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A Comprehensive Framework for Evaluating Educational Vouchers

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Major policy debates have arisen around the subject of educational vouchers as an alternative for financing and organizing elementary and secondary education. To a large degree, comparisons between vouchers and the traditional system of educational finance and school operations have been limited to one or two dimensions of education such as the relative impact of a particular system on achievement test scores. This article describes a comprehensive, evaluative framework that draws upon a larger range of goals that have been posed for education in a democratic and free society. These criteria include: (a) freedom of choice, (b) productive efficiency, (c) equity, and (d) social cohesion. The framework demonstrates the importance of and tradeoffs among these four criteria in evaluating specific educational voucher plans and enables comparisons with other alternatives such as charter schools as well as the more traditional public school arrangements.

Keywords: competition, educational finance, educational vouchers, evaluation, privatization, school choice

ALONG with the standards movement, increased educational choice is at the heart of school reform in the United States. Two of the most prominent choice reforms are charter schools and educational vouchers. Charter schools are public schools that receive a specified sum of funding for each student from their local school district or state and are released from compliance with many local and state regulations providing that they adhere to their declared mission or charter (Finn, Vanourek, & Manno, 2000; Fuller, 2000; Hess, Maranto, & Milliman, 2001; Miron & Nelson, 2002; Murphy & Shiffman, 2002; Nathan, 1996). In 2002 there were about 2,400 charter schools in 34 states and the District of Columbia.¹

A far more dramatic initiative towards parental choice is that of educational vouchers, an approach that would place the operation of schools into the competitive marketplace. Educational vouchers refer to a system of public educational finance in which parents are given a tuition certificate by the government that can be used to pay tuition at any “approved” school, public or private. Many types of schools, including those seeking profit, would

compete for students and their vouchers. Presumably, competition would lead to a greater range of choice and rising efficiency and innovation in education as schools have financial incentives to attract and retain their enrollments.

Although there are precursors to the voucher approach such as the plan proposed by Thomas Paine more than two centuries ago (West, 1967), the present discussions are based largely on the proposal made by Milton Friedman almost half a century ago (Friedman, 1962). Friedman argued that there is a compelling case for public finance of elementary and secondary education because of its public benefits in preparing the young for the values and behaviors necessary for a democracy. But, he also argued that there was no compelling reason for government to operate schools and that a government monopoly needed to be replaced with a free market of competitors. To protect the public interest, Friedman called for minimal content to promote democratic skills and attitudes among schools eligible to redeem vouchers. But, beyond that Friedman believed that schools should be unrestricted, so that a dynamic market

of for-profit schools would compete for students and provide more variety and a higher quality of education.

At the present time there are limited voucher programs for low-income families in both Milwaukee and in Cleveland.² Both programs were challenged in the courts for violating state and federal laws prohibiting public funds for religious instruction. In June 2002 the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the decision of a lower court in ruling that the Cleveland plan did not violate the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment. This recent decision has energized voucher advocates to expand such plans to other settings. The State of Florida adopted a plan by which students in schools that have failed, according to state standards, two years out of the previous four, must allow students in those schools to get a voucher to attend private schools or other public schools. Although Florida courts initially rejected the plan, it was upheld on appeal. Other states are also considering such measures. In addition, there are an increasing number of private voucher plans where philanthropic individuals and groups have provided funding for scholarships for the poor to attend nonpublic schools (Moe, 1995), and voucher experiments have been implemented in New York, Dayton, OH, and Washington, D.C. (Howell & Peterson, 2002).

The advent of educational vouchers has generated considerable controversy. Advocates argue that families need more choices and that educational vouchers will provide competition and improved school effectiveness and productivity in the spending of public dollars. Detractors claim that educational vouchers will serve primarily to generate business profits and marketing costs that could have been used to provide better educational services, and will lead to increased inequities in educational outcomes. They also assert that vouchers will undermine the common experiences that are fundamental to preparation of citizens for democracy. Although some empirical data are available on limited aspects of educational vouchers, the lack of a comprehensive framework that takes into account the major strengths and weaknesses limits any overall conclusions on probable consequences.³ Indeed, there is little clarity on precisely what should be assessed and how.

In considering the public policy alternatives, there is a great need to adopt an approach that can be used to compare systematically the different

alternatives and their consequences.⁴ The purpose of this article is to set out the foundation of a comprehensive framework for evaluating educational vouchers that might be a first step in building a fuller understanding and comparative assessment. I wish to put emphasis on the term "comprehensive." Much of the voucher debate seems to revolve around whether students who use educational vouchers or who attend private schools rather than public schools show higher achievement than those who attend public schools. In fact, typically the voucher comparison is limited to the apparent impact on test scores in reading and mathematics at the elementary-school level.⁵ On the basis of these results, many tend to infer general conclusions about the superiority or inferiority of educational voucher plans at all levels of education and for all educational outcomes, even though policy discussions set much broader goals for our educational system.

In the following sections, I will propose a comprehensive framework that has been applied in capsule form to addressing educational privatization (Levin, 1999). It will be shown that such a framework can compare educational vouchers with traditional public schools, charter schools, and other forms of educational organization. The next section will address the background for choosing particular criteria for assessing educational finance and organization. This will be followed by the specific criteria that we have chosen. The last section will address the challenging issues of refining the details of such an assessment framework to make it useful for choosing among alternative policies.

Educational Cross-Currents in a Democracy

In order to understand the issues surrounding educational vouchers, it is important to address the role of the schools in a democratic society characterized by considerable ethnic, racial, regional, and socioeconomic diversity such as the United States. This role can only be understood by considering the dual role that schools play in providing both public (social) benefits and private (family) benefits.⁶

Parental and Societal Rights

Both families and society have rights that are addressed through education. In a free and democratic society, parents have the right to rear their children in the manner that they see fit, philo-

sophically, religiously, politically, and in lifestyle. Since education is a central component of child-rearing, this right is consistent with freedom of educational choice. That is, it suggests that parents should be able to choose the type of school that best matches their child-rearing preferences.

