school,” but when they consider the private schools actually in their area, more practical concerns—transportation, for example—may come into play.

No Cure-All

Although people initially favor the proposal, they do not ascribe the greatest hopes for vouchers as a solution—and this would seem to be an important difference. Only 23% have “a lot” of confidence that students who are now doing badly in public school would do better in private school (40% express some confidence; 32% little or no confidence). “I would have given my teeth to send my kids to private school,” said a California grandmother. “But the other kids are going to be running the world as much as the good kids from the good schools and you want all of the kids to have as best an education as possible.”

And though advocates present vouchers as the last, best hope for struggling, low-income students in poor neighborhoods, the public’s assessment is far less optimistic. Only 31% believe all or most such students would do better, while the plurality (45%) expects only some to improve, and another 20% believe few or no students would thrive. Americans, it would seem, have modest expectations of vouchers—positive but modest.

What Vouchers Can’t Fix

Another important reason for the lack of pro-voucher enthusiasm is the public’s sense that parents will always be the key to successful education. “Going to a good school can make all the difference to a child’s education” agree 90% of Americans, but the public also firmly believes that before anything good can happen, parents have to be there for their kids. Eighty-six percent agree with this simple but dramatic statement: “Parents are the most important reason kids succeed or fail in school.” As a father in Dayton, Ohio, remarked, “The problems with the schools are the parents. Parents need to teach their kids better morals and respect. You can’t blame it on the teachers and the

schools. Some kids from bad neighborhoods, with these attitudes. . . . It’s not the kids’ fault. It’s the parents’ fault.”

This helps explain why vouchers are not seen as the be-all and end-all solution. “I can’t say that money is not important, but who is

going to use these

vouchers?” asked another Dayton resident. “Parents who are actively involved in their kids’ education and their lives. You put a

voucher in front of some

parents, even if they could

use it, they’re not going to be interested.” According to this thinking, vouchers may give involved parents options, but the kids who truly need help won’t get it.

Almost no one saw vouchers as something that would transform the local public schools.

Considering Pros and Cons

People may not see vouchers as a dramatic breakthrough, but they also do not respond to the idea with alarm. In the survey, respondents were asked to weigh in on a number of arguments put forth by voucher opponents and advocates. Several questions tested reactions to the arguments of voucher opponents: private schools would “cherry pick,” turning away children who are the most difficult to teach; the cream of the crop would leave the public school; segregation would surge; chaos and confusion would result; and private schools would simply lack the space to take in all comers. When survey respondents are asked how likely each of these scenarios is to happen under vouchers, the percentage responding “very likely” never rises above 37%. [See Table Two]

Voucher supporters forward their own arguments. They argue that vouchers would rescue many kids from failing public schools and give them a chance to fulfill their potential and that as more parents use vouchers, more private schools would open up. But the percentage of the public saying these things are “very likely” to happen never rises above 40%. [See Table Two]

Statistics are a tricky business in any endeavor, and survey analysis is no exception. None of the pro or con arguments resonated strongly with a majority of the public, but if one were to add the “somewhat likely” responses to the “very likely” responses, then one could say a substantial majority of the public agrees with almost all of these arguments. But either the private schools will lack the space to take in all comers or more private schools will open up to accommodate them—both cannot be true at the same time. The real answer is that at this point the public is far from ready or equipped to make conjectures about the future impact of a hypothetical proposal to which people have given little thought. The focus groups are again instructive in this regard: it was rare for participants themselves to introduce many of these arguments, and when the moderator brought them up, it often took work to explain them and a considerable length of time for people to engage them.

Neither Salvation nor Destruction

Since they don’t fear dire consequences, most Americans see vouchers as legitimately trying to improve—not decimate—education. Only 20% believe that “vouchers represent an effort to destroy the public school system”; instead, 67% think they “represent an effort to pressure the public school system to improve and therefore save it.”

So are vouchers *the* solution, as their staunchest advocates believe—or are they part of the problem, as many defenders of the public schools contend? The public seems to reject both viewpoints. The survey asked people to choose from a three-part question: are vouchers “a good idea that promises to solve the nation’s education problem?”—only 11% thought they were; are vouchers “a bad idea that will make the nation’s education problems worse?”—only 17% thought this was true. About two-thirds of the public (67%) opted for a third option: “Vouchers are a good idea but they cannot solve the nation’s education problems.”

Most, but not all, leaders at the community level agree. Almost half (48%) believe that vouchers are a good idea but cannot solve the nation’s education

problems. But 3 of 10 (30%) believe that vouchers will make problems worse. Thus, optimism among community leaders is even more tempered than that of the public at large.

Willing to Be the Guinea Pigs?

Perhaps the most telling way to measure whether people are truly attracted to a program is not to ask them to evaluate its impact on society in general but to ask them directly if they’d like to see it in their own backyard. Ask people if drug rehabilitation is a good idea, and you may get little quarrel; ask them how they would feel about having a rehab center on their block and the answer may be quite different. In this survey, 32% would like to see a school voucher program start in their local area and 19% would not. But the plurality prefers a sympathetic wait-and-see approach—44% say “I would want a school voucher program in my area only if it first shows good results in other communities.”

The political debate on vouchers is polarized into “eureka” versus “death knell” positions, but the public’s response is more tentative, resembling a mild curiosity. To a public ultimately most concerned with outcomes rather than ideology, results will matter: 6 in 10 (60%) survey respondents who opposed vouchers say they would view them more positively if the kids using them were doing better and public schools improved. Success might kindle greater public enthusiasm—and failure might undercut it.

Vouchers: Solution or Problem?

Which comes closest to your own view about school vouchers?

School vouchers are:	General Public
A good idea that promises to solve the nation's education problems	11%
— OR —	
A good idea but they cannot solve the nation's education problems	67%
— OR —	
A bad idea that will make the nation's education problems worse	17%

FINDING THREE: First Impressions

Americans may want to learn more about vouchers, and they may even support the idea, but there are crucial differences between the way the public envisions the approach and many of the voucher programs now being tested. At this time, the public's preferences are more instinctive than well-considered. But most would expand a voucher program to include all families, regardless of income, and to include religious schools. The public has almost no grasp of a pivotal issue in the debate over vouchers: will increased competition spur the public schools to improve?

Policy makers often design voucher programs so that they can withstand court challenges or ameliorate conditions in the neediest areas. But if they were designing voucher programs in their local area based on the instincts of ordinary Americans, the results would be different from prevailing trends in the policy arena.

Middle-Class Families Too

Though few people understand the fundamentals of the issue, the instinct of most Americans would be to give all families—regardless of their income—access to vouchers. By a 72% to 22% margin, people say that if their state government started a school voucher program they would want all families to be eligible for it, not just those families whose incomes are lower. The preferences of community leaders—political, civic and business—match the public's (69% to 20%).

For some, such as this woman in Utah, the reason was a general sense of equity and fairness: "I hesitate to exclude. If low-income families need the extra help, they should be given it but so should all families. If we're offering an opportunity for people to pick, everyone needs that opportunity." Others, such as this woman in Pennsylvania, felt the money was theirs to begin with, so government should just give it back: "I believe all families should have the right to have some of their tax dollars back to use for school. I mean, it's our money anyway—we all pay through our real estate taxes for schools. We should have a right to use it for private school. It's our money." Finally, a few people objected to designing a program that to them

was an echo of welfare. To a California woman, vouchers for the poor reminded her of California's Medicaid program, MediCal: "I'm very opinionated... I think they're getting enough government assistance. There's stuff that they could do to get off their butts and get a job. So I want to know, is this going only to MediCal kids? It should be merit based."

Include Religious Schools

Experts predict that the Supreme Court will eventually have to decide whether state-funded voucher programs can include religious schools or whether this violates the principle of separation of church and state. For its part, the public seems quite permissive about and comfortable with including such schools. More than 3 in 4 Americans (78%)

would allow parents to use the vouchers to send their kids to religious schools; only 14% would limit them to nonreligious schools. Again, most community leaders agree with the general public—68% would prefer that religious schools be included in voucher programs.

"I hesitate to exclude. If low-income families need the extra help, they should be given it but so should all families. If we're offering an opportunity for people to pick, everyone needs that opportunity."

For one thing, to most people, private schools mean religious schools. When survey respondents are asked to think about private schools in their communities, they visualize religious schools—not elite prep schools serving the privileged.

Two-thirds (67%) say they mean parochial schools or Christian academies when they talk about private schools—only 16% say they are thinking of nonreligious private schools.

Perhaps more significantly, Americans are a religious people—at the same time that they hold a strongly ingrained ethic of religious tolerance. Some parents would simply rather send their children to schools that teach religion, cannot afford to do so, and hope vouchers would make that possible. “I believe in religion, so I’d rather send my child to a religious private school than not,” said a Pennsylvania mom. Other parents may be seeking out other aspects of religious schools—a reputation for discipline, uniforms and an atmosphere of respectfulness—rather than specifically looking for religious instruction.

Not Bothered By Prayer

Though many years have passed since court rulings struck down prayer in the public schools, public sentiment is far from resigned to the distancing of religion from its schools. In a recent Gallup survey, 70% of the public favored “allowing daily prayer to be spoken in the classroom” and 68% even favored “teaching creationism along with evolution in public schools.”¹⁰ These responses suggest that when it comes to education, many Americans are far from enthusiastic about strict separation of church and state. It is also possible that many Americans have not worked through the tension between their desire to help children acquire religious values and their desire to teach them tolerance. “Religious schools should be included in voucher programs, as long as they are held up to some academic standards,” said a California woman. “It doesn’t bother me that there might be prayer. I personally think it’s sad that we took religion out of schools. I’m for children learning about religion. As long as we’re not excluding any specific type of religious school, as long as all types of religious schools are eligible—then it would be fair.”

But it is not just religious values that attract people to the principle of expanding vouchers to religious schools. Hallways that are orderly, students that are civil, classrooms where teachers are in control—these are the images that come to people’s minds when they

start talking about why religious schools should be part of the answer.

Reciprocity

Yet the public’s instinct would also be to place some conditions on families and students before they could benefit from voucher programs. Most Americans like the idea of expecting a student’s family to contribute at least something toward tuition, and they like the idea of awarding vouchers to students who show they are motivated and deserving. Both of these provisions reflect a principle that has often guided the thinking of Americans: reciprocity—the notion that programs to help people work best when recipients are expected to contribute to their own success.

Americans think people are more likely to value something when they have had to earn it. By a 64% to 28% margin, they believe parents should be required to come up with some tuition money themselves, that vouchers should not amount to a free ride. “They

If Typical Americans Designed Vouchers ...

Suppose your state government decided to start a school voucher program and you could have a say over what it looked like.

Which would you want?	General Public
All families to be eligible, regardless of income	72%
— OR —	
Only low-income families to be eligible	22%
To allow parents to use vouchers only for non-religious schools	14%
— OR —	
For parents to use the vouchers to send kids to religious schools as well	78%
To require parents to come up with some tuition money themselves	64%
— OR —	
For vouchers to cover the entire cost of tuition, as long as it was reasonable	28%

[parents] would feel more vested,” declared a Pennsylvania woman. “When you pay for something, you’re more invested in making it good. Maybe make it on a sliding scale basis.” A California dad believed it would force parents to be more responsible and pay closer attention to their children’s education: “We as parents are supposed to be responsible for education . . . If you’re using the voucher and paying some of the tuition, you’re going to take some responsibility. They’ll take their children’s education a little more seriously. When you pay for something, you take care of it a little bit better.”

Motivated Students

Some focus group participants also wanted to be selective and hand vouchers to hardworking kids, believing they would be the ones who would take full advantage of the opportunity. “I would rather see it go to kids who are really excelling in school, so they could go to a better program,” said a California man. In the survey, 62% support “having more scholarships available to hardworking students in weak public schools so they can switch to private school.” Some participants also wanted to protect the private schools from public school kids who misbehaved or did not care. A Westchester man suggested “selecting kids for vouchers by behavior. That would create an atmosphere where people could learn.”

Follow the Money?

Voucher advocates would, in the words of one expert interviewed for this study, “strap the money to the back of kids”: when public schools lose students through vouchers, they lose funding. Their rationale is classically free market: school administrators will respond like business owners who suddenly start losing money to the competition across the street—they will fight to improve their products and services to hold on to their customers and their customers’ money.

Yet most Americans are equivocal—sometimes confused, sometimes uneasy—about applying competition and free market models to education. In the focus groups, most participants had a difficult time grasping the competition argument as it relates to education. The discussions about school competition

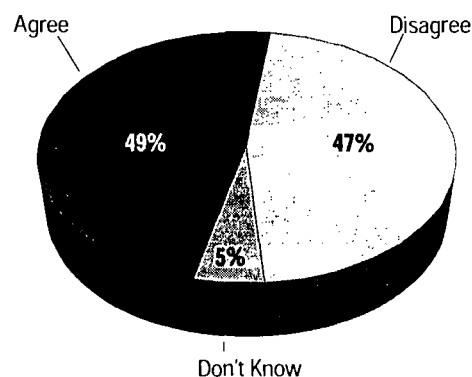
were not particularly contentious; instead, they seemed to present an entirely new way of thinking for many participants. Most people are just not used to picturing education as a product, students and their families as consumers or schools as competitive organizations.

Results from this survey show that the public is divided over a zero-sum funding mechanism for vouchers: 38% would pay for a school voucher program through new tax money, and 44% would do so by reducing the public schools’ budgets. Community leaders are similarly equivocal: 50% would also like to see vouchers funded out of the public school budget, but 21% favor new taxes and almost a third (29%) are not sure.

The public also is uncertain about the effectiveness of the pressure of competition: about as many disagree (47%) as agree (49%) with the belief that public school teachers and administrators “will try harder to do a good job if they see that they are losing more and more kids to the private schools.” At the same time, a majority also seems to believe that the public schools would hold their own and improve after a few years of competition with private schools. Nearly 6 in 10 (57%) say the public schools “would fight to get better and eventually improve in order to hold on to their students,” while only 18% believe that public schools “would become steadily worse as they lose more

Split on the Effect of Competition

Do you agree or disagree with this statement?
Teachers and administrators working in the public schools will try harder to do a good job if they see they are losing more and more kids to private schools



money and more students.” Significantly, almost 1 in 5 (19%) believe that very little would change.

A Little Roundabout

To some members of the public, subjecting public schools to competition seems an oddly roundabout means of improving them. Again and again in the focus groups, participants were somewhat befuddled by the competition argument, and sometimes even a bit exasperated. Many had an almost knee-jerk reaction — “Why don’t they just fix the public schools?” As a mother in California said, “If a state gives the money for a parent to take his kid to private school, the state admits that their system is wrong. That they can’t solve their problem.” Reaching her left hand all the way behind her head and touching her right ear, she continued, “It’s like touching my ear that way. Why don’t they solve it by fixing the public schools?” Those who grasped the competition idea doubted it would raise all boats. A father in Dayton, Ohio, remarked, “In a capitalist society, if one person has a better product, everyone is going to go there. But if everybody wants to go there, what happens to the people they push aside?”

The focus group in Phoenix, where there are a high number of charter schools, was an interesting exception. There, some of the participants not only engaged the competition argument, they enthusiastically raised it themselves. “I love the idea of vouchers,” said one dad. “It’s going to break the stranglehold that the teachers’ union and the bureaucracy has. Schools are going to sprout up like mushrooms; some of them will be bad, some of them are gonna be good. They’ll be competing for my dollar, and I will have a choice.”

