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The Politics and Ironies of Educational Change: The Case of Vouchers

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Perhaps Rube Goldberg didn't design the American system of education, but he would certainly admire it. Like one of his fabulous contraptions, our school systems chug along, always in motion, seldom changing much, relatively impervious to outside forces. This is particularly true of major urban school systems which are generally agreed to be in serious trouble financially, organizationally and educationally.

Why is this so? Are the Kozols right? Are school systems staffed only by mean-minded civil servants lurking in cloistered classrooms, awaiting childish misdemeanors so they can take the rod, physical or psychological, to hapless children? Surely not, as a discussion with decent, intelligent, yet frustrated, teachers and administrators in almost any major school system will reveal. Is it because, as a former member of the Boston School Committee recently argued, schools are getting better and better but kids are growing worse and worse, implying that virtually the entire responsibility for educational problems lies outside the school system? But how can this be when children from affluent and poor families, cities and suburbs, voice similar complaints about schools? Or is it because we starve public education for money and then expect it to perform complex tasks with efficiency and imagination? While there might be something to this complaint, what evidence we have raises serious doubts about the relation between more money and better schooling.
The catalog of excuses is extensive. Whatever one's favored explanation, there is wide agreement that schools must change. Yet, most people also conclude that schools and school systems are not changing much, or at least not enough. Those who actively work for it testify to the extraordinary difficulty of implementing educational change, even when the changes are less sweeping than those discussed here.2 This paper will attempt to contribute to an understanding of the forces arrayed against educational change. The discussion revolves around a proposal to test an educational voucher system through a demonstration project designed by the Center for the Study of Public Policy (CSPP)3 with the backing of the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) in Washington. This project would be carried out through a series of local demonstration projects in a number of school districts; the projects would be funded by OEO and would test the CSPP-developed voucher model. This voucher model is central to the analysis; its features are briefly described below.4 In a broader sense, however, the educational voucher proposal is the occasion, not the subject of this discussion. My contention is that many of the obstacles placed in the road to a voucher project are built-in features of the educational system. The particular shape which these obstacles have taken in response to the voucher proposal is partly accidental, and they will continue, in one form or another, to plague this and other efforts to bring about educational change.

To me, these obstacles are political characteristics of American education—political in the sense that they create and resolve conflict and define power relations. They are also political in their definition of a procedure through which major change must run before winning approval. The analysis in this essay, therefore, proceeds at three levels:

*** It examines the intensely divisive social issues, such as race and church/state tensions, which provide a context for educational change, and which create an atmosphere in which it is practically impossible to focus on the educational merit of a proposal.

*** It discusses structural roadblocks to the implementation of change. The primary and most debilitating of these is the extraordinary number of parties who must approve an educational experiment such as vouchers—and who must do so virtually simultaneously. The essay also examines the fragmentation of power which characterizes American education and the special threats posed by a voucher system to those who do have some power.

*** It describes a process which relies on outsiders to design a plan for approval by local interests who face one another as antagonists in a social climate characterized by uncertainty, mistrust and hostility.

CSPP staff members have, at the request of local officials and OEO, provided technical assistance to those cities which have been considering application to OEO for support of a local demonstration project.5 Material for this essay is drawn not only from the CSPP report, but of more importance, from the experiences of its staff in these cities. My hope is that this distillation of experience will help to clarify the discussion of vouchers as well as to illuminate the why it is so exhaustingly difficult to implement educational change.

