

WHEN YOU WEIGH THE EVIDENCE...

Voucher Programs in Milwaukee and Cleveland

BY DAN MURPHY

VOUCHERS HAVE always been controversial. Ever since they were first proposed forty years ago, people have been arguing about the wisdom of using public money to send children to private schools. Because the vast majority of private schools in the United States are religiously affiliated, one of the most heated debates has always been over church-state issues. Should taxpayers be expected to pay for children being educated in religious schools? The courts are now beginning to rule on this question.

On June 10, 1998, the Wisconsin Supreme Court supported the right of religious schools to participate in Milwaukee's publicly funded voucher program. The Cleveland voucher program, which has permitted religious schools since its beginning in 1996, is also awaiting a state supreme court decision as to its constitutionality.

But both these decisions could soon be moot. The plaintiffs in the Milwaukee suit have petitioned the U.S. Supreme Court to hear their case. If the court agrees,* the question of whether vouchers violate the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution by breaching the wall of separation between church and state could be resolved (though it is more likely that any decision will be tested and modified by later court cases).

In the meantime, the merits of vouchers continue to be argued in the court of public opinion. There, the church-state issue has recently taken a back seat to a number of other questions—in particular, social justice, student achievement, and value for money.

In the past, arguments about vouchers had to be largely theoretical because the only voucher programs in this country were short-lived and inconclusive. This did not stop advocates from presenting vouchers as a panacea for whatever ails public education. Now, however, we are beginning to get evidence about whether vouchers live up to the claims made for them. The programs in Milwaukee and Cleveland allow us to put the slogans of voucher supporters side by side with what vouchers actually achieve.

*It may have done so by the time this magazine reaches readers.

The New Battleground

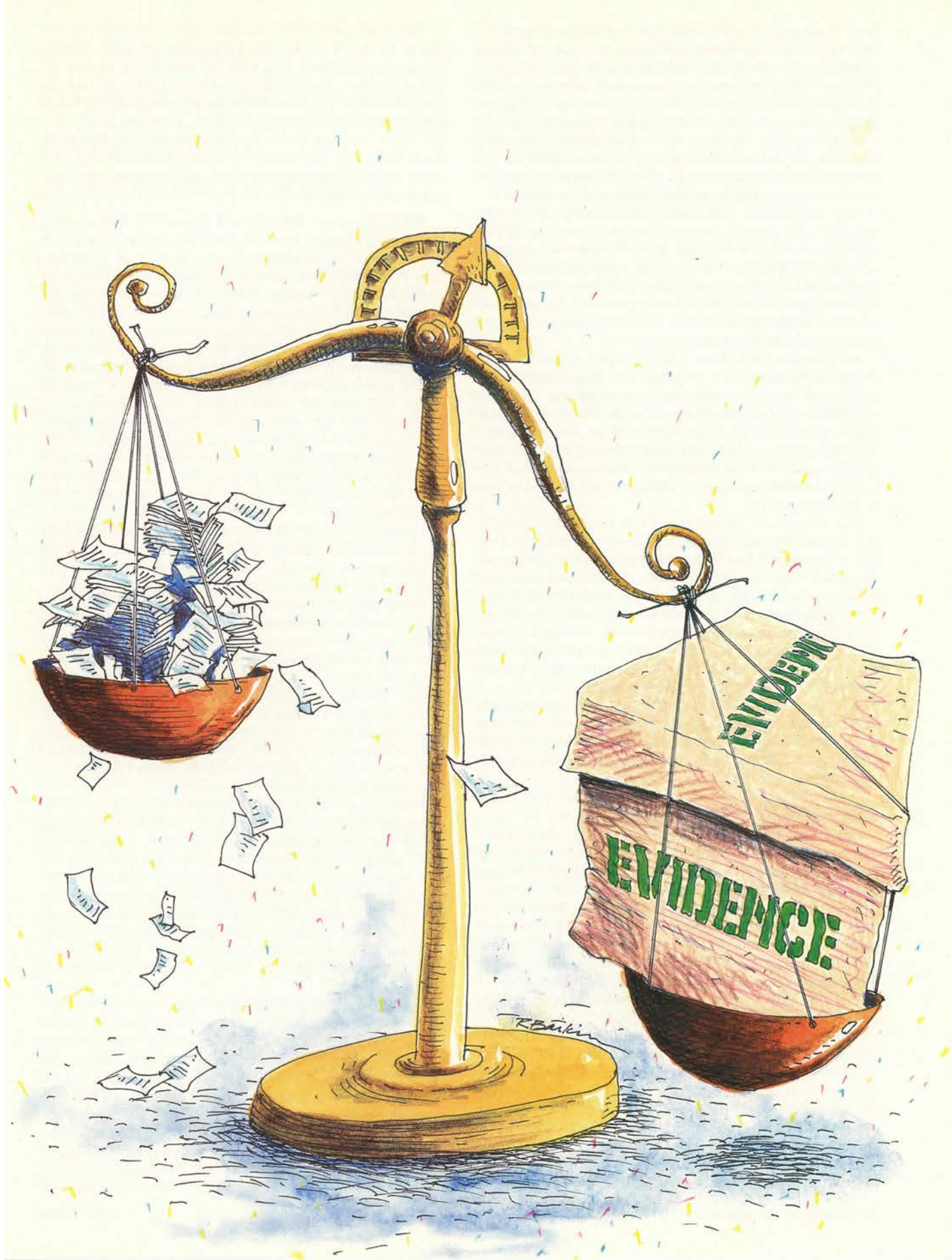
The people who first proposed vouchers generally saw them as a statewide or even national program, open to all children, no matter what their parents' income. In recent years, however, voucher advocates have shifted their energies from statewide or national voucher proposals to small-scale programs limited to poor parents in inner cities. One reason for the change is the lack of public support for large-scale voucher programs. Taxpayers have not been enthusiastic about spending public money to send children to private schools. They have worried about the price tag (especially if current private school students are included) and about further dividing our society along racial, ethnic, and religious lines, with various groups going their own way in their own schools; and they've simply been unwilling to abandon—or even threaten—public education. For example, over the last 30 years, voters in more than 10 states have defeated voucher or voucher-like initiatives by an average 2-1 margin—the most prominent defeats taking place in Oregon (1990), Colorado (1992), California (1993), and Washington State (1996).¹