For-Profit Schools

Turning over the operation of public schools to private companies is another reform idea rooted in the business world. Companies such as the Edison Project may have garnered much attention among education experts but, just as with vouchers and charter schools, most people (86%) know very little or nothing at all about them.

Unlike vouchers and charter schools, however, when survey respondents were read a description of the idea — “some school districts hire private companies that specialize in education to run the public schools. The company develops the curriculum, hires teachers and tests the students. Its goal is to provide a quality education while making a profit” — most rejected it. Only 37% favor it and 51% oppose it, with 35% strongly opposing. Community leaders are more divided — 45% favor the idea and an equal number oppose it. Not surprisingly perhaps, support among business people is higher (61% in favor).

In the focus groups, people often felt it was inappropriate for private business to be involved with public schools and were afraid that profit — not educational excellence — would be the companies’ objective. A

California dad drew parallels from his experience: “I’ve seen a lot of outsourcing at my job, and some of the stuff they do is very disastrous. They will bring in lower-level, untrained people. These guys are going to get a lot less than public school people — and they’re going to teach our kids.” Almost half (48%) of the public believes “private companies would care more about cutting costs than delivering a quality education”; 36% believe they would “work hard to deliver a quality education and make sure kids learn because otherwise they lose business.”

Most people are just not used to picturing education as a product, students and their families as consumers or schools as competitive organizations.

If Vouchers Gain Steam . . .

It is clear that free market principles often fail to resonate among Americans when it comes to the public schools. Ordinary people have a hard time visualizing how competitive pressures will lead public schools to improve and how less money will lead them to do better work. But voucher opponents can hardly take solace: if vouchers were to gain steam, the public’s intuition seems to be to give them wide latitude, expanding them to all families, regardless of income, and to all schools — religious or not.

FINDING FOUR: Charter Schools—So Far, So Good

The public knows even less about charter schools than vouchers, but the more people learn, the more they like the idea. Most appreciate typical charter school features, such as less regulation, special themes or educational approaches and community involvement. This appreciation stems in part from the public's dissatisfaction with the bureaucracies they associate with traditional public schools. In the focus groups, people tended to assume that charter schools are “boutique” schools—small, specialized and similar to good private schools, but free of charge.

Difficult to Get Across

Only 1 in 5 people (20%) know a lot or some about charter schools, and half of parents (51%) don't know if there are charter schools in their local area or not. Despite the public's lack of awareness, there is an impressive variety of charter schools across the country—so much so that defining “charter school” for a survey question is a thorny task. Out of the many topics discussed with focus group participants, the charter school idea was the most difficult to get across. A typical discussion of charter schools began with general confusion over the difference between a charter school, a public school and a private school. But once the moderator went over some of the defining characteristics of charter schools, participants became more engaged. Facing this complexity, and taking a cue from the focus groups, the survey focused on each salient aspect of charter schools separately.

Drawn to Deregulation

When charter schools are defined by their relative lack of regulation, most Americans seem drawn to the idea. Almost 7 in 10 (68%) in the general public—and an even higher proportion of community leaders (77%)—favor the idea of charter schools that “are public schools that have a lot more control over their own budget, staff and curriculum, and are free from many existing regulations.” Clearly, charter schools' autonomy from centralized regulation appeals—at least at the gut level—to most Americans. This in part

is explained by the overall disdain for public school bureaucracies, which is discussed below and in greater detail in Finding Six.

In the focus groups, charter schools for the most part were lauded as innovative and energetic, liberated from the burden of regulation. There was surprisingly little wariness about deregulation, provided that charter schools are held accountable in some way for student performance. A remark by a satisfied father of two charter school students sums up this feeling: “The charter school gave us a feeling like we're taking control back. We're giving our money to the government, and they're doing this mess. This is our way of saying, ‘You can't have our money like that anymore, we're gonna do it our way.’ ”

Autonomy Appeals to Most

How much do you favor or oppose the following idea? Charter schools are public schools that have a lot more control over their own budget, staff and curriculum, and are free from many existing regulations

% responding	General Public	Parents	Community Leaders
Strongly Favor	35	37	34
Somewhat Favor	33	32	43
Somewhat Oppose	8	8	10
Strongly Oppose	10	8	5

More Control over Hiring and Firing

In fact, the majority of Americans believe that with less regulation, charter school students will benefit. By a margin of almost 2 to 1 (54% to 28%), Americans think that it's more likely that "teachers and principals in charter schools will be able to concentrate on teaching kids instead of doing paper-work," rather than "be more likely to experience mismanagement or fraud because there will be less supervision." And anti-tenure sentiments come out in full force: 71% of the public approve of the fact that "charter schools have a lot more control over hiring and firing employees, including teachers."

Special Themes

The fact that charter schools often specialize in a particular theme or educational approach is also a plus to most people. Fifty-six percent of the public approve of charter schools' "focus on a special theme, such as science or art," while 33% disapprove. As a man in Westchester said, "When I see arts-centered, or back-to-basics, that touched a nerve with me. I think about what I went through, and the arts saved a lot of people from going bad and gave people something that they didn't even know they can do." On the other hand, a father of a college-age daughter in Redwood City, California, cautioned, "Let's say I'd really like to see my daughter in a science-based charter school. I could ignore where her gifts really lay, instead of letting her flourish in an atmosphere that's well-rounded in all aspects, which is what I think happened with my daughter in her public school."

Getting the Community Involved

Many charter schools are started by local community groups that wish to provide an alternative to local public schools. Almost 6 in 10 (59%) approve of the fact that charter schools "can be started by groups of teachers or parents in a local area," while 28% disapprove. And when charter schools are started by groups of teachers or parents, 51% of the public think that it's more likely that "more schools will be started by motivated people who care about the kids in their community, so they'll do a good job," versus 35%

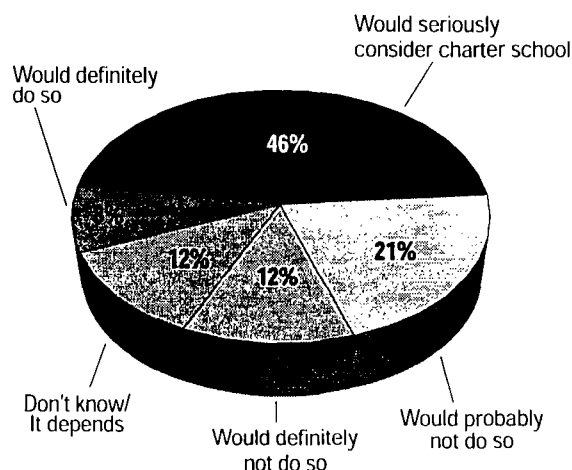
who think it's more likely that "too many people who don't know what they're doing will start opening schools, and kids will suffer." As one mother in Dayton, Ohio, remarked, "When you're talking about community groups running them, there's that whole thing—getting people involved. I like that. What I see in the public schools is a bureaucracy saying, 'This is what we're going to feed your kids, this is what we're going to do with your kids.'"

Sounds Like a Free Private School

Most people like these different aspects of charter schools. And many parents sound willing to make the switch. Over half (54%) of parents who do not send their children to charter schools would either seriously consider it or definitely do so. However, since many are still not sure what a charter school is, it's likely that many would want to see one for themselves before making a decision; only 8% would definitely send their child to a charter school—far fewer than the 23% who would definitely use a voucher to send their child to a private school.

Will Parents Choose Charter Schools?

If you had the chance to send your child to a charter school, would you do so or not?



Base: Parents who currently do not send their child to a charter school (n=360)

Many focus group participants did remark that charter schools seem a lot like good private schools—independent, innovative, committed and small, so that each student receives more attention. This remark from a Redwood City woman was typical: “When did they start this charter school idea? I want to know if they have had some positive results with the charter school, compared to private and compared to public, because this really sounds to me like a free private.”

Some Great, Some Lousy

Perhaps because of this assumption, there was some suspicion that charter schools may try to keep “difficult” students out, either openly or covertly. As another woman in Redwood City remarked, “There has to be some sort of standard, written or not. Would they be willing to take problem children? I think it would be good if they weren’t picking the cream of the students.” In Phoenix, parents knew more about actual charter schools, and they acknowledged that the schools’ quality ranged from extraordinary to fly-by-night. As a mother whose daughter is in a Mesa charter school said, “Each school is its own entity. So you’ve got to look at each school. . . . There are some great ones and some really lousy ones. Some are money makers. Some who are opening charters have no educational background. . . . It’s a whole gamut.”

But overall, most were enthusiastic or, at the very least, open to the idea. As a man in Dayton remarked, “If they can do these changes in charter schools, why can’t they make them across the board in the public?”

No Magic Bullet

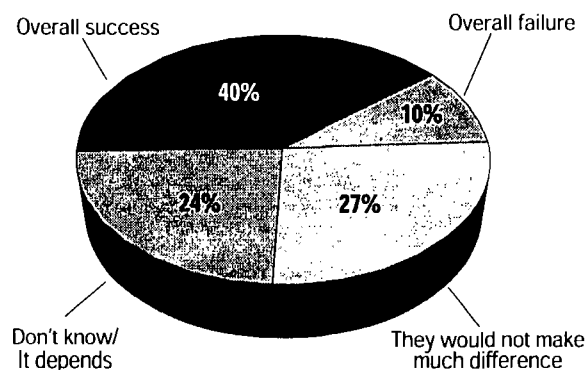
This does not mean, however, that citizens consider charter schools the magic bullet of school reform. As with vouchers, just about half of a cautious public (51%) would want charter schools started in their local area “only if they first show good results in other communities.” And while a plurality (40%)

believes that charter schools in their local area “would be an overall success as far as the quality of education kids received,” 27% believe they “would not make much difference,” 10% believe they would be an “overall failure,” and about a quarter (24%) were unwilling to venture a guess, answering “don’t know” or “it depends.” The percentages among community leaders are very similar. Therefore, while charter schools are appealing, they still must make their case to the public by demonstrating tangible results.

And even then, there is not high confidence that charter schools by themselves can help a whole district. As one mother of a preschooler in Redwood City remarked, “I think it’s good, but I don’t think it’s good for the kids who can’t get in. It’s too bad that the two groups—public schools and charter schools—can’t get together and form a happy medium.” Asked to imagine they had to choose among four local school board candidates with different reform agendas, only 8% would cast their vote for the candidate who wants charter schools because they will “breathe fresh life into the public schools.” (See Table Five)

Would Charter Schools Make a Difference?

If charter schools were started in your local area, do you think they would be an overall success, an overall failure, or would they not make much difference as far as the quality of education kids received?



FINDING FIVE: Will Parents Shop Around?

Regardless of whether Americans support or oppose ideas such as vouchers and charter schools, the research suggests that large numbers of parents may not be able or willing to behave as reform models predict. Most parents like the idea of having more educational options for their children, but confronted with an expanded menu of schools, many may be driven by factors other than the search for academic excellence.

Proponents of vouchers and charter schools believe that if parents were given more options in choosing schools, their skills as highly motivated consumers would be tapped. After all, they reason, no one can be trusted to care more about their children's education than parents themselves. Give parents more choices, and they will seek out information, comparison shop and carefully choose the schools that are best for their children. Parents—not the school district—would have the responsibility of deciding which school is best for their child.

But there is an array of factors—not just academic excellence—that influence parents' choice of schools. Parents are not just—perhaps not even mainly—rational consumers making purchases of academic quality. Often concerned about safety and proximity, often lacking a handle on how to evaluate quality, many are not able to or willing to assume the role of savvy consumers demanding only top-notch academic experiences for their children.

The Right to Choose

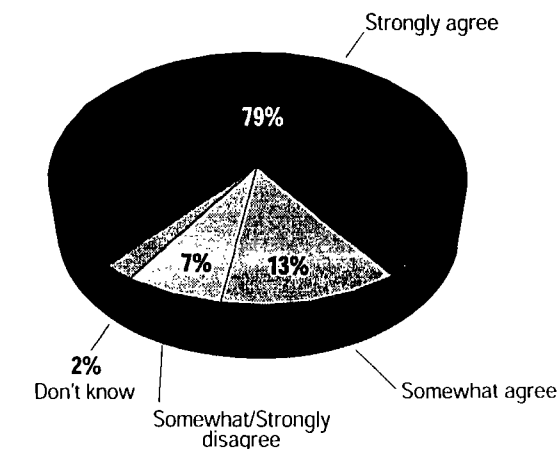
The notion of having choice in schools seems inherently appealing to parents, something they appear to care deeply about. Nine in 10 (91%) say "Parents should have the right to choose the school they want their child to attend," with 79% *strongly* agreeing. A father in Phoenix elaborated, "There are some generic disadvantages to public school. It's one size fits all, and the parents have little choice."

But this immediate affinity for "choice" may not be what it first appears. Surveys have shown broad endorsements of the "right" of parents to choose but when pressed, the public's response can be more muted—some are willing to concede at least a measure of authority to administrators. While 54% believe parents should have the right to send their children to whatever public school they want, either inside or outside their neighborhood, about 4 in 10 (39%) believe the district should have some control.

The Right to Choose

How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement?

Parents should have the right to choose the school they want their child to attend



Base: Parents of K-12 children (n=394)

Careful Shoppers

On the face of it, many parents appear to be shopping carefully for the right school for their child. Many parents—more than half (56%) in a recent Public Agenda survey—say they've gone as far as interviewing the principal or teachers of a new school before their child began attending it. In the 1999 study *Playing Their Parts*, Public Agenda found that more than 7 in 10 parents (73%) say that one of the main reasons they've chosen to live in their neighborhood is the quality of its schools.¹¹

But Are They Reading the Contents Label?

But there seem to be serious limits to the consumer model of parental involvement in education. Based on a number of Public Agenda studies, there is mounting evidence that however sincerely parents want the best for their children, their skills in evaluating schools repeatedly come up short. One limit simply has to do with the level of knowledge and information that parents have at their fingertips. Are parents now critically assessing their school's performance, comparing it, for example, with that of other schools? According to Public Agenda's 1999 study *Reality Check*, many are not. Only 39% of parents know a lot about how their child's school ranks academically with other schools in the district.¹² (See adjacent chart)

Additionally, many parents don't know about the qualifications of the teachers working with their kids. Even as most parents rely on teachers and trust them to do what's best for their kids, only 24% of parents say they know a lot about their teachers' qualifications.¹³ And many parents may not be prepared to assess teachers' work in the classroom, with the vast majority (89%) saying "today's teachers often use very different techniques to teach their subjects" than in their day.¹⁴

Short on Specifics

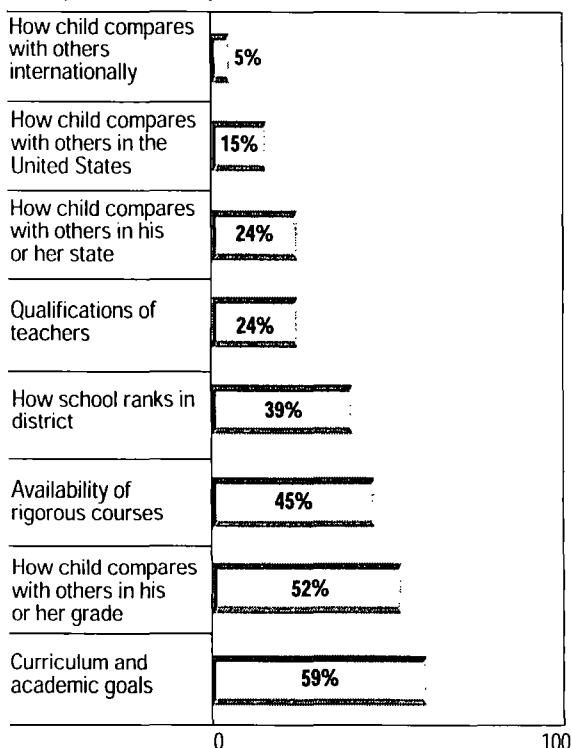
Studies suggest that parents don't have very concrete definitions of what their children should learn or how they should be taught. In Public Agenda's *Playing*

Their Parts, only 25% said they would be very comfortable helping to plan their school's curriculum; few (27%) were eager to weigh in by proposing changes to how teachers teach in their classrooms; only 31% were keen to help make hiring decisions on new teachers or principals.¹⁵

In fact, parents often turn to relatives, neighbors and acquaintances—people they know—to seek advice. The Internet is often invoked as the embodiment of the information revolution facilitating consumer empowerment, but even its users seem compelled to hearken back to old-fashioned methods. "I live in one district, but I take my kids to another because the schools near me are not rated good on the Internet," said a California mom. "But the thing that bothers me is every year you still have to ask around the school 'Who is the best teacher for the next year?'"