But, democratic societies also need to reproduce the institutions for a free society in order to ensure these freedoms and the civic behavior that is consistent with them. Children are not born with civic knowledge and behavior. A purposive effort must be made to provide them with the knowledge, behavior, and values to participate in the political, social, and economic institutions that are foundational to a democratic society. Democratic societies are also concerned with the provision of fairness in access to life's rewards so that effort and talent, rather than privilege, are the determinants. These requirements suggest an educational system that provides a common set of educational experiences. Such educational conditions are a necessary foundation for creating equal life chances and preparing the young for democratic citizenship, participation, and opportunity in a socially cohesive society.

An educational system that responds to parental preferences through freedom of choice requires schools that are differentiated to meet the unique desires of families. In contrast, an educational system that prepares the young for democratic participation and for equity in life's chances requires a substantial, common educational experience for all children. Balancing individual choice for addressing child-rearing preferences with a common educational experience that will promote equity and social cohesion has always been a major challenge for the educational system.

Traditionally, U.S. communities addressed this challenge by creating state school systems that permitted considerable local discretion in implementing school policies within a common statutory framework. The political, religious, economic, ethnic, and racial status of the most powerful elements in the local population determined school practices and resources. For example, the system of financing education was dependent upon local property tax yields that depended upon the wealth of the local community (Coons, Clune, & Sugarman 1970). Within communities or local neighborhoods, the decisions of local governing boards were predicated upon the practices and beliefs of dominant groups in the community (Katz

1971). And within schools, students from different social classes were often placed in tracks that were more heavily reflective of their social status than their educational capabilities (Oakes, 1985).

But, by the latter half of the twentieth century these practices came under assault. Successful court challenges in behalf of poor school districts, racial minorities, females, handicapped, limited-English students and at-risk students were played out in state and federal courts. Congress and state legislatures passed educational laws protecting the rights of these groups and, in some cases, providing additional educational resources for them. Religious practices were proscribed from schools in almost all forms, and states intervened to more nearly equalize educational spending. Desegregation of schools and democratization of school opportunities became central to educational policy. Schools became profoundly more uniform in their policies over this period, reducing the special privileges that families had enjoyed traditionally. And simply moving to other neighborhoods or communities, a practice that was common to the middle class in its search for compatible schools, no longer provided the range of opportunities that were once available (Tiebout, 1956).

This increased uniformity of schools reduced parental options and the ability to match child-rearing preferences of parents to school experiences. By 1970 the success of legal and legislative strategies to achieve more equal educational opportunities and funding along with more uniform school practices led to rising pressures for increased freedom of choice and school differentiation, particularly among those who felt that they had lost choice privileges. If local political power could no longer be used to create schools that echoed the racial preferences, values, religious practices, and wealth of local residents, other alternatives would be sought.⁷ Initially these alternatives revolved around ways to increase local choice within the public schools.⁸ Public choice alternatives refer to the ability of families to choose from among public schools within a district or among districts rather than having students assigned to schools (Clune & Witte, 1990). Some districts created magnet schools with special themes to attract families who were interested in those themes (e.g., science, the arts, technology, multiculturalism, business, health professions, and so on). Intradistrict and interdistrict choice options also became common in many states and

school districts in response to family pressures for alternatives.

However, in the last decade these forms of public choice have been superseded by a shift to more radical alternatives such as charter schools and educational vouchers. Educational vouchers represent the most complete response to the public-private dilemma by funding all schools that meet certain minimal requirements, whether publicly or privately sponsored, with public dollars provided to families for educational purposes.

School Efficiency and Competition

Freedom of choice, school equity, and preparation for democracy are not the only themes that have characterized educational discussions and tensions over this period. There is also deep concern about whether schools are adequately productive, particularly in urban areas. Productivity refers to the relationship between resources provided for schooling and their educational impact. There is little evidence and considerable controversy over whether large increases in spending have produced significant improvements in student achievement and other school outcomes, particularly in inner-cities and rural areas (compare Hanushek, 1994 and Grissmer, Flanagan, & Williamson, 1998). Results have lagged especially for students from poor families, racial minorities, and immigrants with deep concerns on whether these populations will be educated adequately for incorporation into an economy based upon information technologies. Searches for ways of improving educational productivity have extended from greater use of educational technologies to comprehensive school reforms to market competition.

A key argument for school choice and vouchers by proponents is that they will replace an educational monopoly with competition (Hoxby, 2000). By forcing schools to compete for students, the discipline of market competition is expected to replace the captive audience enjoyed by most existing public schools.⁹ Additionally, Chubb and Moe (1990) argue that democratic solutions to school offerings are fraught with conflict and compromises, wrought by special interests that are often unconnected with student educational needs. Further, the diversity of student needs in any specific school environment means that any overall solution will not be particularly attentive to the needs of particular students.

In contrast, Chubb and Moe (1990) believe that the matching of students to schools through family choice would better meet the needs of all students. Friedman (1962) and others have lauded the educational marketplace as not only creating choice, but also providing incentives to improve efficiency in the delivery of educational services and innovation in education. Their view is that competition between public and private schools and among those in each sector will improve the performance of all schools that remain viable in the market while eliminating those that cannot survive competition. Thus, educational vouchers and other forms of market choice have been recommended as ways to increase the responsiveness of schools to family preferences and as a means of creating dramatic improvements in productivity. To the degree that they would be restricted only to the poor as in Cleveland and Milwaukee, they have also been asserted as a mechanism for gaining greater equity, and equity has been a recurrent theme through American education.

