

MAKE SCHOOL BOARDS PAY WHEN KIDS DON'T LEARN

Rodney A. Clifton

Full-blown voucher systems for primary and secondary education are usually bitterly opposed by teachers and principals in the public school system. They also don't work in rural areas, where lack of population density makes effective competition among private schools unlikely. A modified voucher system would have the public school boards pick up the tab for privately-provided remedial work whenever parent-funded independent tests showed that a student was more than two grades behind in public school. Having to pay for the public schools' failings would give taxpayers a strong incentive to make sure the schools perform well.

La généralisation à l'enseignement primaire et secondaire d'un système de bon est globalement décriée par les enseignants et directeurs des écoles publiques. Un tel système s'applique en outre difficilement en régions rurales, où la faible densité de population ne favorise guère la concurrence entre établissements privés. Aussi devrait-on modifier ce système pour faire en sorte que les conseils d'écoles publiques paient la note des cours privés de rattrapage chaque fois que des examens indépendants financés par les parents montrent qu'un élève a plus de deux années scolaires de retard. En payant ainsi pour les lacunes de l'enseignement public, les contribuables seraient fortement incités à en assurer l'efficacité.

“Public schools are local monopolies with few competitors,” says James Heckman, a co-winner of the 2000 Nobel Prize for Economics. “The problem in public education is primarily due to muted incentives, not to inadequate resources.” Professor Heckman is not the only person who thinks that education is important and becoming more so. In fact, many people think it is important to improve the educational performance of students by opening public education to market-style incentives and competition. Most also believe that education should be improved without destroying the public schools in the process.

Few politicians, on the other hand, are so convinced of the necessity of improving education that they are willing to take on the powerful interest groups—teachers’ unions, principals, trustees, superintendents and professors of education—who are determined to protect the status quo. But if schools are to be reformed, politicians will need to empower parents and, at the same time, disempower these interest groups.

A truism in policy, as in life, is that it is better to fix problems sooner rather than later. In education, it is better

to address the problems that children have in learning as soon as possible rather than wait until they become serious. And yet thousands of parents often wait far too long, and then pay millions of dollars beyond what they already pay in educational taxes, for private tutors and private educational agencies to do what public schools have already been paid to do.

To make parents, particularly poor parents, pay twice for the same schooling, once in the public system and again in private agencies that provide remedial services, is simply unfair. To end that unfairness, provincial governments, parents, and other taxpayers must make fundamental changes in public education. The best-known proposal for improving public education is the voucher system. Both conservatives, such as Nobel Laureate Milton Friedman, and liberals, such as former US Labor Secretary Robert Reich, have argued that vouchers could improve children’s education. Many voucher systems are possible, but they all have in common that they take money from the public purse and give it to parents so they can purchase education for their children. Along with this transfer of money, opening up access to both private and public schools gives parents the opportu-

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nity to shop around for the best educational programs they can find.

There are at least four problems with most existing voucher systems, however.

- Teachers, school administrators, and trustees generally oppose opening up public education to market competition for the simple reason that it weakens their control and threatens the job security of teachers. They usually see vouchers as leading to the destruction of public education. Even if this perception is wrong, threatening teachers is not a good way of obtaining their cooperation.

- Vouchers will not work in rural areas where there are few schools. Competition requires the realistic availability of at least two schools that can deliver similar services.

- Parents pay for their children's education at the beginning of the school year and then trust that the schools will deliver the type of education they want. After giving their vouchers to a school, parents can't easily change their minds and enroll their children in other schools.

- Over the last 20 years, departments of education have provided less and less regulatory authority over educational programs and the performances of students. It's not obvious that departments of education will tighten their regulatory authority over schools even if parents were to use vouchers to pay for their children's education. As a result, some parents will send their children to schools with high academic standards while others will send their children to schools that deliver the intellectual equivalent of "junk food."

These weaknesses of unfettered vouchers suggest, at least to me, that provincial governments and school trustees need to develop less blunt policy instruments that nevertheless introduce incentives and competition into public education. At the very minimum, schools must focus on literacy and numeracy, the basic skills required for the developing knowledge-based economy. First, with the support of provincial governments, parents and other taxpayers must lobby their school trustees to ensure that students who are assessed as being below standard (say two or more grades below their grade level) will receive *fully-funded* upgrading at an independent educational agency. In other words, the cost of the upgrading programs will be provided by school divisions and not by parents, as is currently the case. The independent agency could be private tutors, non-profit private schools, parochial

schools or for-profit private schools. With almost 800 franchised centers in North America, Sylvan Learning Center is the largest of a growing number of private educational agencies.