What Do Parents Know?

% of public school parents who know "a lot" about:



Source: Reality Check 1999, Public Agenda

"We Played Ball Together"

Parents also exhibit a persistent preference for schools that are close by—another signal that factors other than quality and academic performance matter to them. About half (49%) of parents say it is very important for kids to go to school in their own neighborhood, and an additional 35% say it is somewhat important for them to do so. For some, a neighborhood school fosters feelings of community and belonging—sentiments far removed from a consumer's rationalist ethic. "Neighborhood schools—we knew each other, we played ball together," said a Dayton, Ohio, man with nostalgia. "It just seems to be not as family oriented anymore. We don't have our neighborhoods." A man in Phoenix was also nostalgic for the neighborhood school, and even felt that the expanded choices available to parents amounted to cheating the kids of community ties: "When I was growing up, your next-door neighbor went to the same school. Now your next-door neighbor might have a school that's 10 miles away. You don't interact or anything. We've got two boys across the street that go to private, we've got three down the street that go to charter who carpool together. The losers are the kids."

As most parents these days work, a school's physical location—is it within driving distance? is it on the way to work?—may also matter. Parents also may feel more secure when schools are nearby, knowing they can get to their kids quickly in an emergency. "I can't imagine sending my kindergartner on a big bus to another school system. I cannot imagine not being able to walk to my daughter's school," a Dayton mom said.

Not Always the Best

Would parents take the initiative, do the necessary research, and go out of their way to send their kids outside their neighborhood to the best school they can find? Taken together, one could imagine that even as parents want the best for their children, a whole constellation of attitudes—trust in professionals, lack of information, sentimental and practical preference for neighborhood schools—would mitigate the drive for getting the best possible academic training for their children. Indeed, when a forced-choice question

pits a good neighborhood school against an even better school that is pretty difficult to get to, 4 in 10 (40%) parents say they would opt for the school in their neighborhood and pass on the better school.

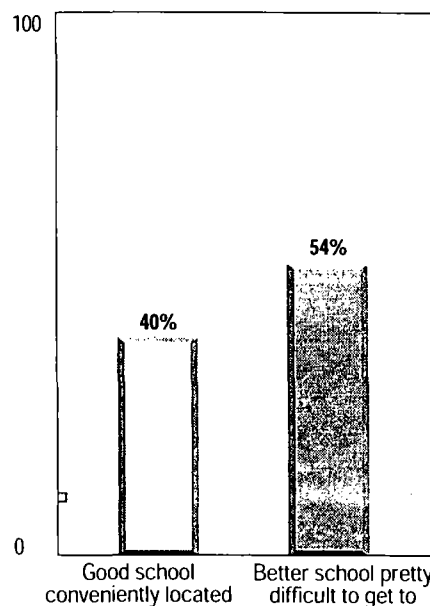
The public itself is somewhat confident that parents would choose wisely. A little more than half the public (54%) says that most parents using vouchers would learn as much as they can and carefully choose the best possible school, while 37% suspect most parents would be poorly informed and choose their school for convenience, not academic excellence.

Will There Be an Exodus?

It is interesting to speculate—especially given parents' current lack of knowledge about such programs—about the number of parents who would

Convenience Is a Factor

Suppose you had to choose between sending your child to a good school conveniently located in your neighborhood, or to a better school that was pretty difficult to get to. Which would you choose?



Base: Parents of K-12 children (n=394)

actually opt out of the traditional public school system for the best of reasons: a better school for their child. Places such as Cleveland and Milwaukee have not experienced the wholesale departure of students from their public school systems, yet privately-funded scholarship programs report overwhelming demand by parents for spots. Voucher and charter school

advocates may argue that only a few parents have to leave the public schools for good things to happen; voucher opponents may argue that even a limited exodus of the best parents and kids would be catastrophic. Whatever the outcome, it is important to keep in mind that the story will be far more complicated than a rational consumer analysis would suggest.

FINDING SIX: No Gold Stars for the Status Quo

Despite their lack of knowledge and mixed reactions to vouchers and charter schools, people are hardly endorsing the status quo. They have serious concerns about the public schools, even those in their own communities. Though most are not ready to dismantle the system, public frustration runs high, especially when it comes to school management and the slowness of reform. At this time, the public—more pragmatic than ideological in this domain—seems to be keeping its options open.

Some observers believe the general public and parents are basically satisfied with their local public schools. They cite surveys, such as the Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup polls, showing that while the public may give the nation's schools poor grades, they give their own communities' schools better grades, and parents are even more positive. Attitudes toward the nation's schools are less reliable, observers argue, because they are driven by media images and stereotypes; attitudes toward local schools are more reliable because they are based upon firsthand experiences and observations—and here the news is heartening. What's more, how can public support be questioned, they ask, when surveys routinely show citizens willing to pay more in taxes on behalf of the public schools?¹⁶

Faith in Diplomas?

Which statement is more accurate for the students graduating from your local public schools?

	General Public	Parents	Community Leaders
A high school diploma is no guarantee that the typical student has learned the basics	43%	38%	49%
— OR —			
A high school diploma means that the typical student has at least learned the basics	52%	58%	45%

Our Schools, Their Schools

Anyone taking comfort in such conclusions may be enjoying a false sense of security. Beneath a surface layer of satisfaction, people are disappointed with the public schools—those in their own community as well as those across the nation. What's more, attitudes toward paying more in taxes for the public schools may be far more complicated and equivocal than they appear.

Local schools get better grades than the schools across the nation, but these grades are nevertheless far from stellar. It is true that in the latest Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll, Americans are twice as likely to give their own community's public schools grades of A or B as they are to give the nation's public schools grades of A or B (49% versus 24%). But this still leaves local community schools with grades that are lackluster: 45% of Americans give their local schools grades of C, D or F.¹⁷

Some Groups Especially Concerned

Moreover, evaluations drop off steeply when survey questions introduce comparative criteria, asking people to judge their local schools against a standard they are familiar with. Ask survey respondents whether graduation means the typical high school student has mastered the basics, and the results—even on these elemental criteria—are far from heartening. More than 4 in 10 (43%) say a diploma from their local public high school is no guarantee the typical student has mastered the basics. "I just think it's a

nightmare,” said a Westchester dad. “I get people coming through my office who are pretty much functionally illiterate with high school diplomas. I couldn’t imagine having graduated from a high school in my day without being able to write a full sentence.” Some may still take comfort from the fact that 52% of the public and 58% of parents believe a local high school degree does guarantee the basics, but other groups in the community are far less sanguine.

Strong majorities of professors (73%) and employers (59%) say a diploma from their local high schools is no guarantee students have learned the basics. More than 6 in 10 employers (64%) say most high school graduates do not have the skills necessary to succeed in the workplace; 55% of college professors say the

students they get do not have what it takes to succeed in college.¹⁸

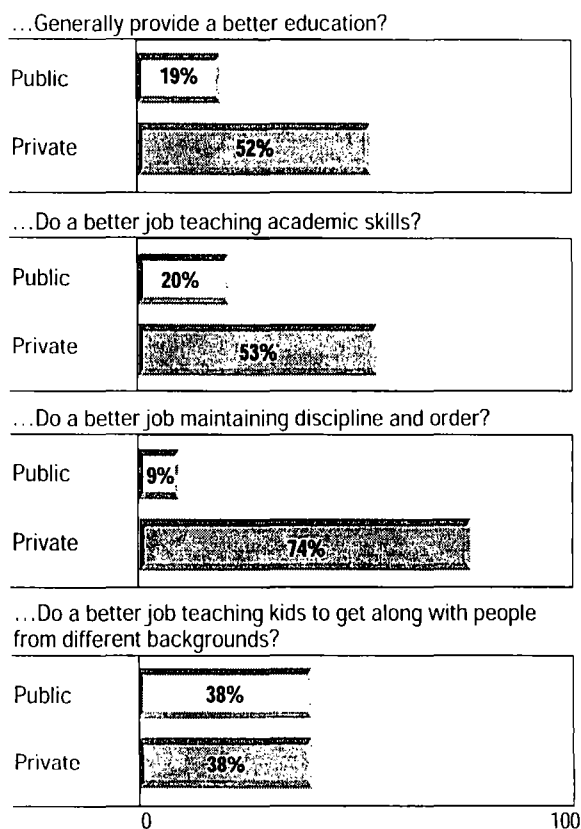
Private Schools Have the Edge

The survey also asked people, in a series of questions, to compare their local public schools with their local private schools. Respondents were asked which schools do a better job—in general and on specific criteria. The public’s disappointment with their local public schools again clearly comes through: a 52% to 19% margin believes the local private schools are better overall than the public ones. “I would choose the private school, hands down,” responded an Arizona mom when asked where she would send her child if money were not an issue.

Just as importantly, people believe the private schools outperform the public schools in precisely those areas that are most important to them. They say private schools are better at teaching the academic basics (private schools get the nod by a 53% to 20% margin here) and are better at maintaining discipline and order (by an overwhelming 74% to 9% margin). One might have expected the public to credit the public schools with “teaching kids to get along with people from different backgrounds.” But perhaps surprisingly, people split even on this dimension, 38% to 38%.

Public Schools Vs. Private Schools

In your local area, is it the public schools or the private schools that:



Base: People who have private schools in local area (n=879)

Not Focused on Elite Schools

Nor are people thinking about elite prep schools when they make these comparisons. Most (67%) are thinking about Catholic parochial schools or Christian academies—institutions with typically far more modest means and cachet.

More Money, Same Track?

Citing opinion surveys that routinely show the public is willing to pay more in taxes for public education, many educators and elected officials would recommend investing more money in a system they believe is fundamentally on track but needs more resources to do its job right.

The public's thinking, on the other hand, is far more complicated and conditional. First, survey data routinely show the public supports increased government spending for a great variety of causes and purposes, from education to health care to fighting crime.¹⁹ Such results should also be interpreted cautiously. One might imagine the agitation that would ensue if taxes were actually raised each time a survey suggested they could be.

"Where's the Money Going?"

More importantly, when people start talking about education's problems it is often clear that their analysis is that the problem is not *too little* money, but *how* that money is spent. "The money is misappropriated in a number of ways," complained a Redwood City, California, man. "Where's the money going? We've got an overload of administrators. It's not the teachers' fault—it's the enormous bureaucracy we've got going on. All these people sitting behind desks in offices who don't teach but make tons of bucks. It's a horror." In the survey, more than 3 in 4 (77%) believe that "too much of the public schools' money is wasted on bureaucracy and fails to get into the classroom."

This attitude suggests that support for adequate public school funding is coupled with the notion that schools are not using money efficiently and not focusing their resources where they belong—in the classroom. Teachers often sound a very similar refrain, complaining about top-heavy bureaucracy and often believing that even if school systems drew more money, little of it would get to the classroom.

No to Abandonment, No to the Status Quo

But Americans are interested in more than simple efficiency. They are also keenly interested in changing the direction of the public schools.

Most people (62%) believe the system requires major change. Few people are satisfied with the state of the nation's public school system—only 19% say the nation's public schools are doing pretty well. Few are ready to abandon it altogether—only 16% say there is so much wrong with the nation's public schools that a whole new system is needed.

Nor does the public believe the problems in the schools are limited to the toughest areas: fully 82% think the problems are widespread, affecting schools across the nation; only 14% say most of the problems are limited to the inner city. Interview people in virtually any community today about their public schools and they will bring up problems with drugs, with behavior and discipline, with unmotivated students.

Few Ready to Abandon Public Schools

Which comes closest to your view about the nation's public schools?

The nation's public schools:	General Public
Are doing pretty well and need little change	19%
— OR —	
Have some good things about them, but they need major change	62%
— OR —	
Have so much wrong with them that we need to create a whole new system altogether	16%

And the Winner Is . . .

For some time now, opinion studies conducted by Public Agenda and other respected survey firms have shown that the American public believes that higher standards and improved discipline promise to set public schools on the right path. In this survey, after listening and answering many questions about vouchers, charter schools and school funding, respondents were asked a bottom-line question: if "you were voting in a local school board election, which of the following four candidates would you be most likely to vote for? Candidate 1, who believes charter schools will breathe fresh life into the public schools; Candidate 2, who believes school vouchers give parents the power to choose the best school for their children; Candidate 3, who believes if the public schools finally got more money and smaller classes, they can do a better job; or Candidate 4, who believes the real answer is higher standards and better discipline?"

The biggest vote getter was Candidate 4, the higher standards and discipline candidate—with nearly half (47%) of the general public choosing that candidate over the others. Support for a candidate espousing these policies is nearly twice as strong as that for the closest competitor—24% would vote for Candidate 3, the more money, smaller classes candidate. Although these findings might seem conclusive, a note of caution is warranted: at this point, the public is generally uninformed about vouchers and charter schools, so it's hardly surprising that these ideas are not as enticing when compared to other, more familiar measures.

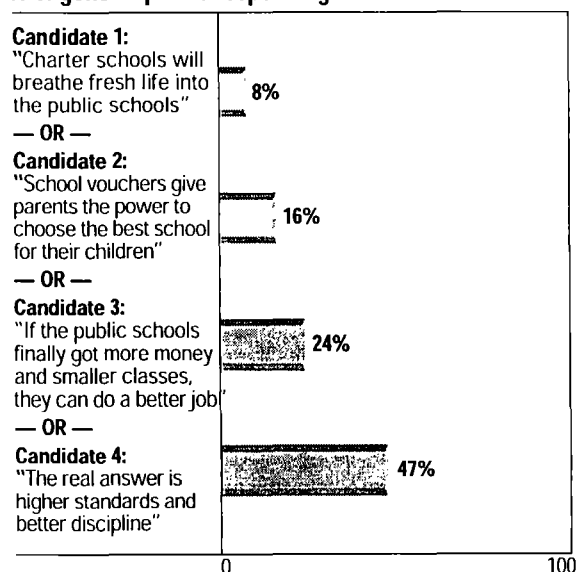
Schools Too Set in Their Ways

The public schools yet enjoy an abiding loyalty. Even in Milwaukee and Dayton, cities whose school systems had been under stress and performing below

The Public Weighs in: Standards, Discipline

Suppose you were voting in a local school board election. Which one of these four candidates would you be most likely to vote for?