Elements of a Comprehensive Framework

The debate over vouchers can be partially understood in terms of the general differences in perspective between libertarians or economic liberals with their reliance on the marketplace and political liberals with their reliance on government. It can also be partially understood in terms of the valuing public versus private outcomes of education (Levin 1987). When one explores the multitude of exchanges on educational vouchers, four criteria emerge. Each of these criteria is highly important to particular policymakers and stakeholders: (a) freedom of choice, (b) productive efficiency, (c) equity, and (d) social cohesion.

Freedom of Choice This criterion refers to the rights of families to choose schools for their children that are premised on their values, educational philosophies, religious teachings, and political outlooks. It places a heavy emphasis on the private benefits of education and the liberty to ensure that the schools chosen are consistent with the child-rearing practices of families. Voucher advocates typically place great weight on this criterion relative to detractors.

Productive Efficiency This criterion refers to the maximization of educational results for any given resource constraint. Educational voucher advocates assume that market competition among schools for students will create strong incentives,

not only to meet student needs, but to improve educational productivity. Voucher detractors disagree.

Equity This criterion refers to a universally accepted goal of schooling in the United States, the quest for fairness in access to educational opportunities, resources, and outcomes by gender, social class, race, language origins, and geographical location of students. Those who challenge vouchers argue that they will create greater inequities because parents with education and income are better informed and have greater resources such as access to transportation. Also, they believe that the choices, themselves, will further segregate the poor and disenfranchised as those with power and status will select schools with students like themselves and schools will also select students by such criteria.¹⁰ Voucher advocates argue to the contrary, that the ability to choose schools will open up possibilities for students who are locked into inferior neighborhood schools and that the competitive marketplace will have great incentives to meet the needs of all students more fully than existing schools.

Social Cohesion This criterion incorporates a major public purpose of schooling in a democratic society, the provision of a common educational experience that will orient all students to grow to adulthood as full participants in the social, political, and economic institutions of our society. This is usually interpreted as necessitating common elements of schooling with regard to curriculum, social values, goals, language, and political institutions. A democracy requires that its members master the skills and knowledge necessary for civic and economic participation including one's rights and responsibilities under the law, the principles of democratic government, and an understanding of the overall economy and preparation for productive roles.¹¹ The preparation for social cohesion is similar to what Friedman (1962) has called the neighborhood effects or societal benefits of education that justify public funding of education. Opponents of educational vouchers stress that a market of competitive choices will lead to the balkanization of society rather than social cohesion.¹²

Designing Voucher Plans to Address the Criteria¹³

It is important to note that there is no single voucher plan, but many different plans, each with

emphases on a somewhat different mix of priorities among the four criteria. Although some refer to "the voucher plan", differences among voucher plans can have profoundly different results. Within limits, educational voucher arrangements are highly malleable. Plans can be constructed with particular features to address each of the four criteria by using three design instruments: (a) finance, (b) regulation, and (c) support services.

Finance Finance refers to the overall magnitude of the educational voucher, how it is allocated and whether schools can charge greater tuition than the voucher. With a larger voucher there will be more options arising in the marketplace with greater freedom of choice and competition. If the educational voucher is differentiated by educational need such as larger vouchers for those with handicaps and from poverty backgrounds, some issues of equity will be addressed. Schools will have greater incentives to attract such students and provide the resources and programs to address their needs. If families can add on to vouchers from their private resources as Friedman proposed, there will be advantages for families with higher incomes in the educational marketplace who are able to send their children to more expensive and restrictive schools with potential increases in inequities relative to the present system.

Regulation Regulation refers to the requirements set out by government for eligibility of schools to participate in the voucher system as well as any other rules that must be adhered to by schools and families in using educational vouchers. Presumably, only schools that meet certain standards will be eligible to redeem vouchers. Some voucher plans have emphasized a common curriculum and uniform testing as a condition of school participation to ensure that students are meeting goals of social cohesion and that schools can be compared for their productive efficiency. Admissions requirements have also been a matter of scrutiny where schools with more applicants than available places will be required to choose a portion of students by lottery to assure fairness in selection procedures. Eligibility for vouchers may be restricted to certain populations in the name of equity. For example, public and private voucher plans in the United States have been generally limited to children from poor families in order to give them choices outside of their neighborhoods. The Florida legislation limited vouchers to children in failing public schools.

Support Services Support services refer to those types of publicly provided services designed to increase the effectiveness of the market in providing freedom of choice, productive efficiency, and equity. Competitive markets assume that consumers will have access to a wide variety of choices as well as useful information for selecting among them. In the United States the availability of public transportation is very limited, necessitating a system of school transportation from the children's neighborhoods to their school of choice. In the absence of school transportation, school choices and competition for students will be limited, reducing both the competitive efficiency of schools and creating inequities for those who cannot afford private transportation. Information must be widely available for families to make informed choices about the schools that they select for their children. Accurate information on school programs and effectiveness as well as other important aspects of school philosophy and practice would need to be collected and disseminated to parents to assist in making decisions (Schneider, 1999). Technical assistance could also be provided by government agencies through information and training to new schools to advance the productivity of the entire sector.

Different voucher proposals have incorporated specific designs that utilize these three policy instruments to achieve particular goals. For example, the original Friedman (1962) proposal focussed primarily on freedom of choice and productive efficiency by establishing a flat voucher at a modest level with the ability of parents to add to the voucher for their children. No provisions were made for transportation or information (inhibiting somewhat the goal of informed choice), and regulation was minimal.¹⁴ Of course, the lack of information and transportation would likely reduce opportunities, especially for families with modest resources, this presents a challenge for equity. But these omissions would reduce costs and government intrusion with respect to family educational goals, presumably raising productive efficiency. Social cohesion was addressed with the suggestion of a minimal curriculum provision that is not described further.