There is probably another reason for voucher advocates' new focus. The work of a number of respected researchers suggests that a voucher system open to all parents—and with no provisions to protect the interests of poorer families—would strongly favor the well-off at the expense of the not-so-well-off.² For example, Professor Henry Levin of Stanford University, who has studied school choice (as vouchers are rather misleadingly known) both here and abroad, contends that a wide-open choice system would most likely worsen the serious inequities in our current system. Evidence is consistent, he says, "that educational choice leads to greater socioeconomic and racial segregation" and "that inequalities in educational outcomes are likely to be exacerbated by vouchers."³

A conclusion like this puts those who push for vouchers in an unattractive position, making them

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ILLUSTRATED BY ROBERT BARKIN



look as though they are willing to subsidize the education of children from well-off families, many of whom already go to private schools, at the expense of poor children. Whether voucher supporters aim, by starting with the poor, to extend vouchers over time to higher-income brackets, this current focus on poor children does give them the best shot at achieving universal vouchers. It also allows them to stake a claim to the moral high ground—and to paint those who oppose vouchers as insensitive to the needs of poor children.

The Milwaukee and Cleveland voucher programs embody the kind of inner-city low-income voucher plans currently in fashion. The Milwaukee program started in 1990-91. Over the last eight years, the program allowed between 300 and 1,650 low-income students a year to receive vouchers worth as much as \$4,700.⁴ Students could use these vouchers to attend private nonreligious schools only.

As a result of the Wisconsin Supreme Court's recent decision, however, the program will look radically different this year. In addition to permitting religious schools to participate, the court also allowed the program to expand to a maximum of 15,000 students. This year, state officials expect between 6,000 and 10,000 students to attend more than one hundred private and religious schools with vouchers worth close to \$5,000 apiece.⁵

The Cleveland program, which began in 1996-97, has permitted religious schools from the start. In fact, last year, about 3,000 low-income students received vouchers worth about \$2,500 to attend more than fifty private schools, the overwhelming majority of which were religious.⁶ Like the Milwaukee plan, the Cleveland program has grown from its early days as a "small-scale" pilot program. Every year, the program adds about 1,000 new students, all of whom enter private school at the kindergarten level.