% of general public responding



par for many years, people in the focus groups evinced a resilient—even tenacious—commitment to fixing their public schools. But people also harbor doubts about the system's ability to fix its problems. "The sad thing is," reflected a Milwaukee parent, "that we're talking about these same schools in our community that haven't improved for a long time. Over 20 years, we've been living with these problems." The public does not have an image of a nimble, responsive public school system, capable of responding to the challenges they believe it faces: about 6 in 10 (59%) say the public schools are too set in their ways and too slow to improve.

Is the public's loyalty born of a deep-seated, ideological commitment to the notion of public schools as assimilating societal institutions critical to their democracy? The survey data are virtually contradictory on this point. Nearly two-thirds (64%) say America needs a strong public school system to stay a healthy democracy, compared to 26% who say it can remain a healthy democracy even if most of its children go to private schools. Yet when asked how our society would fare if most students were attending private schools instead of public ones, only 9% say we would be worse off as a society. Nearly 9 in 10 (85%) say we would be better off or that it would make little difference.

Keeping Their Options Open

Americans rarely rush to dispense with institutions even when they are critical of their performance. "Try harder," they seem to be saying to the public schools. "We want you to succeed. Here are areas—standards and discipline—that we think are particularly crucial." But Americans are also a notoriously pragmatic people. This study shows they are not yet ready to place their hopes on vouchers and charter schools, but it also shows they have only begun to hear about these ideas and they are curious about how successful these policies will be in communities that try them. They are, in a fundamental sense, keeping their options open.

An Afterword by Deborah Wadsworth

It may seem odd that an organization that conducts public opinion research—and promotes it as an important component in policymaking—would advise leaders to step back, take a deep breath, and view survey results with a skeptical eye.

That's because not all survey situations are alike. Surveys are most useful when they plumb public attitudes in areas that people have thought about, worried about, chewed over in discussions with family and friends, or at least observed from a distance for some reasonable length of time. Surveys tend to be mushy—to use the technical term beloved by researchers—when they get into areas that people haven't focused on and may not understand clearly.

"Yeah, I Saw Something about That . . ."

For educators, elected officials and other opinion leaders, such topics as vouchers, charter schools, for-profit schools, and even the concept of "systemic educational reform" are daily intellectual fare—generating controversy and passion among leaders nationwide. Policy makers have spent nearly a decade debating these ideas. To greater or lesser degrees, they have read about such issues, absorbed the pros and cons, learned "who the players are," familiarized themselves with the research, and thought through their own positions with some care.

Many leaders have made public statements or issued position papers on these ideas. Others have organized advocacy groups, lobbied legislatures and, in some instances, taken their cases to court.

But while leadership debate on these issues is thriving, most citizens have only the vaguest notion what terms like "voucher" and "charter school" mean, much less how these ideas might affect their own lives. For most people, these issues are not much more than words in a newspaper headline. "Oh yeah," focus group participants are wont to say, "I saw something about that . . ."

Does this mean that these ideas are dead in the water, that people prefer sticking with the status quo? Not at all, this study strongly suggests. When it comes to public education, large numbers of Americans are frustrated with business as usual—surprisingly open to different ways of approaching the problem.

Voucher and charter school advocates need to wrestle with the public's sense that while such approaches may have merit, they represent a partial solution at best.

But at this point in the discussion, neither the advocates of alternative solutions nor the defenders of public schools have the public's full authorization for their agenda. Voucher and charter school advocates need to wrestle with the public's sense that while such approaches may have merit, they represent a partial solution at best. Public education's defenders should recognize people's frustration with business as usual—their belief that too many public schools seem fully prepared to accept poor achievement and troublesome behavior as inevitable.

Informed Consent

On Thin Ice cannot tell us how Americans will eventually come out on this debate, but it does offer these two additional admonitions for leaders in Washington and around the country.

- Don't take the polls literally—and don't assume that a sentence or two about an unfamiliar concept will be the silver bullet that makes the results more trustworthy. Polls can alert leaders to questions that need answers and concepts that need explanation, but they can't yet predict how Americans want their educational systems organized. Most Americans just don't know.

- Recognize the importance of informed consent. Partisans may be tempted to use the public's lack of focus and understanding to their own advantage. Some reformers will want to promote their own ideas "for the public's own good." Some public school defenders may try to stonewall and just wait the situation out. Either course would be a disservice. Americans have a right to weigh these fundamental choices carefully. And chances are that a more inclusive debate—one that takes account of people's questions and concerns—will improve the prospects for success, regardless of the eventual outcome.

A Special Mission for Journalism

The news media have an especially important challenge that won't be met by recycling partisan slogans or channeling reporters' energies into meticulous tracking of court battles—assuming that everyone understands what's really at stake. These issues may not be "hard news," but journalists must find ways to help the public absorb these ideas and their implications. People need a clear explanation of how these ideas might work, why people support or oppose them, and what the unanticipated consequences might be. But journalists can do even more:

- Journalists can be the public's eyewitnesses in the experimental communities, showing how well pilot projects are working as they unfold in real-life situations.
- Journalists can take the lead in thinking through questions that advocates may not raise. For example, are there enough private schools or charter options in most communities to give families a workable choice even with vouchers? Will public schools really improve without the stimulus of competition? Will these alternatives move us backward or forward in achieving equal educational opportunity?
- Journalists in communities with school choices can give parents the detailed information they need to make thoughtful, appropriate decisions, documenting how local schools—public *and* private—compare with one another, and exploring the strong and weak points of each.

Public education's defenders should recognize people's frustration with business as usual—their belief that too many public schools seem fully prepared to accept poor achievement and troublesome behavior as inevitable.

Indefensible Options

While Americans are often highly critical of Washington, complaining that its leaders are out of touch with the realities of their daily lives, education decisions are primarily local—with state and district leadership that is closer to the people and more thoroughly interconnected with their lives. In such a situation, it seems indefensible to decide the kinds of important questions raised in this study without full public participation. On the one hand, it is indefensible to make Americans live with a public school system that doesn't deliver what they expect and believe that they need. It likewise is indefensible to disassemble the public education system without giving ample opportunity for citizens to absorb and weigh the possible consequences.

The operational question is whether we can find ways in our communities to exchange information, ideas and concerns and make thoughtful decisions—whatever those decisions may be. To do so, policy makers, educators and journalists need to set aside their differences and invite, even encourage, citizens to take part in this process. We have a duty to help people understand what's at stake and allow them to make informed choices that reflect their own judgments and aspirations for the future.



Deborah Wadsworth, Executive Director

SUPPORTING TABLES

TABLE ONE: Knowledge of School Vouchers, Charter Schools and For-Profit Schools

Would you say that you need to learn more about (Insert Item) before you can have an opinion about it, or do you feel you know enough already?

% responding	GENERAL PUBLIC	PARENTS	VOUCHER COMMUNITIES	CHARTER COMMUNITIES	COMMUNITY LEADERS
School Vouchers					
Need to learn more	80	81	75	80	42
Know enough already	18	18	25	20	53
Charter Schools					
Need to learn more	89	89	83	68	54
Know enough already	9	8	15	32	40
For-Profit Schools¹					
Need to learn more	85	87	86	75	N/A
Know enough already	12	12	12	25	N/A

How much do you know about (Insert Item)? Would you say you know very little, some or a lot?
[Volunteer response: "nothing/don't know"]

% responding	GENERAL PUBLIC	PARENTS	VOUCHER COMMUNITIES	CHARTER COMMUNITIES	COMMUNITY LEADERS
School Vouchers					
Very little/nothing	63	66	60	61	N/A
Some	29	25	34	29	N/A
A lot	8	9	6	11	N/A
Charter Schools					
Very little/nothing	81	79	81	52	N/A
Some	16	17	17	29	N/A
A lot	4	4	3	19	N/A
For-Profit Schools					
Very little/nothing	86	88	83	80	N/A
Some	12	10	14	11	N/A
A lot	2	2	3	9	N/A

¹Specifically, respondents were asked about "school districts hiring private companies that specialize in education to run public schools."

Note: "Voucher Communities" consists of parents of school children in Milwaukee, WI, and Cleveland, OH; n=103

Note: "Charter Communities" consists of parents of school children in metropolitan areas in Arizona and Michigan; n= 105

General Public: n=1200 Parents: n=394 Community Leaders: n=833

TABLE TWO: Attitudes Toward School Vouchers

Do you think each of the following is likely or unlikely to happen? Is that very or somewhat?

% responding	GENERAL PUBLIC		PARENTS		VOUCHER COMMUNITIES		COMMUNITY LEADERS	
	Likely	Unlikely	Likely	Unlikely	Likely	Unlikely	Likely	Unlikely
	Very/ Somewhat	Very/ Somewhat	Very/ Somewhat	Very/ Somewhat	Very/ Somewhat	Very/ Somewhat	Very/ Somewhat	Very/ Somewhat
Since many parents would want to use school vouchers, more private schools would open up	40	9	44	7	43	17	36	4
	33	13	34	11	22	77	43	10
There will be more segregation because many parents will send their kids to schools where there are students from similar backgrounds	35	14	35	14	32	12	25	9
	30	16	30	16	28	26	42	16
School vouchers will rescue many kids from failing public schools and give them a chance to fulfill their potential	32	14	37	14	42	7	27	12
	32	14	33	12	36	12	34	19
Parents and students who care most would take advantage of vouchers, and the cream of the crop would leave public schools	37	14	37	14	51	14	43	3
	27	17	26	18	20	14	41	9
The private schools would lack the space to take in all the public school students who wanted to use the vouchers	35	13	39	14	41	10	27	6
	27	17	27	16	27	19	41	20
Private school kids would look down at the kids with vouchers coming from public schools	30	16	32	16	32	16	11	17
	27	20	28	19	31	18	30	32
Private schools would turn away children with vouchers who are more difficult to teach or who are handicapped	28	18	28	18	33	19	29	10
	27	18	29	18	25	15	35	18
The PRIVATE schools would get worse because some of the voucher students they take in will be badly behaved or unmotivated	18	21	22	22	20	25	7	21
	28	25	28	22	29	24	27	35
There would be chaos and confusion because there would be less control of who goes to what school	21	23	21	27	25	24	10	27
	23	27	23	26	24	22	23	31

Note: Percentages in tables may not equal 100% due to rounding or missing answer categories. Rounding may also cause slight discrepancies between numbers in the text and numbers in the tables.

Note: "Voucher Communities" consists of parents of school children in Milwaukee, WI, and Cleveland, OH; n=103

General Public: n=1200 Parents: n=394 Community Leaders: n=833

TABLE THREE: Attitudes Toward Charter Schools

Overall, would you say you approve or disapprove of the following aspects of charter schools?

% responding	GENERAL PUBLIC		PARENTS		CHARTER COMMUNITIES		COMMUNITY LEADERS	
	Approve	Disapprove	Approve	Disapprove	Approve	Disapprove	Approve	Disapprove
Charter schools have a lot more control over hiring and firing employees, including teachers	71	19	72	15	76	21	76	9
Charter schools can be started by groups of teachers or parents in a local area	59	28	61	27	68	29	63	19
Charter schools often focus on a special theme, such as science or art	56	33	54	36	60	31	N/A	N/A

Which do you think is more likely to happen ...

% responding	GENERAL PUBLIC		PARENTS		CHARTER COMMUNITIES		COMMUNITY LEADERS	
	Approve	Disapprove	Approve	Disapprove	Approve	Disapprove	Approve	Disapprove
... When charter schools have more control over hiring and firing their employees?								
They will be better able to hire good teachers and fire bad ones	68		72		70		74	
— OR —								
They will be more likely to mistreat their teachers or fire them unfairly	16		13		19		10	
... When charter schools are started by groups of teachers or parents?								
More schools will be started by motivated people who care about the kids in their community, so they'll do a good job	51		49		43		52	
— OR —								
Too many people who don't know what they are doing will start opening schools, and kids will suffer	35		36		47		25	
... When charter schools are free from a lot of the regulations and day-to-day supervision that regular public schools face?								
Teachers and principals will be able to concentrate on teaching kids instead of doing paperwork	54		51		60		61	
— OR —								
There will be more mismanagement or fraud because there will be less supervision	28		30		27		16	

Note: "Charter Communities" consists of parents of school children in metropolitan areas in Arizona and Michigan; n= 105

General Public: n=1200 Parents: n=394 Community Leaders: n=833

TABLE FOUR: Attitudes Toward the Public Schools

Would you say you agree or disagree with each of the following? Is that strongly or somewhat?

	GENERAL PUBLIC		PARENTS		COMMUNITY LEADERS	
	Agree Strongly/ Somewhat	Disagree Strongly/ Somewhat	Agree Strongly/ Somewhat	Disagree Strongly/ Somewhat	Agree Strongly/ Somewhat	Disagree Strongly/ Somewhat
% responding						
Going to a good school can make all the difference to a child's education	74 16	4 5	77 14	5 3	49 45	1 4
Parents should have the right to choose the school they want their child to attend	69 19	5 5	79 13	3 4	42 33	7 14
Parents are the most important reason kids succeed or fail in school	66 20	5 8	66 19	5 8	50 45	1 4
Too much of the public schools' money is wasted on bureaucracy and fails to get into the classrooms	58 20	5 9	59 17	7 8	41 33	4 17
It would be much better if each public school had more control over who to hire and what to teach	48 26	8 13	51 24	7 13	27 34	9 21
Most school problems can be overcome with dedicated teachers and principals	48 27	11 13	51 24	12 12	15 52	6 25
Too many public school teachers are going through the motions	41 24	11 16	46 21	10 18	27 41	9 18
More scholarships to hardworking students in weak public schools so they can switch to private school	38 24	16 17	43 26	13 16	19 22	29 24
The public schools can learn a lot from private companies about how to run themselves efficiently	35 29	14 14	38 32	12 11	30 36	10 18

General Public: n=1200 Parents: n=394 Community Leaders: n=833

TABLE FIVE: Overall Comparison of Reform Proposals

Suppose you were voting in a local school board election. Which one of the following four candidates would you be most likely to vote for?