A plan prepared for the U.S. Office of Economic Opportunity by Christopher Jencks (Center for the Study of Public Policy, 1970) placed much greater emphasis on equity, social cohesion, and freedom of choice as do plans suggested

by; Chubb & Moe (1990, p. 90), and Coons & Sugarman (1978). The Jencks plan provided larger vouchers for the poor, regulation of admissions, standardized tests for common areas of curriculum, and provision of both transportation and information. But, the high potential costs of transportation, information, and regulation could harm productive efficiency. This proposal put great emphasis on increasing choice, particularly for families who lack resources, but extensive regulations could also inhibit freedom of choice more generally by imposing admissions requirements, curriculum, and testing requirements on schools and limiting the numbers of schools that will enter the market.

In contrast to these general voucher plans, the privately financed voucher plans and publicly financed arrangements in Milwaukee and Cleveland are restricted to students from lower income families, with an obvious emphasis on increasing opportunities for these children alone. However, these are viewed as pilot programs by many of their advocates and an entrée or prelude to a more general voucher endeavor by others. Voucher plans for the poor vary considerably with respect to size of the voucher, regulation, and support services, with the two public plans encompassing substantial regulation while providing transportation and some information.¹⁵ In most of the privately financed voucher endeavors, the voucher has been set at a low level in order to require the parent to make a sacrifice by raising the remainder of the funds as a gesture of shared responsibility.

It is important to stress that setting out regulations and other provisions is only a necessary condition for using finance, regulation, and support services to construct a voucher (or charter school) plan. Equally important is the implementation of these provisions. If schools are not permitted to charge additional payments to parents or take donations, this policy is only as good as the ability to enforce it. The same is true for ensuring that a common curriculum is used or that admissions decisions are made in an equitable manner. For example, many of the states seem to have guidelines for charter schools that are not strictly enforced because the states have provided only minimal appropriations for ensuring their implementation. Certainly, states have not been able to assure consistent quality among traditional public schools through setting out requirements that are often vague and difficult or costly to monitor. Imple-

mentation requires resources, monitoring, technical assistance, and sanctions. In the absence of the first three of these, the sanctions are not meaningful. Thus, any analysis of the use of the three design instruments must go beyond the formal provisions to the adequacy of the mechanisms for implementing provisions.¹⁶

A System of Tradeoffs and Preferences

Moe (1995) has suggested that molding particular objectives into voucher plans is a matter of design. To some degree he is correct, but such a perspective does not acknowledge the tensions and conflicts among criteria and goals in themselves that suggest that gains in fulfilling one criterion may reduce the ability to fulfill others. This means that intrinsically there must be tradeoffs. Some goals cannot be attained without sacrificing others.

For example, Friedman's plan aims to maximize freedom of choice and productive efficiency through competition, arguably, at the expense of equity and social cohesion. Recall that Friedman would provide a modest, flat voucher at public expense with parental options to add to the voucher from their private resources and schools could set tuition at any level. Regulation would be minimal, and there would be no provision for transportation and information. This would promote a very large number of alternatives at different levels of tuition, *for those who could afford them*, with few restrictions on schools that enter the marketplace, promoting a large supply of options. Clearly, social cohesion and equity goals would not be paramount.

Conversely, plans that emphasize social cohesion and equity tend to reduce freedom of choice and productive efficiency by establishing a variety of regulations and support services. For example, the Jencks plan (Center for the Study of Public Policy, 1970) would regulate admissions and curriculum and require standardized testing and reporting of results. It would also provide larger vouchers for the poor—so-called compensatory vouchers—and a system of transportation and information.¹⁷ Furthermore, vouchers could not be augmented from private resources. The regulations and a fixed-government voucher with no private augmentation would reduce freedom of choice relative to the Friedman plan. The high costs of providing information and transportation and monitoring the regulations for eligible schools

could add considerably to the costs of the voucher system and reduce productive efficiency (Levin & Driver, 1997). The plan designed by Jencks and associates would focus on equity. The common curriculum and testing requirements would also be expected to improve social cohesion.

Although some design provisions would improve outcomes along more than one criterion, almost all would also reduce outcomes on other criteria. Provision of information and transportation will improve choice options for all participants, but especially for those from families with the least access to information and transportation, (i.e., the poor.) But, such provisions would also raise the costs of the overall educational system, probably reducing productive efficiency unless gains from competition due to better information and access offset the costs of transportation and information. The establishment of regulations with continuous monitoring and enforcement could be used to increase equity and social cohesion, but at the sacrifice of freedom of choice and productive efficiency.

This means that there is no optimal system that provides maximal results among all four criteria. Ultimately, the choice of design features will depend upon specific preferences and values as transmitted through democratic institutions. Those who place a high value on freedom of choice will probably be willing to sacrifice some equity and social cohesion provisions by eschewing regulations and support services and allowing parental add-ons to vouchers. Conversely, those who place a high value on social cohesion will be willing to sacrifice some freedom of choice through establishing a common curriculum core and other standardized features of schools. Ultimately, much of the debate over the specifics of educational voucher plans revolves around the political power and preferences of the stakeholders.

It is an understatement to say that advocates of vouchers may agree on the general case for vouchers, but may disagree profoundly on specifics. There are even strong differences among persons who are often placed in the same general political category.¹⁸ Thus, many political liberals want to see greater freedom of choice for students in the inner city through educational vouchers, even though political liberals are usually viewed as antagonistic to marketplace solutions for government services. At the same time, cultural conservatives are deeply committed to a common cur-

riculum and knowledge framework that should be required of all students and the schools where they are enrolled—a very substantial commitment to regulation (Bennett, 1987; Hirsch, 1987). Conservatives with libertarian views reject regulatory requirements entirely in favor of market accountability.