What are the main arguments that voucher supporters use to support their efforts to get voucher programs into cities all over the country? And how do their claims stack up with the emerging facts from Milwaukee and Cleveland?

The Social Justice Argument

Voucher supporters currently couch their arguments in terms of social justice. They say that if rich people, including the president of the United States, can send their children to elite private schools, poor people should be able to do that, too. Proponents often refer to the campaign for vouchers as the "next civil rights movement." Just as the marches and protests of the 1960s brought minorities closer to the full rights of citizenship, vouchers—advocates say—will secure a new "civil right" for poor people: a high-quality education for their children.

Given the dubious civil rights and social justice credentials of many people now making this argument for vouchers, one could question their sincerity. But looking at the voucher programs themselves rather than the people advocating them, how valid are these appeals to social justice? Will voucher plans really open elite private schools to poor children? Will they even significantly expand the educational choices available to disadvantaged families?

There are two major reasons why vouchers are unlikely to fulfill these promises: (1) By their nature, voucher programs, even those restricted to low-income families, tend to favor the most (not least) advantaged families. (2) Even if a voucher program starts out restricted to low-income families, pressure from middle-class families (who naturally want the same for their kids) will likely lead to an expansion of the program to higher-income families, undermining the program's potential benefits for poor kids.

Who chooses? Who loses? Research shows that voucher programs tend to favor better-off families at the expense of families who are worse off. One reason, Professor Levin says, is that better-off families, by virtue of having "better access to information, greater ability to afford transportation, [and] a higher penchant to exercise educational alternatives" are more likely to seek a voucher in the first place.⁷ Although this bias toward better-off families can be partially reduced by restricting vouchers to low-income families, there will still be "advantaged" families—ones in which parents are more educated or more involved in their children's education—and these families will be more likely to go after a voucher. Indeed, Levin writes, this bias, which is likely to leave behind the kids who need the most help, "may be endemic to educational choice systems."⁸

Furthermore, for all the hype about giving parents the freedom to choose their children's schools, ultimately, private schools, not parents, do the choosing. And private schools are more likely, as Levin puts it, "to seek and choose students from families of higher socioeconomic status and with higher previous educational accomplishments."⁹ To some extent, this problem can be addressed by requiring participating voucher schools to admit voucher applicants randomly. But the inevitable result of such a requirement is that many established, high-quality private schools won't participate at all—or if they do, they may make only a few spaces available for voucher students. Any way you look at it, private schools retain control over who is admitted and who is rejected.

Evidence so far from the Milwaukee and Cleveland programs illustrates the soundness of Levin's warnings about the unequal effects of vouchers. Even though both programs are restricted to low-income families and require partial random admission (both allow participating private schools to give admission preference to existing students and their siblings; applicants thereafter must be admitted randomly, if demand exceeds the number of available slots), both have favored more-advantaged families at the expense of less-advantaged families.

For example, five years of Milwaukee voucher program evaluations revealed that voucher parents, on average, were better educated, more involved in their children's education (including when their children attended public schools), and had higher expectations for their children than parents of children in the Milwaukee Public Schools.¹⁰

Cleveland shows a similar pattern. Touted as a plan that would "save" the most disadvantaged students from "failing public schools," the program has fallen far short of this pledge. State records show that of

the 3,000 students enrolled in the program last year, only 25 percent were attending a public school the year before they entered the program.¹¹ The rest were either in a private school already or starting kindergarten. (And most of these students would probably have gone to private school even without the money provided by a voucher.)