% responding	GENERAL PUBLIC	PARENTS	VOUCHER COMMUNITIES	CHARTER COMMUNITIES	COMMUNITY LEADERS
Candidate 1 , who believes charter schools will breathe fresh life into the public schools — OR —	8	7	16	14	10
Candidate 2 , who believes school vouchers give parents the power to choose the best school for their children — OR —	16	20	27	14	20
Candidate 3 , who believes if the public schools finally got more money and smaller classes, they can do a better job — OR —	24	26	18	27	19
Candidate 4 , who believes the real answer is higher standards and better discipline	47	43	38	43	40

Note: "Voucher Communities" consists of parents of school children in Milwaukee, WI, and Cleveland, OH; n=103

"Charter Communities" consists of parents of school children in metropolitan areas in Arizona and Michigan; n= 105

General Public: n=1200 Parents: n=394 Community Leaders: n=833

ENDNOTES

1. "Your Assignment: Fix New York's Schools," *The New York Times*, 6/19/99, p. A15.
2. Sara Mosle, "Talking to the Teacher," *The New York Times Magazine*, 9/12/99, p. 57.
3. For example, Gallup Organization (sponsored by Phi Delta Kappa). *Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes toward the Public Schools*. "Do you favor or oppose allowing students and parents to choose a private school to attend at public expense?" 1993: Favor, 24%; 1999: Favor, 41%.
4. For example, National Public Radio / Kaiser Family Foundation / Kennedy School of Government *Survey on Education*, 1999. "To pay for this/these change(s), would you be willing to raise your taxes by \$500 per year?" Willing to raise taxes by \$500, 55%.
5. Gallup Organization (sponsored by Phi Delta Kappa). *Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes toward the Public Schools*. 1995-1999.
6. National Public Radio / Kaiser Family Foundation / Kennedy School of Government, *Survey on Education*, 1999. Half the sample was asked, "Do you favor or oppose the government offering parents money or 'vouchers' to send their children to private or religious schools, or public schools outside their district?" Favor, 42%; Oppose, 54%; Don't know, 4%. The other half of the sample was given the additional answer choice, "...or haven't you heard enough about that to have an opinion?" Favor, 31%; Oppose, 36%; Don't know, 33%.
7. National Public Radio / Kaiser Family Foundation / Kennedy School of Government, *Survey on Education*, 1999. Half the sample was asked, "The charter school program exempts some public schools from certain state regulations and permits them to function independently from the local school district as long as they meet state standards for student achievement. Do you favor or oppose such a program?" Favor, 62%; Oppose, 29%; Don't know, 9%. The other half of the sample was given the additional answer choice, "... or haven't you heard enough about that to have an opinion?" Favor, 25%; Oppose, 12%; Don't know, 63%.
8. *The Values We Live By: What Americans Want From Welfare Reform* (Public Agenda, 1996).
9. *Assignment Incomplete: The Unfinished Business of Education Reform* (Public Agenda, 1995), p. 13, 37.
10. Gallup Organization/CNN/USA Today Poll, June 1999.
11. *Playing Their Parts: Parents and Teachers Talk About Parental Involvement in Public Schools* (Public Agenda, 1999), p. 37.
12. "Reality Check," *Education Week, Quality Counts '99*, Vol. XV111, Number 17, 1/11/99.
13. Ibid
14. *Playing Their Parts* (Public Agenda, 1999), p. 37.
15. *Playing Their Parts* (Public Agenda, 1999), p. 13.
16. See endnote 4.
17. Gallup Organization (sponsored by Phi Delta Kappa). *Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes toward the Public Schools*, 1999.
18. "Reality Check," *Education Week, Quality Counts '99*, Vol. XV111, Number 17, 1/11/99.

19. For example, on crime: Princeton Survey Research Associates (sponsored by Pew Research Center), 1997. "If you were making up the federal budget this year, would you increase spending for combating crime, decrease spending for combating crime, or keep spending the same for this." Increase, 62%; Keep the same, 29%; Decrease, 7%; Don't know, 2%.

For example, on education and health care: Gallup Organization, 1998. "I am going to ask you several additional questions about government spending. In answering, please bear in mind that sooner or later all government spending has to be taken care of out of the taxes that you and other Americans pay. As I mention each program, tell me whether the amount of money now being spent for that purpose should be increased, kept at the present level, reduced, or ended altogether.

"How about Federal money to improve the quality of public education?" Increased, 77%; Kept at present level, 15%; Reduced, 5%; Ended, 2%; Don't know, 1%.

"How about improving medical and health care for Americans generally?" Increased, 77%; Kept at present level, 16%; Reduced, 4%; Ended, 1%; Don't know, 1%.

METHODOLOGY

On Thin Ice is based on one telephone survey and one mail survey, both conducted within the continental United States during the summer of 1999. The telephone survey is a survey of 1,200 adults aged 18 years or older, plus an oversample of 208 parents of school-age children who reside in Milwaukee, Cleveland, Michigan and Arizona—areas with strong school choice programs. The mail survey is a survey of 833 community-based political, civic and business leaders. The surveys were preceded by five focus groups conducted in sites across the country, as well as 17 telephone interviews of experts in education policy.

The Survey of the General Public

A total of 1,200 telephone interviews with adult members of the general public were conducted between June 11 and June 24, 1999. The interviews averaged approximately 28 minutes in length. The interviews were conducted using a random sample of households and a standard, random-digit-dialing technology whereby every household in the region covered had an equal chance of being contacted, including those with unlisted numbers. The margin of error for the 1,200 members of the general public is ± 3 percentage points; the margin of error is higher in comparisons of percentages across subgroups.

In addition to the national random sample interviews, oversample interviews were conducted with 208 parents of children in school grades K-12 living in areas with school vouchers or a concentration of charter schools. This oversample was drawn from the city of Cleveland, the city of Milwaukee, and metropolitan areas in Arizona and Michigan with the highest concentration of charter schools. These interviews were conducted between June 17 and June 21, and averaged approximately 30 minutes in length. These areas were targeted after extensive research and consultation with experts in the field.

The Survey of Leaders

A questionnaire, comparable to the telephone survey of the public, was mailed on June 24, 1999 to 4,100 leaders—political, civic and business—at the local level. A reminder postcard was sent out on July 8, followed by a second mailing of the questionnaire on July 15. July 30 was the final day to accept data. The process netted 833 completed questionnaires, for an overall response rate of 20%. Of those, 334 are CEO's or presidents of businesses employing more than 50 employees. The remaining 499 respondents are broken down as follows: 206 are leaders from the political sector (including mayors; county clerks or supervisors; state representatives); 293 are civic leaders (including presidents of colleges or universities; ministers, priests, rabbis; heads of nonprofit organizations that employ 5 to 25 employees; editorial writers). Survey results are weighted, with each of the three sectors—political, civic and business—accorded an equal weight.

Leadership samples were supplied by Dun and Bradstreet, the United States Conference of Mayors, the National Conference of State Legislatures and the National Conference of Editorial Writers.

The Questionnaires

The questionnaires were designed by Public Agenda, and all interpretation of the data reflected in this report was done by Public Agenda. As in all surveys, question order effects and other non-sampling sources of error can sometimes affect results. Steps were taken to minimize these, including extensively pre-testing the survey instruments and randomizing the order in which some questions were asked.

Both the general public and the leadership surveys were fielded by Robinson and Muenster Associates, Inc., of Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

The Focus Groups

Focus groups allow for an in-depth, qualitative exploration of the dynamics underlying the public's attitudes toward complex issues. Insights from these groups were important to the survey design, and quotes were drawn from them to give voice to attitudes captured statistically through the survey interviews. Additional follow-up interviews were conducted with those who responded to the telephone survey.

A total of five focus groups were conducted in April and May 1999 in five cities: Elmsford, New York; Dayton, Ohio; Phoenix, Arizona; Redwood City, California; and Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

APPENDIX

Experts Interviewed

Interviews were conducted by senior Public Agenda staff in person or via telephone in the spring of 1999 with the following individuals.

Mary Jean Collins
National Field Director
People for the American Way

Chester E. Finn, Jr.
President
Thomas B. Fordham Foundation

Roger Hertog
President and Chief Operating Officer
Sanford C. Bernstein & Co., Inc.

Henry M. Levin
Director
National Center for the Study of Privatization in
Education, Teachers College

Bruno Manno
Senior Fellow, Education
The Annie E. Casey Foundation

Jay Mathews
Education Reporter
The Washington Post

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University of Delaware

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Somerville Charter School

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Michael Rebell
Executive Director and Counsel
Campaign for Fiscal Equity

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National Association of Independent Schools

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President
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Wisconsin State Assembly

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Research

Playing Their Parts: Parents and Teachers Talk about Parental Involvement in Public Schools. Steve Farkas, Jean Johnson and Ann Duffett with Claire Aulicino and Joanna McHugh. While there is almost universal agreement that parents need to be involved in their children's education, questions remain as to what ways they should help. This study examines the opinions of parents and teachers on what each believes the parents should be doing to help their children succeed. 1999. 50 pp. Price: \$10.00 Technical Appendix: \$40.00 ISBN 1-889483-58-3

Standards and Accountability: Where the Public Stands. Jean Johnson with Ann Duffett. Prepared for the 1999 National Education Summit, a gathering of state governors, CEOs and education leaders, this paper reviews recent opinion research from Public Agenda and other organizations on public support for higher academic standards in public schools. 1999. 6 pp. An electronic version in PDF format that may be downloaded at www.publicagenda.org

Kids These Days: What Americans Really Think about the Next Generation. Steve Farkas, Jean Johnson, Ann Duffett with Ali Bers. A series of studies document Americans' attitudes toward the nation's youth. 1999: 12 pp. An electronic version in PDF format that may be downloaded at www.publicagenda.org. ISBN 1-889483-61-3 1997: 50 pp. Price: \$10.00 ISBN 1-889483-46-X.

Cities, Suburbs and Schools: Would Citizens in Chicago, Cleveland and Milwaukee Support Greater Collaboration? Will Friedman and Aviva Gutnick with Claire Aulicino. This qualitative study explored people's reactions to regional education strategies in and around these three Midwestern cities. Participants in 15 focus groups were asked whether they would support educational initiatives that allow urban and suburban students to collaborate. 1999. 34pp. Price: \$7.50 ISBN 1-889483-60-5

A Lot to Be Thankful For: What Parents Want Children to Learn about America. Steve Farkas and Jean Johnson with Ann Duffett and Joanna McHugh. What should public schools teach children about being an American today? This study investigates native-born and foreign-born parents' beliefs on whether a set of "American values" should be taught to kids by the public schools and, if so, what this would mean. 1998. 47pp. Price: \$10.00 Technical Appendix: \$40.00 ISBN 1-889483-58-3

Time to Move On: African American and White Parents Set an Agenda for Public Schools. Steve Farkas and Jean Johnson with Stephen Immerwahr and Joanna McHugh. This comprehensive national study takes an in-depth look at the views of black and white parents toward public school integration, academic standards, student achievement, as well as parental involvement, teacher quality, safety and discipline in the schools. 1998. 55pp. Price: \$10.00 Technical Appendix: \$40.00. ISBN 1-889483-57-5

Reality Check '99. Steve Farkas, Ann Duffett, Joanna McHugh and Jean Johnson. The second annual survey of five groups - parents, students, K-12 teachers, employers and college professors - finds sharp differences on the impact of higher standards in the classroom. Attitudes toward accountability are examined for the first time. 1999. *Reality Check '99* is part of *Quality Counts '99*, a special issue of *Education Week* newspaper. Call (301) 280-3100 for a copy or go to www.edweek.org. Visit www.publicagenda.org for additional tables. Technical Appendix is available from Public Agenda for \$40.

Summing It Up: A Review of Survey Data on Education and the National Education Goals Panel. Jean Johnson with Claire Aulicino. In preparation for congressional reauthorization of the National Education Goals Panel, Public Agenda was asked to produce a summary of public opinion on eight goals. The report digests survey findings from Public Agenda and other organizations. 1998. Available on the Goals Panel Web site (www.negp.gov).

Different Drummers: How Teachers of Teachers View Public Education. Steve Farkas and Jean Johnson. This is the first comprehensive survey of the views of education professors from U.S. colleges and universities. Their vision of education and the mission of teacher education programs are explored, including their attitudes toward core curriculum, testing, standards and the public's parameters. 1997. 40pp. Price: \$10.00 ISBN 1-889483-47-8

Getting By: What American Teenagers Really Think about Their Schools. Jean Johnson and Steve Farkas. Public high school students are the focus of this national survey, which examines how teens view their schools, teachers and the learning process. Includes insights into what students say would motivate them to work harder and how they define good and bad teaching. 1997. 56pp. Price: \$10.00 ISBN 1-889483-43-5

Given the Circumstances: Teachers Talk about Public Education Today. Steve Farkas and Jean Johnson. This report examines the views of public school teachers on how the public schools are performing; what children need to learn; and what schools need to be effective. A special focus on black and Hispanic teachers is included. 1996. 50pp. Price: \$10.00 ISBN 1-889483-06-0

Assignment Incomplete: The Unfinished Business of Education Reform. Jean Johnson. Prepared in collaboration with the Institute for Educational Leadership, this study examines why support for public schools is in jeopardy; why Americans are so concerned with the basics; whether people are really committed to higher standards; and whether they value education in and of itself. 1995. 46pp. Price: \$10.00 Technical Appendix: \$25.00 ISBN 1-889483-09-5

First Things First: What Americans Expect from the Public Schools. Jean Johnson and John Immerwahr. This report looks at public attitudes toward values issues in the schools and toward education reform efforts. A special focus on the views of white and black parents, as well as parents identified as traditional Christians, is included. 1994. 56pp. Price: \$10.00 Technical Appendix: \$25.00 ISBN 1-889483-14-1

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The National Journal, December 18, 1999

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December 18, 1999

SECTION: EDUCATION; Pg. 3598; Vol. 31, No. 51-52

LENGTH: 4375 words

HEADLINE: Desperate Measures

BYLINE: Siobhan Gorman

HIGHLIGHT:

Fed up with their neighborhood schools, some low-income parents are embracing Republican-backed **vouchers**. Can the Democrats come up with anything better?

BODY:

As president of the Urban League of Greater Miami, T. Willard Fair collects stories from Florida's educational front lines. Such as the time a seventh-grade girl, asked to write the days of the week, stared blankly at the board with chalk in hand. A product of the Miami-Dade public school system, she couldn't do it. And when the days were written on the board for her, she couldn't read them either. Fair relates the story to explain why he's sure he's on the correct side of the debate over school **vouchers**. He's all for them. Fair says that variations of the same scene occur all too frequently in low-income areas of Miami--where 26 schools received a grade of F this year from the state--and across the country. He asks why low-income students should be sentenced to years in failing schools, while wealthier children escape to **private** schools; and he blames a public education system that, he says, is more interested in preserving itself than in educating students.

"The **voucher** says forget about the fact that you don't have the money," Fair said. "You still have a right to get the best possible education for your children." That's why

religious schools

finance is important - governance

access + excellence - access + accountability

- E.D. Hirsch

he pushed hard in Florida this year for the A-Plus plan, Republican Gov. Jeb Bush's program that gives **vouchers**--government money that students can use to attend **private** schools--to children in chronically low-performing schools.

Fair frames his argument for school **vouchers** as a civil rights issue--an argument some minority parents and local civil rights leaders are beginning to embrace. And GOP presidential front-runner George W. Bush hopes to capitalize on this new interest in **vouchers** by promoting a federal version of his brother Jeb's program on the campaign trail.

If George W. Bush is successful, he'll chip away at a core Democratic constituency--low-income and minority voters--and put Vice President Al Gore and other Democrats in a bind. Some of Gore's supporters are hoping that he will respond to the challenge by articulating an alternative to **vouchers** that speaks to the urgency felt by many low-income parents.

"That's our best hope for recasting the debate in bolder tones," said Christopher Edley Jr., a former top Clinton Administration aide on race issues and currently a professor at the Harvard Law School who is advising Gore's presidential campaign. One option suggested by some experts: Make every school a charter school--public schools that promise to raise student achievement in exchange for regulatory freedom.

The still-young presidential campaign offers an opportunity to educate the American public on the pros and cons of **vouchers** and other alternatives, said Deborah Wadsworth, the executive director of Public Agenda, a nonpartisan public opinion research group. "It's an enormous opportunity," she said. "It is, on the one hand, kind of indefensible to make Americans continue to live with a public school system that does not deliver what they expect, but it is also indefensible to kind of disassemble the system without giving people real opportunities to weigh the options, and that's probably what the presidential candidates' debate needs to be about."