Summary of the Evaluation Criteria

Thus far we have suggested that educational vouchers and competing approaches to financing and organizing education can be assessed according to four criteria: (a) freedom of choice, (b) productive efficiency, (c) equity, and (d) social cohesion. We have asserted that voucher (and charter) plans can be designed to address each of these through employing three design tools as policy instruments: (a) finance, (b) regulation, and (c) support services. But, we have also concluded that even with the use of these three tools there are tradeoffs among the criteria in the sense that enhancing performance on one or more of them is likely to infringe on the performance of the others. Thus, educational voucher designs must choose priorities among the different criteria in considering these tradeoffs. In the final section we will consider the broad steps that must be taken to refine this framework for making evaluative choices both within an educational voucher system and in comparing educational vouchers with alternative educational policies.

Refining and Applying the Framework

In order to apply this framework, it is necessary to set out various dimensions for using the three policy tools to design or analyze voucher proposals; to develop the details for evaluating criteria; and to search for evidence that links the specific features of a voucher plan to the criteria. It would also be useful to ascertain social preferences and tradeoffs among the criteria.

Creating a Checklist for Design and Impact

It should be possible to construct a checklist for the three policy dimensions so that both policy makers and laypersons can examine different voucher plans to know their crucial features. The Appendix sets out questions under the three design dimensions that might guide such analysis. It is important to note that the questions are illustrative rather than exhaustive. The responses to these questions should help in the analysis of

specific voucher proposals, although they might be augmented as new issues arise in the design of voucher plans. Each question invites a detailed evaluation of the proposed voucher arrangement.

In similar fashion it is important to provide a detailed structure of the components of each of the four criteria for evaluating the impact of voucher plans. The following are examples, but hardly a comprehensive listing, of such components:

Freedom of Choice Elements of this criterion include the magnitude and range of school costs that will be covered by vouchers including special needs; the range of permitted school philosophies, religious practices, and educational goals that will be allowed; the degree of regulation of curriculum, admissions, and testing; short-run and long-run supply of schools (depending on population density, funding incentives, and so on); the availability of information on alternatives; and the availability and extensiveness of transportation. The degree to which families versus schools make choices is also important and may be affected by regulation.

Productive Efficiency This criterion includes a variety of measures of academic outcomes relative to the costs for similar students and student services to produce these outcomes. Outcomes should include not only the standard academic subjects, but also other skills such as problem solving, working in teams, and effective decision making as required in high-productivity workplaces. Academic achievement should include not only knowledge as measured on test scores, but also understanding and application of knowledge in real-world situations. Costs should be compared against the costs of producing similar services for similar populations through other alternatives. Also, there must be a distinction between the costs of producing education at the school site and those associated with the system of monitoring and administering the educational system and providing support services (Levin & Driver, 1997). A voucher system may require a range of support and administrative elements that are likely to be more extensive and costly than those of the present overall system.

Equity The components of equity include identification of the particular distinctions among populations that are the focus of equity such as race, income, gender, immigrant or language status, and

geographical region. Availability of services to respond to special educational needs is also central. Components of analysis include the degree of access to educational opportunities, the quality of those opportunities including school resources and peers, and the probable educational outcomes for those groups. Some have expressed concerns about “cherry picking” so that students left behind lose their more advantaged and able peers and schools lose those parents who would be more active in changing the public schools (Zimmer & Toma, 2000). This too, should be accounted for in the equity measures.

Social Cohesion This criterion includes those common elements that prepare students for civic participation. In general, this encompasses exposure to history, political institutions and their dynamics, legal frameworks and institutions, citizen rights and responsibilities within the political and legal systems, economic institutions and their functions, and a common language. In addition, it may include an attempt to provide productive interactions with peers from different perspectives or cultures. It may also require community service and applications of the institutional framework in the classroom through debates, mock trials, “constitutional conventions,” and other manifestations of citizen roles.

Each of these must be as fully developed as possible so that detailed comparisons of the impacts of different educational systems of finance and operation can be ascertained.

Assembling Evidence

The analysis of voucher plans and the descriptions of the four evaluative criteria can be used as a framework to assemble evidence on the consequences of vouchers and other alternatives.¹⁹ An extensive summary is beyond the scope of this article, but examples of evidence can be suggested.

Freedom of choice has not been studied directly. It is obvious that marketplace approaches generally provide more choice than conventional neighborhood schools, but not necessarily more than public-choice approaches such as intra-district, interdistrict, magnet, and charter school plans. Inner city and private voucher plans have surely expanded choice for the low-income populations towards which they have been targeted (e.g., Witte, 2000; Moe, 1995). Attention needs to be devoted to ranges of alternatives with respect

to types of educational choices and their affordability and accessibility under specific voucher plans (Gill, Timpane, Ross, & Brewer, 2001, pp. 115–137).

Evidence on productive efficiency is more abundant, although limited in scope (mostly analysis of test scores) and equivocal in many ways. For example, McEwan (2000a) found modest differences in favor of private and voucher students for student achievement in reading and mathematics. In a review of econometric studies, Belfield and Levin (in press) found small positive effects of school competition on a range of educational outcomes. Studies of the impact of educational vouchers on improving competitive efficiency of schools is too limited to generalize from according to both McEwan (2000b) and the very extensive study by the Rand Corporation (Gill et al., 2001).