Moreover, the kids who did transfer from public school were not the most disadvantaged but some of the best and brightest. According to the official state evaluation of the program released last spring:

Scholarship students who accepted a scholarship to move from the Cleveland public schools to a private school were achieving at higher levels than their public school peers before they entered the program. Thus, it appears that the scholarship program *attracted better achieving students away from the Cleveland public schools* [italics mine].¹²

As for the most disadvantaged students in Milwaukee and Cleveland, they continue to attend the public schools. But now, as a result of vouchers, the schools these kids attend have even fewer resources and fewer students who are likely to achieve at high levels—a dubious way indeed to “save” the children most in need of help.

Middle-class blues. Even assuming that the “ideal” low-income voucher program could be engineered—one that would make sure that only the most disadvantaged children received vouchers and then were able to use them at the best private schools—how long could such a program last? How long would working- and middle-class taxpayers be willing to foot the bill for vouchers while being denied the right to participate in the program—especially when some of them are already sending their kids to private or parochial schools at their own expense?

Not very long—if the Milwaukee voucher program is any indication. In the early days, the main force behind the Milwaukee voucher program was Annette “Polly” Williams, an African-American Democrat in the Wisconsin Assembly and author of the original 1990 bill. She envisioned vouchers as a way of helping poor kids while also empowering parents and bolstering secular African-American community schools.¹³

Williams realized that in order to get her program passed, she would need some help. Thus, she formed a coalition with some unlikely allies, including Republican Governor Tommy Thompson and other free-market enthusiasts. She knew that teaming up with such a crowd was a political gamble, but the risk seemed worth it, so long as the program remained limited to poor families in Milwaukee.

Soon, however, the balance of power began to shift, and Williams found herself increasingly estranged from the movement she had originated.¹⁴ First, religious schools were written into the law in 1995. Next, conservatives rebuffed several of Williams’ proposals to beef up monitoring of voucher schools—three of which had shut down mid-year. Finally, last June, Williams fired back. She accused conservatives of “hijacking” the program, with secret ambitions to give vouchers to higher-income families: “They got the door open, and that’s all they

needed.”¹⁵

A spokesperson for Governor Thompson’s office called this accusation “outrageous.”¹⁶ But just a little more than a month later, Milwaukee Mayor John Norquist issued a public statement vowing to raise or phase out the income cap on the program. Calling the cap unfair to middle-class families, Norquist warned that “As choice expands, the dissatisfaction with this income limit is going to become very acute.”¹⁷ Although state lawmakers say that the mayor’s proposal is a little premature, there is a growing sense that it will sooner or later have its day. “Republican legislators, in the future, will be willing to expand the choice program in Milwaukee,” Assembly Speaker Scott Jensen said.¹⁸

A disgusted Williams could only shake her head: “I knew it was coming. When we take the [income] cap off, we have lost the intent of that legislation. . . . There are people in that coalition who never intended to help low-income children.”¹⁹

Williams seems to be suggesting that voucher supporters’ real interest was in a universal voucher program, and they used her crusade for Milwaukee’s poor children to get a foot in the door. And it’s likely that when vouchers are expanded to include middle-class children, poor kids will suffer. The relatively scarce places in established private schools are likely to be snapped up by middle-class kids, leaving poor kids in schools that spring up to take advantage of the voucher money. (Some of them may be good; many will undoubtedly be very inadequate.)

Practically speaking, though, it doesn’t matter whether voucher advocates have been sincere in joining Williams’ crusade for poor children. Given the realities of our political system—where a broad middle class supplies most of the votes and pays most of the taxes—it is naïve to think that Williams’ story could have ended any other way.

The ‘Bigger-Bang-for-Your-Buck’ Argument

But even if current voucher programs are a mere prelude to a universal voucher scheme, one that includes all who care to participate, aren’t vouchers still a wonderful bargain? Advocates assure us that students who use vouchers to attend private schools will learn more and do it at almost half the cost of a public school education.

This argument is a real winner. Everyone wants American students to achieve at higher levels—after all, that is one chief complaint about public schools—and everyone likes a bargain. However, there is no proof that private schools, on average, produce higher student achievement than public schools, and there is no proof that private schools can provide the same education for less money.

The performance myth. A quick look at national test scores reveals that private school students do score slightly higher than public school students. But if you go beyond the raw data, it becomes clear that this is not because private schools provide a “better” education but because the students they

(Continued on page 40)