Public opinion on **vouchers** remains split and soft, although support for the idea is stronger among minorities. A recent study by Public Agenda suggests that most Americans--63 percent--do not understand the issue, so their support is largely up for grabs. But the same survey also finds that when the public is presented with an explanation of **vouchers**, 57 percent respond favorably and 67 percent see them as part of the solution.

Experts on both sides of the debate agree that the window of opportunity is closing for nonvoucher education reforms. Unless **voucher** opponents seize the opportunity, they say, that window will slam shut within three to five years. "You're not going to see mass defections by the Democratic base, but there'll be erosion at the margin, and

there are certainly a number of swing voters to whom education is important," Edley warned. "I think that frustrated parents and civic leaders who don't sense urgency from public education leaders will increasingly favor blowing up the system."

Looking to Election 2000

In policy addresses, television ads, and town hall meetings, the top presidential candidates in both parties are already talking about **vouchers**. George W. Bush is pushing a kinder, gentler **voucher**. Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., would pilot a more robust one. Gore, without articulating a comprehensive alternative of his own, has charged that Bush's proposal would "slam the door on kids in America's public school system." Earlier this month, Gore launched a television ad that calls **vouchers** "a big mistake," in an effort to contrast himself with both Bush and his Democratic opponent, Bill Bradley, who supported a pilot **voucher** program when he was in the Senate but says that **vouchers** are not the answer to America's educational problems. Bradley still waxes equivocal, however. "If I'm President of the United States, when it comes to urban public education, we're going to try this, we're going to try that, we're going to experiment here, experiment there, but we are going to improve urban public education," he said at a town hall meeting in New Hampshire.

In addition to formulating a policy on **vouchers**, the next President will almost certainly have the opportunity to nominate Justices to the Supreme Court, where the issue is heading for a review.

A recent Los Angeles Times poll asked registered voters whether a presidential candidate's stand on **vouchers** would affect their vote, and 41 percent said that a candidate's support for **vouchers** would make them more likely to vote for that candidate, compared with 22 percent who said they would be less likely and 34 percent who said it would have no effect. The trend was not dramatically different among Democratic voters: 35 percent said they would be more likely to vote for a candidate if he supported **vouchers**, while 25 percent said they'd be less likely, and 38 percent said it would have no effect.

"Assuming that the two current front-runners are the nominees of their respective parties, I think it's clear that there will be a debate about the appropriateness of **vouchers** as an element of an overall educational strategy," said William A. Galston, a professor at the University of Maryland's School of Public Affairs and an adviser to Gore.

Like Jeb Bush, George W. does not use the word "**vouchers**." He prefers to call them federally funded "scholarships," worth about \$ 1,500 each, and he touts them as an example of his tough-love approach to school reform. He would give students who are languishing in perpetually failing schools scholarships to attend other schools--public or **private**. Jeb Bush says that Florida's test run this year

should give his brother's national message a boost. "I hope that it'll give them (the voters) a sense that they can match the rhetoric with the practical implementation of it," he told National Journal. "I know what my brother's views are, and I think it'll be helpful to him."

And Democrats are worried. Although Edley characterized the Bushes' **voucher** plan as "snake oil," he conceded that it has public appeal. "It's a brilliant tactical move because it positions **voucher** supporters as the allies of children in desperate straits," he said. "You've got desperate kids and their families. One side is offering **vouchers** as an escape, and the other side is offering three-year plans. That's not much of a contest."

It is too early to tell whether the Florida program has improved achievement for **voucher** students or pushed poorly performing schools to improve. (See box, these two pages.) But the end of the program's first year, in May, will provide some clues, based on the experiences of the 134 children who used **vouchers** to leave two chronically failing schools in **Pensacola**--58 went to **private** schools and 76 went to other public schools. The subsequent year could offer a better test of **vouchers**: 78 Florida schools received a grade of F last year, and those that receive another F at the end of this school year will be required to offer parents **vouchers**.

Not surprisingly, the **voucher** issue is likely to be raised in the Florida legislative campaigns next year. "I do think that a candidate's stand on **vouchers** will affect the outcome of elections," said state Rep. DeeDee Ritchie, a Democrat, whose **Pensacola** district includes the two schools in which students received **vouchers** this year.

Vouchers will very likely be an issue in other states as well, but some experts predict that many states mulling **voucher** plans will wait until after the presidential election and a year or more of the Florida experiment before moving ahead. In New Mexico, where Republican Gov. Gary E. Johnson's **voucher** plan was soundly defeated in both the House and Senate this year, the Governor has vowed to campaign for any state-level candidate--Democrat or Republican--who supports **vouchers**. Georgia's Democratic Gov. Roy Barnes is eyeing Florida's progress. In Michigan, **voucher** advocates are gathering signatures for a ballot initiative that would require low-performing schools to offer **vouchers** to their students, but Republican Gov. John Engler dismisses the measure as a "nonstarter."

Regardless of who dominates the **voucher** debate next year, the ultimate outcome, says Fair, will be a stronger commitment to finding a new way to educate children. "It's going to reform, reshape, and redefine education," he said. "We will not be doing business as usual." From Milton Friedman to the Brothers Bush "In the beginning," says author Terry Moe, pausing for effect, "there was Milton Friedman." Friedman first floated

the **voucher** concept in the mid-1950s as a way to privatize American education and get it to play by the rules of the market. But Moe, a Stanford University political science professor who co-wrote *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools*, a 1990 book that put school choice in the political mainstream, said that the concept had gained little traction because the public had a strong faith in government as the answer to social problems.

The **voucher** tide shifted leftward briefly in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In 1968, Harvard University's Graduate School of Education Dean TheodoreSizer proposed a plan that would give **vouchers** only to low-income families. He argued that such a plan would equalize funding for poor children without damaging the public schools. Two years later, sociologist Christopher Jencks built on Sizer's proposal and said that participating **private** schools should take children lottery-style and that the **voucher** should cover full tuition. Jencks' proposal spawned what was intended to be the first **voucher** experiment, but the short-lived pilot project in Alum Rock, Calif., was limited to public schools and produced no conclusive results.

Once again, Moe noted, the **voucher** issue piqued little public interest because most Americans were reluctant to embrace market solutions for schools. But the attempt did energize opposition. The national teachers' unions and other educators' unions mobilized a coalition to lobby Congress to argue that **vouchers** would not help the poor, but would instead privatize the education system.

Although America was warming to market solutions in general during the Reagan era, the country's response to a 1983 report called *A Nation at Risk* was a series of new government reforms focused on boosting standards for teachers and for school curricula. But by the early 1990s, some policy-makers and such liberal academics as New York University professor Joseph Viteritti--whose recent book, *Choosing Equality*, amplifies Fair's argument for **vouchers**--began to question the effectiveness of those reforms. Their views helped create an opening for more-radical proposals. In Milwaukee, an unusual coalition led by Annette "Polly" Williams, a black single-parent-turned-state-legislator, joined an effort to start a pilot **voucher** program for low-income children. Coalition members included then-soon-to-be Milwaukee Public Schools Superintendent Howard Fuller, GOP Gov. Tommy G. Thompson, and the business community. Similar coalitions sparked a pilot project in Cleveland in 1998.

And **private voucher** programs for some of the neediest children have sprung up throughout the decade. The largest effort is the New York City-based Children's Scholarship Fund, which sorted through 1.2 million applications last spring and awarded 40,000 partial scholarships to students from across the country. The foundation, launched by Wall Street tycoon Theodore J. Forstmann and Wal-Mart billionaire John Walton, has been able to sidestep many political

battles because it is a **private** effort with a bipartisan board.

"We learned a lot about the demand at low-income levels. They wanted it desperately," said CSF President Darla Romfo. "We're going to talk about it every chance we get, because there are a lot of kids we didn't help and you can't do it all through philanthropy."

National Urban League President Hugh B. Price, a **voucher** opponent, cites several reasons for the recent surge in interest in **vouchers**: Colleges and universities are raising their admissions standards; universities are paring back remedial classes; employers are clamoring for a better-skilled work force; states are raising the bar on standardized tests and graduation requirements; and the increasing attacks on affirmative action are pressuring minority students to demonstrate that they have the skills to compete for college admission in the absence of race-based entry policies.

This year, Florida offered a blueprint that appears to be 2 parts Jencks to 1 part Friedman. The plan passed last spring by the Florida Legislature uses grades A through F to evaluate schools, and requires schools that receive a D or F to submit a plan of action to the state Board of Education. The state then gives the school technical and financial help to implement that plan. If a school receives two F grades in a four-year period, the students in that school are eligible for state "**opportunity scholarships**" worth \$ 4,000 a year. The **vouchers** must be accepted as full tuition at participating **private** schools, and those schools must offer spaces to **voucher** students by lottery if there are not enough seats for everyone. Students who use the **vouchers** take the same state tests that public school students take. Public schools that move up a grade or earn an A get financial bonuses.

But this compromise has the potential to offend free-market purists, who bristle at the idea of tying up **private** schools with government strings, such as requiring **voucher** students to take state tests. And Nina Shokraii Rees, an education policy analyst at the Heritage Foundation who is also advising George W. Bush's presidential campaign, has reservations about the ability of this approach to produce a sample size large enough for research that could lead to widespread change.

"It's a new era, in a way," Rees said of the Bush brothers' **vouchers-as-accountability** approach. "It really is part of the public school reform strategy, rather than an opportunity for poor people to have the same opportunities that more affluent parents have. I'm not saying there's anything wrong with it, but you're removing it more from the original intention of simply offering the parents the option to choose schools."

Seeking Minority Votes

The political success of **voucher** supporters may hinge on their ability to attract support from minority voters. According to a September poll by the education fraternity Phi Delta Kappa International and the Gallup Organization Inc., 57 percent of blacks support **vouchers** that cover full tuition, compared with 47 percent of the general population. The same poll found that 70 percent of nonwhites support the government's paying all or part of the tuition for nonpublic schools, compared with 51 percent of the general population.

There is a small but growing nucleus of **voucher** supporters in the African-American church community. And Fuller, who is now director of the Institute for the Transformation of Learning at Marquette University, said that his next project is to join forces with the Hispanic community. Pastor Cheryl McBride Brown, the director of education for the highly regarded Believers in Christ Christian Academy in Milwaukee, said that a pro-**voucher** organization she chairs has grown from two churches to 33 in a little more than a year. She added that the group--Clergy for Educational Options--has started talking with African-American church leaders in other states. Support for **vouchers** from African-American church leaders not only builds support for school choice within the African-American community, Brown said, but may also help address the lack of space for **voucher** students in the **private** sector by encouraging African-American churches to start schools for these students.

Voucher supporters see the upcoming elections as an opportunity. "Education is going to be the No. 1 issue, and what you are prepared to do about that is going to be the question that is asked by the electorate," said Fair. "**Vouchers** therefore become part of an arsenal of things that can be used and articulated to say we are prepared to do something right now as other repairs reform the system."

Price of the National Urban League does not agree with Fair, but he's sympathetic to his local counterpart's plea. "I understand what T. is saying," Price said. "He's holding the sword of Damocles, saying: 'You need to know in my town of Liberty City I don't have the luxury of saying to kids, just wait until we figure this out.' I understand where he's coming from; he's close to the ground and close to the families. We're trying to say to the policy-makers: 'Some very old and very dear friends of public education are getting very impatient with the situation.' "

Searching for Alternatives

Fair's statement implies that there may be other weapons in the reform arsenal, ones that Democrats can use. Several alternatives are possible, including building on a Wisconsin program that combines smaller classes with a contract to improve student achievement in low-income schools, and requiring **private** schools that accept **vouchers** to be publicly accountable.

TheodoreSizer, who is a founder of Francis W. Parker

Charter School in Ayer, Mass., offered the most radical suggestion: Charter every public school and allow students to take all of their public education money with them to any public school. Uncomfortable with sending public money to **private** schools, because he fears **private** schools will not take students at random, Sizer says that charter schools offer both competition and equal access. Similar ideas have been floated recently by such Democrats as Sen. John F. Kerry of Massachusetts and Price of the National Urban League. Last month, the nonpartisan Education Commission of the States also endorsed the idea of chartering all public schools.

"You can't do these things piecemeal because it won't have an effect," said Sizer, who is now chairman of the Coalition of Essential Schools. "When you're talking **vouchers**, that is a code word for choice. You, the parent, want the right to pick your child's school." True, says **voucher** proponent Clint Bolick, the litigation director of the Institute for Justice, a conservative public-interest law firm. "That would be an effective glasnost to our perestroika of school choice," he said, shaking his head. "But the Democrats can't go there because the unions won't allow that." Indeed, Robert F. Chase, the president of the 2.5 million-member National Education Association, said that chartering every school is too simplistic an approach. "I don't know what that means," he said. "The laws that exist right now related to charter schools vary dramatically."

The teachers' unions, the most aggressive opponents of **vouchers**, say that reducing class size and boosting resources for Saturday and after-school programs are the best antidotes to **vouchers**. "It's not as if people are floundering around out there, and they have no idea what to do to serve kids as well as we possibly can," Chase said. "Class size has a great impact on student achievement."

One of the programs that Chase would like to see highlighted nationally is Wisconsin's Student Achievement Guarantee in Education program. Targeting low-income schools, SAGE lowers class size to 15 in early grades, extends the school day, establishes a rigorous curriculum, and requires an accountability plan for school staff. These components are rolled together into a contract the school has with the state Department of Public Instruction that promises to raise student achievement.

Alex Molnar, a professor at the University of Wisconsin (Milwaukee) and a creator of the SAGE program, is evaluating the three-year-old program and says that SAGE produces significant increases in achievement for all children. He found a particularly strong benefit for African-American students. But some **voucher** advocates say that the unions are only looking out for their own interests by pushing solutions that hinge on hiring more teachers.

One option Florida may consider next year would require **private** schools participating in the **voucher** program to adhere to the same testing and accountability measures that public schools do. Holding **private** schools to the same standards that public schools have to meet polls well nationally, according to this year's Phi Delta Kappa-Gallup poll: 77 percent of Americans believe **private** schools that take public money should be held to the same accountability measures as public schools.

In another approach floated recently, an Atlantic Monthly article called for a "grand bargain" that would allow a multiyear test of **vouchers** for up to 5 million children in return for major increases in public school spending. But **voucher** proponent Paul E. Peterson, a Harvard University professor who is assessing public and **private voucher** programs and a self-described Democrat, questioned the practicality of the proposal. He said that the Bush brothers' approach offers a better political bargain because it gives schools a chance to reform themselves and gives children in continually failing schools an alternative. "I doubt that there's enough political support to go that dramatically immediately, even with the idea of additional monies being given to the public sector," he said.

All in the Delivery

In election-year politics, the messenger may be as important as the message. Whether Gore will formulate and articulate a plan that addresses the urgency many minority parents feel remains an open question.

He'll face some tough competition from likely Republican messenger-to-be George W. Bush. Touting Bush's education record in Texas, several **voucher** advocates argued that it is difficult to paint the Governor as an enemy of public schools. As a practicing "compassionate conservative," Bush has gone to great lengths to de-demonize the Republicans on the education issue and to court minority voters. "I can see him going into the inner city and championing this, where his father and Bob Dole simply weren't going to do that," said the Institute for Justice's Bolick. "The big question is whether the Republicans will seize the opportunity, or if they'll fumble."

The same question can be asked of Gore, who has secured endorsements from the top two national teachers' unions. "It's obviously been difficult for Gore to state full-blown policy proposals that are inconsistent with major Administration initiatives that are under active consideration by Congress," Harvard's Edley said. "But as the campaign develops, that will have to change, especially on an issue like education, where the Administration's measures don't measure up."