A quick look at the skeletal organization of school systems will aid in understanding the contrasting notions behind a voucher approach. The state creates local school districts and delegates legal responsibility for their operation to local school boards, which are elected or appointed by local officials. School districts levy taxes to pay for education and usually receive some additional assistance from the state. The school board is responsible for the allocation of these funds among the schools under its jurisdiction, as well as to various supporting services. The school board usually appoints a superintendent who serves as the chief administrative officer of the district. The board divides the district into attendance zones, and with some exceptions, where a child lives determines where he or she will go to school.6 The amount of money spent at a particular school is determined by the superintendent and the school board. The same is true for teacher salaries and assignments, except where a strong teachers' union shares in these decisions. Parents often have little direct impact on the operation of schools but can periodically voice their approval or disapproval of overall policies through the election of school board members.7

Many different notions huddle under the name vouchers.8 They run all the way from the unregulated system proposed by Milton Friedman,9 to moderately regulated systems such as that proposed by John Coons and his associates,10 to the more fully controlled system proposed by the Center for the Study of Public Policy. The last deserves some exposition, for it is the model around which much of the contemporary argument about vouchers revolves and its ideological structure and specific rules are directly related to the ongoing controversy over vouchers.

All voucher systems have certain common characteristics. They involve payment of public tax monies in support of education to parents instead of to local school authorities. To assure that the money would be spent on education, it would be transferred to parents as a credit—a voucher—rather than as cash. Parents would use their vouchers to purchase educational services for their children, from among a variety of schools. The voucher would be redeemable into cash usually only by approved schools, for approved educational activities only.11

The school board would no longer determine which school a child attended. Unlike the present situation, attendance would not be based on geography; a child could choose to apply to the school around the corner but would not be required to do so simply because it was nearby.
The amount of money spent at an individual school would be determined by multiplying the number of children in attendance by the value of the voucher. Assume, for example, that the amount of the voucher were set at the average per pupil expenditure of the school system, e.g. $1,000 per child. A school that enrolled 100 children would have an operating budget of $100,000 (100 x $1,000), exclusive of grants that it might obtain from such outside sources as foundations and the federal government.

The end result is a system of schooling in which (a) attendance is no longer geographically controlled and (b) the amount of money available to a school is determined by its ability to attract and hold students. Since housing, like schooling, is racially and economically segregated, the first change, at least theoretically, breaks the link between race/income and access to a particular school. The second change is intended to create an incentive structure which rewards responsiveness of schools to students and parents. Young people would no longer enroll in a particular school at the fiat of the school board. If schools wanted to attract students, so the theory runs, their programs would have to be responsive to the perceived needs of those students.

Beyond these minimal concepts, voucher models vary widely. Most of the variation is explained by the ideological positions or values held by proponents of a particular plan. The plans differ largely in the degree of regulation of the admissions “marketplace”—i.e., in the degree to which the free choice of students by schools, or schools by students, is circumscribed in order to serve values other than freedom. The voucher system proposed by CSPP is more highly regulated than many others. The regulations, for the most part, are aimed at insuring equal access to schools for children of all races and socio-economic status, assuring at least minimal standards of educational quality and providing sufficient information to parents to facilitate choice. Thus under the CSPP system, to become eligible to cash vouchers, a school would have to:

1. accept a voucher as full payment for a child’s education, charging no additional tuition;
2. accept any applicant so long as it has vacancies;
3. if it had more applicants than places, fill at least half of the places by a lottery and the other half in such a way as not to discriminate against ethnic minorities;
4. accept uniform standards for suspension and expulsion of students;
5. agree to make a wide variety of information about its facilities, teachers, program and students available to the public;
6. maintain accurate and public financial accounts;
7. meet existing state requirements for private schools.

Three more aspects of the CSPP plan are worthy of note, for they have influenced the politics of vouchers. First, children could attend any eligible school, public or private. The proponents of the plan were less concerned with who ran the schools (public officials v. private citizens) than how they ran them (without discrimination and responsively). Second, the system would be operated by an Educational Voucher Agency (EVA) which could but might not be directly controlled by the local school superintendent or school board. Although the school board would still be responsible for the operation of the public school system, the schools in that system would have to meet the requirements established by the EVA in order to be eligible for voucher funds. Schools not operated by the school board—private schools—would have to meet the same requirements. Third, the proposal calls for somewhat higher payments to schools which enroll children from poor families. The basic mechanism sets the redemption value of the voucher higher for children from poor families than for children of the more affluent.