The imaginative use of randomized field trials of vouchers in three cities by Howell, Wolf, Campbell, and Peterson (2002) showed a positive impact for African Americans (although not for Hispanics) in one city, after two years. However, no advantage in achievement was found in the third year with the exception of African-American students in New York City (Howell & Peterson, 2002; Viadero, 2002). No systematic cost comparisons for comparable students and services are available, but the costs of administering a voucher system appear to be higher than for the existing organization of schools (Levin & Driver 1997).²⁰

Some inferences have been drawn about equity in terms of who chooses and receives the benefits of choice (Fuller, Elmore, & Orfield, 1996). In general, minorities and the poor are less likely to choose, unless the plan is restricted to these groups. Such populations are also more limited in information (Levin, 1998; Schneider, Teske, & Marschall, 2000) and transportation access (Levin, 1998). Although there are many assertions about potential effects on student stratification, peer effects, unfair admission practices, and effects on remaining students in schools where students have left, the supporting evidence is drawn from other choice situations (Gill et al., 2001, pp. 139–184). There is virtually no rigorous evidence from specific voucher plans.

Recent studies on civic education and behavior that might reflect on social cohesion are also inconclusive.²¹ A Massachusetts study compared civic education and behavior across different types of schools; charter schools, public schools

with different achievement, catholic schools, and private schools (Campbell, 2001). However, both sampling issues and a lack of statistical controls on student selection and school characteristics limit interpretation. Greene (1998) argued that private schools promote greater tolerance than public schools, but he did not adjust for the self-selection that differentiates student bodies between the two types of schools. Godwin, Deng, Martinez, Wolf, and Wood (2001) adjust for self-selection and find that some groups of private schools are as effective or superior to public schools in the teaching of democratic norms and political tolerance.

A concerted effort must be made to develop a wide range of reliable evidence and to use the rubric to evaluate the evidence. The Rand study (Gill et al., 2001) did an exhaustive study on what is known and what is lacking and concluded that the knowledge base is still inadequate to draw conclusions on these dimensions

Gauging Preferences

The lack of solid evidence on most of the criteria may explain why the weight of political opinion, ideology, and preferences seem to dominate the voucher debate. Reference to evidence is often overstated and selective. This phenomenon suggests that a study of relative importance of the different criteria is important (e.g., Moe, 2001). In particular, we need to ascertain how different populations set priorities among the criteria in establishing their own preferences for a particular kind of educational system.²² This does not mean that the best system is one that is reflective of individual opinions, summarized for particular demographic groups or geographical entities. It may be difficult for individuals to consider the value of the social purposes of schooling.²³ But, we believe that sophisticated public opinion polling can assist in providing the contours of preferences for a given population and segments of that population that differ by age, race, education, income, political orientation, and so on. By using methodologies that allow respondents to weight their preferences among a number of competing criteria, we might obtain data that enable us to judge tradeoffs.²⁴

Supreme Court Decision on the Cleveland Program

In June 2002 the U.S. Supreme Court in *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* (2002) handed down its important decision on the constitutionality of vouch-

ers under the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program (CSTP). Although the Court did not carry out a comprehensive evaluation of vouchers, it is instructive to examine the views of the Court regarding the Cleveland program within the evaluation framework proposed in this article. The CSTP provides tuition aid to parents for sending their children either to private schools (religious or non-religious) or public schools outside of the Cleveland district or for tutoring. Payments are contingent on financial need. Parents with incomes below 200% of the poverty line (\$ 27,722 for a family of three) are given priority and can receive 90% of private school tuition up to \$2,250. Students can also choose to go to public schools in other school districts, receiving a flat voucher of \$2,250. Tutorial assistance of \$360 a year is available to students in the Cleveland school system that do not receive voucher scholarships. Vouchers can be supplemented by other scholarships and financial assistance as well as by funding from parental resources. In the case of private school vouchers, few regulations are imposed beyond those that already apply to private schools in Ohio. Schools must not discriminate in admissions and must provide data for evaluation. In terms of support services, transportation is offered at public expense.

It should be noted that the Cleveland School District was declared to be failing by a federal district court in 1995 and placed under state control. Subsequently, the State of Ohio undertook a number of interventions including the establishment of magnet schools and the CSTP. The issue before the Supreme Court was whether the CSTP violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment which declares that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion . . .". This clause has been interpreted as preventing the states from enacting laws that have the purpose or effect of advancing or inhibiting religion. In 1999–2000 some 82% of the participating private schools were religious and 96% of students receiving vouchers or scholarships were in religious schools. By a 5–4 majority, the Supreme Court declared that the CSTP neither advances nor inhibits religion.

Of the four criteria in the comprehensive evaluation framework, the Court's decision gave overwhelming attention to freedom of choice. Its principal argument is that the CSTP is neutral with respect to religion because it simply provides additional options among a much larger range of

choices in a failing school district. That is, the CSTP simply adds interdistrict, private school, and tutoring options to the existing choice opportunities of magnet schools and charter schools (called community schools in Ohio). Although equity issues are mentioned, productive efficiency is largely neglected, and the majority decision does not address the major issue of social cohesion. The dissenting justices emphasized that the decision serves to authorize the use of public funds to indoctrinate religious “truths” and to create the potential for social strife rather than social cohesion and democratic functioning.

In terms of freedom of choice, the Court’s majority viewed the CSTP as only one among a variety of choice mechanisms available to students in Cleveland that enables them to find alternatives to their neighborhood public schools. When CSTP with its 4,200 students is placed within the context of the Cleveland School District with about 75,000 students, it is a relatively small choice program. Magnet schools enrolled about 13,000 students in 1999, and an additional 2,000 students were enrolled in an expanding set of charter schools. Accordingly, the Majority argued that the CSTP is neutral with respect to religion and simply provides additional private options within a larger choice framework.