On Thursday, Gore highlighted his education proposals in a campaign speech. Gore adviser Galston said that many of Gore's proposals deal with the concerns of poor and minority parents. He cited class-size reduction; universal preschool;

and Gore's teacher corps, which would subsidize college tuition for high school seniors who agree to teach in the inner city. Gore's plan for improving low-performing schools is essentially the same as the current White House proposal, which calls on states and school districts to turn around failing schools and offers more money for after-school programs. Galston said that Gore has an advantage over Bush when it comes to trumpeting the anti-**voucher** theme, because Democrats still hold more favor with the public on education issues.

But Gore can't depend on that edge alone, some Democrats warn; to win the debate, he'll have to offer a clear alternative to **vouchers**. "If Gore's going to repackage the same ideas, at best it's going to be a stalemate," said Arnold F. Fege, the president of Public Advocacy for Kids, a nonprofit public-education advocacy firm, "and at worst, he's going to lose (to) **vouchers**."

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To: Bethany Little/OPD/EOP@EOP, John B. Buxton/OPD/EOP@EOP

cc:

Subject: Vouchers

Here is the article that the forum tomorrow is based on. The first panel is Lisa Graham Keegan, Williard Fair (Miami Urban League) and Jack Coons to talk about three different pro-vouchers points of view.

The second panel is me, Sandy Feldman, Clint Bolick, and Lamar Alexander, talking about this article and whether the grand bargain it describes is workable.

Let's huddle at 4pm and do the murder board for an hour or so.

AR

----- Forwarded by Andy Rotherham/OPD/EOP on 02/28/2000 11:37 AM -----



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HEADLINE: Education: A Bold Experiment to Fix City Schools; school vouchers

BYLINE: Miller, Matthew

BODY:

Depending on whom you listen to - conservative or liberal - vouchers are either a lifeline or a death knell for America's urban public schools. Yet a case can be made for vouchers that everyone can support - and the time for a "grand bargain" is at hand.

WHEN Maria Neri's daughter Tina finished eighth grade, two years ago, her scholarship at a Catholic elementary school in south-central Los Angeles ended. The parochial high school in which Neri (not her real name) hoped to enroll Tina charges \$ 3,500 a year-a third less than the \$ 5,400 Los Angeles would spend to educate Tina in public school. Neri, thirty-three, earns \$ 600 a month as a part-time teacher's aide; she's looking for a second, and perhaps a third, job. Her husband, from whom she is separated, earns \$ 1,200 a month as a laborer in a glass factory. He pays his wife's monthly rent of \$ 340, but offers no support beyond that. After paying for food, a phone, gas, and other expenses, Neri had no money left to put toward private school for Tina. Yet she was afraid to send Tina to the neighborhood public school, where the walls were covered with graffiti, and "cholos," or gang members, had been involved in shootings that brought police helicopters to the campus. So Neri used her sister's address to enroll Tina at another public school, which, though twenty minutes away, at least seemed safer. But it is far from ideal. Classrooms each have forty to forty-five children belonging to several different grades. Tina, sixteen, says the teachers often have the students watch movies. Her math teacher was so confused about who Tina was that he gave her an F for not completing many assignments-a grade he changed, with embarrassment and an apology, after Neri confronted him with Tina's completed workbook. "I can see the difference," Neri says. "She's going down." Tina says she would go back to Catholic school if they could afford it. "I talk to my daughter," Neri explains, "and say, 'I'm sorry.'"

Neri's desire to send Tina to a better school is at the heart of one of the nation's most important and most demagogic debates. Through vouchers, often touted as an answer to Neri's problem, the government would give parents some or all of the money it now spends educating their children to use at a school of their choice. Depending on whom you listen to, vouchers are either a lifeline or a death knell. "It is quite simply an issue of survival for our nation's poorest students," says Dan Coats, a Republican and a former senator from Indiana. But Kweisi Mfume, the president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, calls vouchers a "terrible threat," and Sandra Feldman, the president of the American Federation of Teachers, says they mean "a radical abandonment of public schools and public education."

These are heated claims, especially given the relatively small number of students who are involved in voucher programs today. Just over 52 million students attend grades K through 12 in the United States. Only two cities offer publicly funded vouchers: in Milwaukee (whose breakthrough program was begun in 1990) roughly 6,000 of 107,000 students get vouchers; in Cleveland about 4,000 of 77,000 do. In May, Florida approved a plan under which students at the poorest-performing schools would get vouchers. Four schools are expected to be eligible this year, and

12,000 of the state's 2.3 million K-12 kids are expected to use vouchers over the next four years. Privately funded voucher programs in thirty-one cities served roughly 12,000 children last year; ten new such programs came into being for the 1998-1999 school year. Two wealthy investors, Ted Forstmann and John Walton, recently announced a plan to fund (along with other donors) \$ 170 million in vouchers, which will reach 40,000 new students over the next four years.

Add these numbers up and you get 74,000 children-about 0.1 percent of students. Add 200,000 for those students in the 1,200 charter schools around the country (which also give parents a choice), and the proportion comes to only 0.5 percent of schoolchildren. In other words, the school-choice debate is taking place utterly at the margins. At this rate, for all the fuss, it's hard to imagine that any impact could be made on the skills and life chances of students stuck in our worst public schools in time to prevent what the Reverend Floyd Flake, a voucher advocate and a former Democratic congressman from New York, calls "educational genocide."

This tragedy is most pronounced in big cities, whose public schools together serve six million children. Despite heroic local efforts and pockets of success, depressing evidence mounts of an achievement gap between students in cities and those in suburbs, where, school-watchers say, most schools are doing fine, largely because they're safer, better funded, and less prone to the social ills that plague cities. Of Detroit's eleventh-graders 8.5 percent were deemed "proficient" in science on Michigan's 1997 statewide exam. Fourth-graders in Hartford were a tenth as likely as Connecticut students overall to show proficiency on the state's three achievement tests in 1996. Only two percent of Cleveland's minority tenth-graders have taken algebra. "The numbers tell a sad and alarming story," a special report in Education Week concluded last January. "Most 4th graders who live in U.S. cities can't read and understand a simple children's book, and most 8th graders can't use arithmetic to solve a practical problem." As polls prove, increasing numbers of urban parents like Maria Neri want a way out. It seems immoral to argue that they must wait for the day when urban public schools are somehow "fixed." It's even harder to argue that bigger voucher programs could make things worse.

Yet a political standoff has kept vouchers unavailable to nearly 99 percent of urban schoolchildren. Bill Clinton and most leading Democrats oppose them, saying we should fix existing public schools, not drain money from the system. Teachers' unions, the staunchest foes of vouchers, are among the party's biggest donors, and sent more delegates to the 1996 Democratic National Convention than did the state of California. Republicans endorse vouchers as a market-based way to shake up calcified bureaucracies, but they generally push plans that affect only a few students. The distrust that has led to today's gridlock is profound. Republicans view Democrats as union pawns defending a failed status quo; Democrats think Republicans want to use urban woes as justification for scrapping public education and the taxes that fund it.

MISSING entirely from the debate is the progressive pro-voucher perspective. To listen to the unions and the NAACP, one would think that vouchers were the evil brainchild of the economist Milton Friedman and his conservative devotees, lately joined by a handful of desperate but misguided

urban blacks. In fact vouchers have a long but unappreciated intellectual pedigree among reformers who have sought to help poor children and to equalize funding in rich and poor districts. This "voucher left" has always had less cash and political power than its conservative counterpart or its union foes. It has been ignored by the press and trounced in internecine wars. But if urban children are to have any hope, the voucher left's best days must lie ahead.

Finding a productive compromise means recalling the role of progressives in the history of the voucher movement and exposing the political charades that poison debate. It means finding a way for unorthodox new leaders to build a coalition- of liberals for whom the moral urgency of helping city children trumps ancient union ties, and of conservatives who reject a laissez-faire approach to life's unfairness. The goal of such a coalition should be a "grand bargain" for urban schools: a major multi-year test of vouchers that touches not 5,000 but 500,000 children, and eventually five million-and increases school spending in the process. The conventional wisdom says that today's whittled-down pilot programs are all that is politically achievable. The paradox is that only through bigger thinking about how vouchers might help can a durable coalition emerge.

IN 1962 John E. "Jack" Coons, an idealistic thirty-two-year-old law professor at Northwestern University, was asked by the U.S. Civil Rights Commission to study whether Chicago schools were complying with desegregation orders. Coons soon found that what really interested him was a different question: Why were suburban schools so much better than those downtown? Over the next few years Coons, eventually joined by two law students, Stephen Sugarman and William Clune, found one answer in what would become a source of enduring outrage: America's property-tax-based system of public-school finance created dramatic disparities in the resources available to educate children.

This financial aspect of education's vaunted tradition of "local control" is rarely the subject of national controversy. In part that is because it gives the nation's most powerful citizens both lower taxes and better schools. Imagine two towns, Slumville and Suburbia. Slumville has \$ 100,000 in taxable property per pupil; Suburbia has \$ 300,000. If Slumville votes to tax its property at four percent, it raises \$ 4,000 per pupil. But Suburbia can tax itself at two percent and raise \$ 6,000 per pupil. Suburbia's tax rate is half as high, but its public schools enjoy 50 percent more resources per student.

In the 1960s affluent districts routinely spent twice what nearby poorer ones did, and sometimes four or five times as much. To Coons and his colleagues, such inequity in a public service was indefensible. Beginning with *Private Wealth and Public Education*, a book that he, Sugarman, and Clune published in 1970, Coons has denounced the system eloquently. It's worth sampling his arguments, because the left's case for choice is usually drowned out by the right's cheerleading for markets, or by urban blacks' cry for help. In a 1992 essay, "School Choice as Simple Justice," Coons wrote,

This socialism for the rich we blithely call "public," though no other public service entails such financial exclusivity. Whether the library, the swimming pool, the highway or the hospital-if it is "public," it is accessible. But admission to the government school comes only with the price of the house.

If the school is in Beverly Hills or Scarsdale, the poor need not apply.

Coons's point was simple: the quality of public education should not depend on local wealth-unless it is the wealth of a state as a whole. "Everyone ought to be put in a roughly equivalent position with regard to what the state will do," Coons, now an emeritus law professor at Berkeley, says.

Coons and Sugarman made a successful case for the unconstitutionality of the school-finance system in California's famous Serrano case in 1971, beginning a national movement to litigate for school equity. Although it was little noticed then, they cited vouchers as a potential remedy. The idea was to give courts a way to instruct legislatures to fix things without having to mess with local control. Asking legislatures to centralize school funding at the state level was a political nonstarter. But through various formulas, Coons and Sugarman argued, the state could give families in poorer districts enough cash in the form of vouchers to bring education spending in those districts up to that of better-off districts. And what could be more "local," they reasoned, than giving families direct control over the cash to use at schools as they chose?

COONS and Sugarman, focusing on school equity, thus arrived at a policy that Milton Friedman had been urging through a principled commitment to liberty and to its embodiment, the market. Friedman's 1955 essay "The Role of Government in Education" is viewed as the fountainhead of the voucher movement. In an ideal world, the future Nobel laureate reasoned, the government might have no role in schooling at all; yet a minimum required level of education and its financing by the state could be justified.

A stable and democratic society is impossible without widespread acceptance of some common set of values and without a minimum degree of literacy and knowledge on the part of most citizens . . . the gain from the education of a child accrues not only to the child or to his parents but to other members of the society. . . . Yet it is not feasible to identify the particular individuals (or families) benefitted or the money value of the benefit and so to charge for the services rendered.

However, Friedman said, if this "neighborhood effect" meant that the government was warranted in paying for K-12 education, another question remained: Should the government run the schools as well? Friedman's view was that schools could be just as "public" if the government financed but didn't administer them. That notion remains virtually unintelligible to leaders in public education, perhaps because it is so threatening.

Friedman's analogy (adopted by every voucher proponent since) was to the G.I. Bill, which gave veterans a maximum sum per year to spend at the institution of their choice, provided that it met certain minimum standards. Likewise, for elementary and secondary schooling Friedman envisioned a universal voucher scheme that would give parents a fixed sum per child, redeemable at an "approved" school of their choice. Such a school might be nonprofit or for profit, religious or secular. Parents could add to the sum if they wished. The role of government would be limited to assuring that "approved" schools included some common content in their programs, "much as it now inspects restaurants to assure that they maintain minimum sanitary standards." In Friedman's view, market-style competition for students would

spur the development of schools that were better tailored to families' needs and cost less than those run by notoriously inefficient public bureaucracies.

Friedman's and Coons's different angles of vision represent the ancient tug between liberty and equality within the pro-voucher camp—a debate the two have waged since Friedman was an occasional guest on Coons's Chicago radio show, *Problems of the City*, in the 1960s. Friedman today isn't bothered by issues of school-finance equity. "What's your view of inequity in clothing and food?" he snapped when asked recently, saying that such concerns reflect Coons's "socialistic approach." And even if public schools were making every child an Einstein, Friedman says, he would still want vouchers. "Private enterprise as opposed to collectivism," he says, "would always be better."

Coons is less ideological. In his view, choice would improve the public schools, which he believes would always be chosen by the majority, even with a full-blown voucher system. The prospect of losing students (and thus funding) would force improvements faster than today's seemingly endless rounds of ineffectual education fads. If poor children got a decent education under the current system, he adds, he probably wouldn't have devoted his life to these issues.

The fate of disadvantaged children under a voucher regime is where the Coons-Friedman clash is sharpest. Coons would be glad to offer vouchers to all low-income students and to no one else if such a step were necessary for consensus. He fears that under a universal voucher system they could get left behind, as schools competed to recruit better-off, smarter, healthier (nondisabled) students. The incentives are plain: such children would be easier to teach, and schools could charge wealthy families far more than the voucher amount to maximize profit. Coons and the voucher left therefore insist that any universal scheme should include protections for low-income and disabled children. Examples would be increasing the voucher amount for those children to make them more attractive to schools, and letting schools redeem their vouchers only if, say, 15 percent of new places were reserved for such children, for whom the voucher would cover tuition. To Friedman, these are unacceptable intrusions on schools' freedom to operate as they like, turning vouchers into "a welfare program, not an education program."

WITHOUT a link to unions—which, despite the waning of their influence, remain one of the few sources of progressive ideas in American public life—liberal pro-voucher champions have had little political impact. The muting of their voice, combined with the ease of legislating pilot programs, explains why few urban children have a choice today. What's more, deceptive arguments by both teachers' unions and conservative activists keep the broader public confused.

Teachers' unions (and voucher foes generally) rely on five dubious arguments.

There's no evidence that vouchers work. The trials have been so isolated, unions say, that their results are unproved. That's a nervy case to make when it is union opposition that has kept the trials small. Pro- and anti-voucher forces have funded research in Milwaukee and Cleveland that purports to

show why Johnny is doing demonstrably better or worse under vouchers. It is impossible to make sense of these dueling studies, whose sample sizes are so small that results seem to turn on whether, say, three children in Cleveland handed in their homework on time. Wealthy conservatives are now offering vouchers to all 14,000 at-risk children in a poor San Antonio district in part so as to compile a broader database from which to judge the impact of voucher systems. (In the first semester of the program 566 children taking vouchers left district schools.) For now the "no evidence" argument says more about union chutzpah than about voucher performance.