In summary the CSPP voucher proposal calls for financing education by payments to parents. It provides more regulation than most other voucher proposals and calls for higher expenditures for the education of poor children. It is called a regulated compensatory voucher system.

The idea of vouchers has been around at least since Adam Smith. Its contemporary American history includes support from such varied authors as the conservative economist Milton Friedman and the liberal Dean of Harvard’s Graduate School of Education, Theodore Sizer. Christopher Jencks, head of CSPP, had also written several articles discussing vouchers. OEO considered the voucher idea and eventually funded CSPP to develop a model and provide technical assistance to cities considering a demonstration project. The Center (CSPP) received a grant in December of 1969 and in March of the following year, issued its first report. This report contained a survey of voucher approaches, its own proposed model (the regulated compensatory system), a discussion of the requirements for a demonstration project, and an analysis of some troubling legal issues (racial segregation and church-state problems). For a variety of reasons not relevant here, the report suggested a project limited to elementary schools. OEO and the Center subsequently distributed copies of the report as well as an invitation to consider participation in a demonstration project to dozens of cities across the country. The cities were chosen for size: around 10,000 children were originally considered to be appropriate for a demonstration. These cities were selected for the heterogeneity of their populations in the potential test areas. OEO was anxious to establish a project in an area with a racially and economically mixed population. For constitutional and related reasons, cities under court order to correct dual segregated school systems were eliminated from consideration. Some weight was also given to finding cities with existing private schools which would become voucher schools for the duration of the project and, eventually, to cities where such schools were likely to develop.

Taken together, these criteria suggest large urban areas above the Mason-Dixon line as the logical places for
The criteria practically assure that any demonstration would include a reasonably high percentage of children from poor families, an important concern of OEO and CSPP. But they have other implications. Foremost among them is that CSPP would deal with the school systems generally thought of as being in the deepest trouble—inner-city systems. These school systems would be characterized by critical educational and financial difficulties, as well as by communities split racially, socially, and politically. This situation struck no one as the ideal climate in which to create a social experiment. Yet the mandate of OEO and the interest of the CSPP staff was precisely to improve education in the cities, where the problems of poverty and educational failure were—and remain—acute.

The difficulties experienced so far in establishing a demonstration site quite possibly have more to do with the times and their particular turmoil than anything else. Certainly other social reforms have experienced similar difficulties. It does seem unusual, however, that a proposal for a demonstration project, not a permanent change, should encounter the intensity of opposition met by the voucher proposal. The reason is found, I think, in the relation of the politics of reform through vouchers to the realities of change in American education. The next sections of this essay, therefore, deal with the politics of vouchers from three perspectives: issues, structure, and process. At times the distinction between these categories blurs, but they have proved useful in developing a focus for discussion.

At all levels—from local meeting halls, to state legislatures, to OEO—discussions of vouchers have revolved around several issues, among which race and religion have been the most troubling. Each issue has a long and bitter history; each is current and real beyond the boundaries of the voucher proposal.