Interestingly, equity is mentioned only in passing because of the preference given by CSTP for participation of lower income families and the fact that the Cleveland Public Schools have a predominance of students from low-income and minority families. Of some surprise is the lack of attention in the decision to the productive efficiency arguments, especially given the designation of Cleveland as a failed district that led to the CSTP and other state interventions. Certainly, the overall debate about CSTP has been placed within the claim that vouchers for private schools have merit because they raise student achievement relative to public schools and that competition with private schools should spur public schools to improve (e.g., Peterson & Hassel, 1998). The lack of focus on productive efficiency is likely due to two factors: the narrow focus of the case on the religious issue and the ambiguity of the evidence from evaluations of student achievement (Metcalf, 2001).²⁵ The majority may have also believed tacitly that private schools are superior in their results to public schools, even in the absence of rigorous evidence.

The omission of concern about the social cohesion issue is somewhat more puzzling. Justices Souter and Breyer, in their dissenting statements, place great emphasis on the divisiveness of educating students in schools with strong religious indoctrination. But, this perspective is not considered, except in passing, in the majority opinion. In the light of the framework set out above, the social cohesion criterion was simply not given much weight by the majority.

In the final analysis it is important to note that the Supreme Court decision addressed whether a specific voucher plan that allows the participation of religious schools is permissible according to the Constitution. It may still fail to pass muster among states that have stricter constitutional prohibitions on church-state relations.²⁶ Whether this plan constitutes desirable educational policy is beyond the purview of the Supreme Court and must be decided through democratic mechanisms that govern education within the states. For those states considering educational vouchers, proposals may build on the discussions and criteria used by the Court in designing finance, regulation, and support services. For example, the states may consider voucher approaches that allow vouchers of higher value, opening up a greater range of schools that are willing to accept voucher students than just the lower cost and subsidized religious schools. Or, states that take social cohesion aspects most seriously may decide against vouchers or set out strict curriculum, personnel, and testing requirements to assure greater commonality in educational experience and civic preparation and to prevent practices that are considered to promote potential strife. The policy tools and criteria proposed in this article are useful in carrying out more detailed evaluations of the Cleveland plan as well as the Supreme Court decision and the views of the concurring and dissenting justices.

Summary

The policy issues surrounding educational vouchers are far more complex than the typical assertions on the subject. Multiple educational goals and differences in design features of voucher plans suggest the need for a more detailed and comprehensive approach to evaluation of educational vouchers and their consequences. Preferences for different educational goals mean that even with similar evidence on the effectiveness of different features, different voucher advocates

may disagree profoundly on the design of a voucher system. Among those who oppose educational vouchers, the opposition is likely to stem more from concerns about equity and social cohesion than a desire for more choice or productive efficiency. The framework presented here may provide a useful context for addressing that combination of values, preferences, and design issues.

Appendix

Questions for Analyzing Design Dimensions of Vouchers

Finance:

Funding from Private Sources

- Can parents add on to the voucher to enroll their children in schools with higher tuition?
- Are schools permitted to raise funds or use assets provided outside of voucher support?
- Can schools charge fees to parents for specific services? Which ones?

Affordability

- Is the magnitude of the voucher at a high, medium, or low level relative to the range of tuition costs of schools?
- Is the voucher adequate to promote an abundant supply of schooling places for voucher students?

Responsiveness to Educational Needs and Resource Costs

- Is the voucher graduated according to educational need such as special education, compensatory education, and bilingual education?
- Does the voucher take account of differential costs of education by geographical area because of different costs of resources or diseconomies of scale in rural areas?
- Is the voucher differentiated according to schooling level and type?

Regulation:

Curriculum and School Performance

- Is a standard curriculum or partially standardized curriculum required?
- Is mandatory testing required with specific tests?
- Must schools report aggregate testing results by subject and grade and for different groups of

children (e.g., handicap, poverty, home language, and minority criteria)?

- Can schools promote religion or religious practices or political views?

Personnel Requirements

- What employment and certification standards must personnel meet?
- Are there restrictions on staffing and class size?
- How will salaries and benefits be determined?
- What arrangements are made for collective bargaining?

Sponsorship

- Can schools be sponsored by religious or political entities?

Facilities

- What are the minimal requirements for physical facilities (e.g., classrooms, gymnasiums, auditoriums, play areas, lavatories)?
- What safety requirements must schools meet (e.g., fire or seismic safety)?

Student Eligibility

- What are the geographical limits of school and student eligibility (state, city, school district, region)?
- Are there income or ethnicity limits for student participation?

Parental and School Disputes

- Within what limits can schools set requirements for parental roles and student behavior (parent and student contracts)?
- Must schools (and parents) submit irreconcilable disputes to a government or independent authority for adjudication?

Support Services:

Transportation

- Is there a reasonable system of transportation provided at public expense to assure that families have access to a sufficient number of schools?

Information

- Are schools required to provide accurate information on philosophies, curriculum, staff qualifications, facilities, practices, and student achievement for parental choice?

- Is there a mechanism for disseminating accurate information to parents and students about school choices that provides access to that information regardless of income, education, or language of origin?
- Is there assistance for parents (and older students) to gather and interpret information to make school choices?

Dispute Provision

- Is a mechanism provided for adjudication of disputes between schools and families regarding suspension, expulsion, or switching schools during the school term?

Notes

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¹ It should be noted that charter schools vary considerably from state-to-state in the way that they are financed, regulated, and provided with support services (RPP International, 1999).