Vouchers drain money from public schools. Sandra Feldman, of the American Federation of Teachers, says that the \$ 10 million Cleveland uses to give vouchers to 4,000 children would be better spent on measures that would benefit every child, such as shrinking class sizes and launching proven reading programs. But this is disingenuous. Cleveland provided the \$ 10 million in addition to more than \$ 600 million in existing school spending in order to mollify unions, which insisted that vouchers not "come out of the hide" of public schools. It's unfair for unions to turn around and complain that the extra cash they insisted on should have gone elsewhere. The truth is that public schools are free to fund such measures now by shifting priorities within their budgets. And when broader voucher plans let the amount that public schools receive per student follow students who leave the system, the public-school coffers are not drained -schools receive the resources their enrollment merits.

Vouchers are unconstitutional. Some critics say that voucher use at religious schools violates the Constitution's ban on "establishment of religion," but the better view of the Supreme Court's confusing jurisprudence here suggests that's wrong. After all, no one thinks that federal student loans are unconstitutional when they are used by students to attend Notre Dame. Last June, Wisconsin's highest court upheld Milwaukee's plan, because the voucher goes to parents to use where they like, not to any particular type of school. In union hands, moreover, this legal complaint seems suspiciously tactical. It can't be that we are constitutionally obligated to imprison urban children in failing schools.

The capacity isn't there. Public schools serve 46 million K-12 children, private schools six million. Since private schools can't accommodate more than a fraction of today's students, opponents say, vouchers can't be a meaningful part of school reform. "Where are these schools going to come from?" Sandra Feldman repeatedly asked during an interview with me.

The first response to this argument is to ask, Then what's the problem? If as a practical matter unions feel that most children with vouchers will remain where they are, it's hard to see what the harm is in trying them. A second response is that even relatively few defections from public schools may spur efforts to improve them. Districts with innovative charter schools have reported such a reaction.

The larger answer, however, is that broader voucher schemes would prompt many institutions and entrepreneurs to add schools and spaces to the "market." This would happen not overnight but over a number of years. The initial spaces would be likely to come from Catholic schools, which account

for half the private- school slots in the country. Jerome Porath, the schools chief for the Los Angeles archdiocese, says that if every student got a voucher worth an amount close to the current per-pupil expenditure in California, over several years enough facilities could be built or rented "to accommodate everybody who wanted to come." "We'll get out our spreadsheets and figure it out," he says. Milton Friedman adds, "You can't think of it in terms of the existing stock of schools. There will be a flood of new schools started."

Profit is bad. Voucher foes act as if there were something venal about the profit motive when applied to schools. But public education is already big business. The \$ 320 billion spent last year on K-12 schooling is lusted after by textbook publishers, test designers, building contractors, food and janitorial services, and software companies, to name only a few examples. This largesse inevitably brings scandals-for example, the California flap in 1996 over whether campaign contributions influenced a big textbook purchase. Like health care, defense, and other major public services, schools will always be partly about business; vouchers would simply change who controls the flow of cash. There's no reason to think that the abuses under a voucher system would be worse than abuses today.

Voucher foes make other unpersuasive claims. They say that vouchers will cream off the most-talented children and the most-active parents-a worry that seems acute primarily because today's voucher plans remain tiny. They say that private schools will unfairly be able to avoid troublemaking kids by not admitting them- ignoring the fact that public districts themselves often send such kids to special schools of "last resort." They say the oversight that will follow public money will make private schools resemble public bureaucracies-ignoring the greater flexibility that most analysts say such schools will retain in hiring and firing, resource allocation, and curriculum design. Finally, they argue that it is crazy to subsidize more-affluent parents who already pay for private school-a seemingly powerful charge until one recalls that such families are now paying twice for schools, and that vouchers offered only to poor families would avoid the problem entirely.

For their part, conservative voucher fans peddle one big misconception: vouchers can save lots of money because per-pupil spending in private schools is typically less than half that in public schools today. It is true that religious schools have fewer administrators and lower-paid teachers, and invest less in such amenities as theaters, labs, and gymnasiums. But private schools don't have to take costly disabled and "special education" children; and often public schools must offer extras such as English as a Second Language, breakfast and lunch programs, and transportation. When such differences are taken into account, and hidden subsidies for church space and staff in religious schools are counted, the gap shrinks. Coons says that a voucher's value needs to be no lower than 85 percent of total per-pupil spending in order to stimulate capital investment in new schools. Set it too low, and the result will be simply to fill the handful of empty Catholic-school seats.

The right's claim that vouchers will deliver big savings also ignores the case for spending more in many big cities, where dilapidated buildings may collectively require as much as \$ 50 billion in repairs. Some public school bureaucracies-Washington, D.C., and St. Louis come to mind-seem so

hopeless that it would be senseless to pour new money in until management has improved. But despite run-down buildings and higher proportions of special-needs students, cities such as Philadelphia and Baltimore spend substantially less per pupil than do their states overall.

DISINGENUOUS rhetoric, visceral distrust, maximal posturing, minimal progress. Political debates escape this kind of dead end when grassroots pressure makes the status quo untenable, or when leaders emerge with fresh ways of framing the issues. It's possible that urban schools will fall so far that the poor revolt; or crime, bred by ignorance, might worsen in ways that force society to act. There's a better path to hope for, however, if new leaders can teach us to think differently about today's predicament.

Sounds of rethinking and compromise are in the air. Arthur Levine, the president of Columbia University's Teachers College, is a lifelong liberal and a voucher foe. Yet, frustrated by the seemingly hopeless troubles of inner cities, Levine called last June for a "rescue operation" that would give vouchers to two to three million poor children at the worst urban public schools. "For me," Levine says, "it's the equivalent of Schindler's list." Lisa Graham Keegan, Arizona's superintendent of public instruction and a rising Republican star, calls the property-tax base for school finance "pernicious" and "wholly unfair." She wants a system of "student-centered funding," in which revenues from a source other than property taxes would be distributed by the state on an equal per-pupil basis through vouchers.

If leading liberals are willing to question the public school monopoly, and prominent conservatives hear the call of justice, the voucher debate has a chance to move forward. The sensible first step would be a much bigger road test. Here's the idea I have put to various players in the debate: Suppose everyone came together and said, Let's take three or four big cities where we agree the public schools are failing. (Leave out dens of mismanagement like Newark and Washington, where spending is high but ineffective.) In these cities we'll raise per-pupil spending by 20 percent, giving urban schools the resources the left says they need, and thus going far to achieve the Coons vision of funding equity. But we'll implement this increase by way of a universal voucher system that finally gives every child a choice. So, for example, in a city that now spends \$ 5,000 per pupil, every child would get a \$ 6,000 voucher.

Such a proposal, serving half a million children, would cost \$ 660 million a year. If the voucher system were then extended to all six million big-city children (a logical step if results of the trial were promising), the price tag would be \$ 8 billion a year, or 0.4 percent of federal spending. (For purposes of discussion, I left aside the question of who outside the district would fund the 20 percent increase, though the surplus-rich federal government comes readily to mind.) The responses to this idea suggest how quickly the scale of today's debate could change-and who is responsible if it doesn't.

Jack Coons, the "egalitarian," said it sounds great. Clint Bolick, a conservative lawyer who is active in the voucher movement, also thought it could work-though, he said, the spending increase would mean that "some of my fellow conservatives would have apoplexy." Polly Williams, who led the drive to enact vouchers in Milwaukee, was anxious about extending them to

students who aren't poor, so we agreed to give them only to children eligible for the federal school-lunch program. This would still get vouchers to 78,000 children in Milwaukee instead of the current 6,000, and to four million city children nationwide. We would move pretty far toward universal coverage this way, since, sadly, two out of three city children qualify for school-lunch assistance.

What about the NAACP? To date the organization has welcomed philanthropic efforts, but when public funds are at issue, it stands by the unions. Julian Bond, the chairman of the NAACP, recently called vouchers "pork for private schools." Yet when I asked Kweisi Mfume, the NAACP president, about this proposal, he didn't hesitate. "I don't have a problem with that at all," he said. Mfume says that NAACP opposition has been not ideological but based on three concerns: the association doesn't want programs that leave nearly every child out; it wants accountability to the public on student performance; and it wants an honest approach to higher costs-such as those for transportation-that must be paid to make the system work for poor children. The pilot programs in Milwaukee and Cleveland fail especially on grounds one and three; the bargain I sketched addresses them. Mfume said he was open to the proposal as long as the NAACP's concerns were met, even if that meant taking a stance different from the unions'.

"It's a bad idea," Milton Friedman said at first, arguing that any increase in spending would "fuel the racketeers in the education business." Friedman's point is that raising spending could create further opportunities for profit-hungry operators to take the vouchers and run schools much more efficiently-not to their benefit. Owing to systematic federal overpayments, Medicare HMOs face just such scams in many places today.

But outliers like Washington, D.C., aside, it's not clear that urban schools are overspending. Given that, isn't it worth running a little risk to get a substantial voucher test under way? It seemed that Friedman wouldn't sign on, but toward the end of our discussion he relented. "I'll tell you what I would go for," he said. Friedman has always believed that so many families would flee public schools if given a voucher worth even half what is now spent per pupil that resources for each child remaining in the system would rise. (If ten public school children have \$ 5,000 spent on each of them, and three leave taking \$ 2,500 each, spending on the seven remaining would rise about 20 percent, to just under \$ 6,100.) So he would approve of a 20 percent increase in per-pupil spending for those who remained, as long as the voucher was worth only half that. Since Friedman thinks that this 20 percent increase will come over time anyway, he's not compromising his ideals. His principled accommodation is to put his money where his beliefs are and increase spending up front as part of the deal.

But look where we are. Baltimore spends \$ 6,400 per pupil today-versus \$ 6,800 spent by Maryland overall. According to Mfume's reasoning, the NAACP would accept a citywide voucher at roughly \$ 7,600. Friedman could live with \$ 7,600 for current public school pupils but would want a voucher for departing students at \$ 3,800. Surely there's a deal to be made here-and a chance, therefore, to help millions of children while meaningfully evaluating voucher efficacy, addressing questions about everything from student achievement to private profiteering.

What about the politicians? Lamar Alexander seems the likeliest to raise these issues thoughtfully in the 2000 election campaign; as a former Tennessee governor and the Secretary of Education under George Bush, he knows more about schooling than any other presidential aspirant. He has also been down this road before. Alexander bears scars from his ill-fated 1992 struggle to enact a voucher test at the federal level. Called the G.I. Bill for Kids, the plan would have spent \$ 500 million in new federal dollars to give the parents of half a million low- and middle-income children each a \$ 1,000 voucher to use at the schools of their choice. Alexander wagered (correctly) that conservative groups would be content with tiny sums of new money to get their foot in the door, and (incorrectly) that new cash for schools would be something the unions couldn't be seen opposing. In a Democratic Congress the bill went nowhere. Today Alexander says he would urge states to shift toward child-centered funding. And he'd go to Congress with an updated version of Bush's 1992 bill, featuring \$ 1,500 per voucher and an overall \$ 1 billion price tag.

I asked Alexander if he wasn't thinking too small: \$ 1,500 vouchers would be nowhere near sufficient to spark the creation of new schools. And with vouchers spread thin across the country, he would get no trial of how broad-based choice can improve schooling in a community. Why not try the 20 percent spending boost in exchange for universal vouchers in a few cities?

The voluble Alexander went silent for perhaps fifteen seconds as he considered whether to go on record in favor of a policy that would raise spending substantially-something that conservative primary voters would reject.

At length he said yes. Higher per-pupil spending wouldn't be his preferred solution, of course, but if that's what it took to get a bold voucher plan into failing cities, he'd live with it. "I would go high because the stakes are high," he explained, "and to expose the hypocrisy of the unions. If I told the National Education Association that we'd double it in the five largest cities, they wouldn't take it."

Was he right? I met with Bob Chase, the president of the National Education Association, in the union's headquarters in Washington. He made the familiar case for why vouchers are ineffectual today and would be a threatening distraction for public schools if tried more broadly. Only 25 percent of the adult population has children in the schools, he explained. We need to help the other 75 percent understand why financial support of schools is important. In this regard I sketched the deal: a handful of cities, higher spending, but only through vouchers. My tape recorder captured the staccato response.

"Is there any circumstance under which that would be something that . . ."

"No."

". . . you guys could live with? Why?"

"No."

"Double school spending . . ."

"No."

". . . in inner cities?"

"No."

"Triple it . . ."

"No."

". . . but give them a voucher?"

"Cause, one, that's not going to happen. I'm not going to answer a hypothetical [question] when nothing like that is ever possible."

"But teachers use hypotheticals every day."

"Not in arguments like this we don't. . . . It's pure and simply not going to happen. I'm not even going to use the intellectual processes to see if in fact that could work or not work, because it's not going to happen. That's a fact."

Sandra Feldman was similarly unwilling to consider such a plan. If new money is available for cities, both said, it should be spent to improve the existing system. They would fund pay raises to attract teachers to work downtown, turnaround programs for troubled schools, and general urban programs for health, nutrition, and parenting skills. Of course, pay raises-or smaller class sizes, or any specific reform-could happen under vouchers, if that's what schools felt was needed to attract students.

IF one believes that urban education won't improve under the same approach that has failed for years, the path to progress through vouchers follows a simple logic. A progressive hand is needed to pursue the benefits of vouchers without risk to the poor. A number of conservatives are open to such efforts if they make possible larger voucher trials. Given the disastrous state of many urban schools, the Democratic Party should be the natural home of this progressive influence. It is not, because teachers' unions loom large in Democratic fundraising and campaigns. Yet the Republicans' commitment to minorities will probably never be trusted to carry this issue alone. And, not unreasonably, Republicans are unlikely to increase spending for urban schools without ensuring that such increases are tied to system-wide reform.

Changing the Democratic Party's approach to vouchers is therefore the only way to do something serious for urban children anytime soon. This conclusion begets another political syllogism, and an opportunity. Most observers believe that if the NAACP embraced vouchers, it would force the unions to reassess their opposition. Teacher intransigence is sustainable only as long as minority leaders support it, because the children whose future is being blighted are mostly black and Hispanic. Yet as Kweisi Mfume makes clear, getting the NAACP to change its stance would require

voucher plans much bolder and more comprehensive than today's pilots.

Thus thinking bigger makes progress likelier. "That's why I've taken the more radical side," explains Floyd Flake, who quit Congress to run his church school and pursue these issues. "It's the only way to force the debate."

At some level even the unions know that their stonewalling is indefensible. "I would never argue with an individual parent who wanted to figure out a way to get his or her child into a better situation," Sandra Feldman says. "But to me, as a matter of public policy, that's not a good argument. The objective is to make the schools good-not to escape them."

But what if the ability to escape might help to make the schools better? And what if testing this proposition can't make anyone worse off? Yes, big voucher plans may require an act of faith, but it wouldn't be the first gamble in American education to work. A much smaller federal government rolled the dice on land-grant colleges in the 1860s with only a notion of what would happen; the research they sparked made U.S. agriculture the world's most productive. The G.I. Bill helped to spawn the postwar middle class. The moral urgency of today's voucher gamble is much greater. For all these reasons, Democrats should see large-scale urban voucher programs as an opportunity, not a threat. After all, once they embraced such a grand bargain, Democrats would be in the driver's seat. They retain, at least for now, the moral authority to speak in behalf of the disadvantaged, and Republicans would not be able to shrink from solutions they have long sought. The alternative is a Democratic Party that favors its funders at the expense of its constituents.

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