Why support private agencies with public money? Because they are the only ones that, at any time during the academic year, can provide the competition necessary to hold public schools accountable, particularly in rural areas. In addition, some of the large private agencies—Kumon and Sylvan, for example—guarantee that they can bring the great majority of students up to grade level in literacy and numeracy in less than 100 hours, something public schools do not guarantee, even with substantially more time. Because school divisions will pay for the private lessons of students who are below standard, trustees, principals and teachers presumably will try to ensure that the students spend as little time as possible in the private agencies, which is perfectly appropriate.

Parents should pay for the initial assessments, conducted by external professionals, to determine the grade level at which students are functioning in literacy and numeracy. Making parents pay would both indicate their commitment to improving their children's educational performances and also ensure that the assessments of their children are independent from both the schools and the agencies delivering the upgrading services. Of course, nothing need prevent provincial governments, private foundations, churches and other citizens from assisting poor families with these costs.

Parents should also pay for the reassessment of their children by the independent evaluators after the upgrading is complete. If the students have improved to the appropriate grade level, they can stop attending the upgrading programs and resume full-time attendance at their public school.

Making parents and taxpayers pay twice for children's schooling is not fair. But when taxpayers have to make good the school system's failings they will take school board elections and budgets more seriously than they do now. They will also support parents who demand that public schools change their educational policies and practices to ensure that all students become literate and numerate. The publication of this information will provide incentives for trustees to enact policies and procedures that keep the costs low and the performances of students high. In fact, I expect that during school board elections, information on the cost of delivering

educational programs will be scrutinized and debated by parents and other taxpayers before they cast their votes.

The proposed system will also encourage parents to pay more attention to the education of their children. Parents will quickly realize that their children's education is fundamentally their responsibility. They will no longer be obliged to accept teachers' advice that they should not worry about the academic achievement of their children because they are "progressing at their own pace." And as more and more parents realize that the school board will have to pay for upgrading, they will have a strong incentive to determine the validity of the claims teachers make about their children's progress.

Over time, principals and superintendents will be more careful in hiring and retaining good teachers. Likewise, superintendents will have disincentives for shuffling incompetent teachers from school to school in the so-called "turkey trot" that exists now. If educational administrators hire or retain teachers who do not help their students progress in literacy and numeracy, and if a large number of students are assessed as being below standard, then their school board will need to spend huge sums of money re-educating students at private agencies. The transfer of funds from a public school to a private educational agency will directly affect the reputation of the school, the principal and the teachers.

Principals will also have strong incentives to ensure that their best teachers teach the most difficult students. No longer will excellent teachers be able to bargain with administrators to obtain the best classes of students, leaving the most difficult students for inexperienced teachers, as happens now. Principals will have additional incentives to independently evaluate students at the end of each year to ensure that teachers are keeping them progressing at an acceptable rate. If some students are close to the border line, good principals and teachers may well provide remedial work for the students to complete over the summer holidays.

Both teachers and principals will also have good reasons to reintroduce rigorous disciplinary programs for students who intentionally disrupt the education of others. Serious discipline problems detract from the time and energy that teachers can devote to actual teaching, thus ensuring that fewer students function at grade level. Undoubtedly, most parents, school trustees, and taxpayers will support teachers and principals

who focus more of their attention on the academic achievement of the majority of students who want to learn rather than waste valuable resources attempting to control the minority of incorrigible students.

Finally, this system of limited competition and incentives will force faculties of education—the Trojan horses of the failed public education system—to ensure that all graduates can teach and evaluate basic literacy and numeracy at various grade levels, something that is not currently done. Faculties that do not adequately educate their student-teachers will soon hear from graduates who fail to obtain teaching positions. In addition, faculties will also hear from principals who inadvertently hire less than competent graduates. With a little pressure from parents and taxpayers, school boards may introduce standardized assessment instruments to ensure that the teachers they hire can, in fact, teach and evaluate their students.

All told, the evidence is that monopolistic public schools do not do a good job of delivering education efficiently. The limited system of vouchers proposed here would open up public education to competition based on students' performances and provide incentives for improving performances without destroying the public schools. Those with a vested interest in protecting the status quo would have to become more accountable for what they do and how well they do it. Greater accountability will come from three factors: the system's objectives will be clearly stated in terms of grade level standards in literacy and numeracy; the evaluations of students, initiated by parents, will be independent of both the self-interested internal parties and the private educational agencies; and, finally, resources collected from all taxpayers, and not just from parents or provincial governments, will flow from schools that have failed to private agencies that guarantee success. As a result, taxpayers who have to pay more when the public schools underperform are likely to pay increased attention to the education of all students.

Rodney A. Clifton (Clifton@MS.UManitoba.ca) is Professor of Sociology of Education and Senior Fellow at St. John's College, University of Manitoba. He received a Ph.D in Sociology from the University of Toronto and a Fil.Dr. in Comparative Education from the University of Stockholm. He would like to thank Michael J.B. Jackson for helpful comments on a draft of this article.

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