² See No. 00-1751 *Susan Tave Zelman, Superintendent of Public Instruction of Ohio, et al., Petitioners v. Doris Simmons-Harris, et al.* Docketed: Lower Ct: United States Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit May 23, 2001 (00-3055/3060/3063). The U.S. Supreme Court handed down its decision on May 27, 2002 in *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* (00-1751)234 F.3d945, reversed. The complete text of the Supreme Court's decision, issued on June 27, 2002, with concurring and dissenting opinions is found at <http://supct.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/00-1751.ZS.html>. Details on the Cleveland and Milwaukee plans are found in U.S. General Accounting Office (2001)

³ See summaries in Levin (1998); McEwan (2000b); Goldhaber (1999), and the more recent progress in Gill et al. (2001) and Godwin and Kemerer (2002).

⁴ There has been a tremendous outpouring of recent literature on educational vouchers, much of it limited to a one-sided picture of the issues or to a single issue. Although these sources are valuable, they do not establish a common framework and tend to be framed more in advocacy terms than a more balanced approach. Compare, for example, Fuller, Elmore, and Orfield (1996) with Peterson and Hassel (1998). Other recent works include Henig (1994), House (1998), Sugarman and Kemerer (2000), Viteritti (1999), Wells (1993), and Witte (2000). Compare the narrower focus of each of these works with the much wider range of issues that

emerged in a series of meetings on vouchers and choice with participation of a very diverse set of representatives in Center on Education Policy (2000). The broadest evaluation of evidence is Gill, et al. (2001) and Godwin & Kemerer (2002). Although both cite an earlier version of this article, their analytic categories differ somewhat from those suggested here. Also, see Levin (1999) for the earliest version of the arguments regarding policy tools, criteria, and tradeoffs. Gill et al. (2001) also compares vouchers and charters according to a common set of criteria.

⁵ McEwan (2000a) provides a comprehensive summary of most of the statistical studies.

⁶ The next section draws heavily upon the analysis in Levin (1987).

⁷ Feigenbaum, Henig, and Hamnett (1999) offer other explanations that are more generic in scope and less closely linked to the specifics of the educational case.

⁸ Husted and Kenny (2002) found strong evidence that school finance equalization in California led to greater private school enrollments as funding among districts became more nearly equal.

⁹ Note that Henig and Sugarman (1999) suggest that an analysis of choice among independent schools, public schools within districts, and locational decisions affecting schooling suggest that three fifths of all students are in "choice schools". In a review of about 40 econometric studies that test for the apparent effects of competition on educational results, a small positive effect was found; but a very large share of the analyses show results that are statistically insignificant (Belfield & Levin 2001).

¹⁰ In a somewhat different context, in New Zealand, Fiske and Ladd (2000) review a choice process that, they believe, has lessons for voucher plans.

¹¹ What, precisely, the benefits are and how they are produced is hardly an area of consensus. For some general readings on this subject see Callan (1997), Cuban and Shipps (2000), Goodlad (1997), Guttman (1986), and Soder (1996). For specific interpretations on curriculum, see Bennett (1987) and on content, see Hirsch (1987).

¹² One dilemma is that of delineating the size and scope of the social unit that will be used as a basis for social cohesion. For example, some ethnic and racial groups emphasize the need to use the schools to develop cohesion within their communities. This goal may be in conflict with a more universal set of social cohesion goals. For a thoughtful discussion of this dilemma, see Fein (1970). One voucher adherent who argues that private schools do as well or better than public schools in teaching broad democratic values is Greene (1998).

¹³ This framework can be applied to charter schools, the traditional organization of public schools, and other policy interventions in education to create a comparative approach. I have limited this illustration to educational vouchers for purposes of parsimony.

¹⁴ It could be argued that the schools will provide their own information through promotional materials and informational sessions to parents. However, there is little assurance that the information will be accurate and balanced, and it may be especially difficult to process for less-educated parents. The dearth of knowledge and understanding by parents is heavily underlined in Public Agenda (1999). Schneider, Teske, and Marschall (2000) also found class and race differences in knowledge of schools.

¹⁵ The Cleveland program requires achievement testing for accountability. Although the Milwaukee program required achievement tests until 1995, the schools are no longer required to provide that information. See U.S. General Accounting Office (2001) for details. Witte (2000) provides the most extensive description of the Milwaukee program and its development.

¹⁶ Provisions for these kinds of activities can add considerably to costs. For example, see Levin and Driver (1997).

¹⁷ The rural poor are probably at an even greater disadvantage than the urban poor with respect to information and transportation.

¹⁸ Moe (2001) provides many insights into value preferences of parents on educational policy.

¹⁹ Attempts to summarize the evidence include Levin (1998), Goldhaber (1999), Gill et al. (2001) and Godwin and Kemerer (2002).

²⁰ A common shortcut used by casual observers for comparing costs is to compare tuition at private schools with the per student expenditure on public education. Such an approach is inappropriate for reasons set out in Levin (1998, pp. 383–384).

²¹ Interestingly, the International Study of Civic Education (Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, & Schulz, 2001; U.S. Department of Education, 2001) found that the United States had the highest score among the 28 countries in civic skills and the use of civic-related knowledge. It finished among the top group in civic knowledge and slightly above average in civic content.

²² Cost-utility and multiattribute-utility analyses may offer some promise (Levin & McEwan, 2000, pp. 189–216).

²³ Discussions with staff of the survey organization, Public Agenda, for their report *On Thin Ice* (Public Agenda, 1999) provide a sobering view of how well citizens understand the issues. Even when stated in the simplest terms, the issues are not easy for laypersons to grasp.

²⁴ In earlier versions of this framework we designed “advantage maps” to compare the impacts of particular voucher designs on the four criteria with those of traditional school organization.

²⁵ See Metcalf (2001) for the State of Ohio’s evaluation of the CSTP. Justice O’Connor argues (correctly in my view) that academic performance is too narrow a criterion on which to judge voucher schools and that

“parents in the inner-city also choose schools that provide discipline and a safe environment.”

²⁶ See Kemerer (2002) for an analysis of state restrictions.

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