Race. It is hardly a surprise that the voucher proposal would stumble time and time again on racial problems. Everyone involved in the project was aware of the real and imagined race-related dangers which the prospect of a demonstration would raise. A number of southern states have tried and failed to use publicly supported voucher or tuition grant plans to maintain segregated school systems. The judicial history of these attempts provides clear assurance that they will not be permitted to stand. Even privately sponsored “segregation academies” have been denied tax advantages. The legal situation with regard to a voucher plan established where there is no previous finding of purposeful segregation is less clear; strong arguments have been made that any plan which did not fully protect against the possibility of increased racial segregation would be legally suspect. Recent developments in the northern segregation cases lend support to the contention that courts are less likely than before to find “accidental” school board activities that lead to a pattern of racial segregation. Even if the legal situation were entirely clear, the conflict over racial segregation would still be central. The previous history of voucher plans in the South, regardless of their ultimate legal fate, has made the entire approach suspect to liberals and blacks, both at the national and local levels. The Nixon administration’s “southern strategy” and its subsequent stormy history in the field of civil rights has done little to reassure committed integrationists that the voucher proposal was not part of an attempt to dismantle even the limited desegregation of the past decade. This was and is true even though many of the regulations in the CSPP model were constructed to insure a racial and social mix in voucher schools. As one CSPP field representative put it, “... the precedent of using public funds to finance segregation academies in the South is a fearful specter, and, regardless of the intellectual merits of our guidelines, they did not provide a sufficiently dramatic line of demarcation between our theoretical system and the real and present danger of the segregation academies.” CSPP field staff members sometimes suspected that people concerned about this issue had not read the CSPP report, but simply had rejected it out of hand because of Nixon administration sponsorship and the tainted history of voucher plans.

At the national level, this meant that practically every major national organization concerned with race and education—from the NAACP, to the American Jewish Congress, to the National Education Association—expressed public or private concern about the potential racial impact of a successful demonstration. Even if their representatives privately agreed that the CSPP safeguards might be sufficient, as some of them reluctantly did, they feared that state legislatures and others would not adopt such stringent rules in the future. Thus, they preferred no demonstration at all, even though a carefully controlled system, they conceded, might be of educational merit.

While the pressure at the national level came from mostly pro-integration sources, the local situation was more complicated. First, some whites were concerned that they would lose control over guaranteed access to virtually all-white neighborhood schools. From their perspective, the concern was accurate. The neighborhood school, arbitrarily segregated by housing patterns, is one of the targets of many voucher plans. People would not be guaranteed access to a neighborhood school, although no one would be denied access to a school simply because it was nearby. Since at least half of the places in oversubscribed schools would be filled by lottery, chances are that some children would be required to attend schools outside of their immediate neighborhood. That this is already true all over the country, and has been for years, is no consolation. The underlying issue is race and many white parents feared that vouchers would lead to more integration, not less.

Second, the black community was often split between those who still favored integration and others who had
abandoned integration in favor of increased efforts to gain control over local, predominantly black schools. The former group was convinced that in practice vouchers would harden existing patterns of segregation; the latter was equally certain that vouchers would encourage factionalism and sap energies needed to gain political control over decentralized school systems in urban areas. CSPP was, in effect, caught in an unresolved struggle within the black community. It could assure neither group that a voucher approach would yield precisely the result it desired. Nor could it with certainty claim that the fears of either were entirely without justification. CSPP field representatives were constantly forced to walk a narrow line between the type of candor about potential problems rightly demanded from social researchers and the advocacy usually expected from social reformers. Given the high level of tension over racial issues, the resultant uncertainty created considerable difficulty in local black communities.

In more than one instance, black community and political leaders expressed concern that the voucher proposal had surfaced at a time when they were beginning to develop some control over local institutions. Some saw the plan as a calculated attempt to prevent further local control by blacks; others simply saw its consequences as promoting individualistic solutions to social or community problems. The former argued that the voucher strategy was similar to the white push toward political metropolitanism in cities such as Atlanta where blacks were becoming politically potent. Those who held the latter view feared that only the most active, informed parents would be able to take advantage of a voucher plan and they would do so mainly to improve the situation of their own children. One result, they argued, would be to deprive the reform movement in black communities of the people most likely to provide leadership. In addition, there was a more general frustration with the new complexities which vouchers would create. "Just when we learn the game and begin to get some control," one black school board member said during a conference, "you come along and want to change the rules." He went on to cite the national increase in black school board members, from several to several hundred, and argued that this was simply no time to change the structure of the political system which controlled the schools.

Religion. Concern over the separation of church and state is not new to the United States. The First Amendment to the Constitution is central testimony that the issue has long preoccupied political minds. Public schools have only more recently become central to church-state debates. 29 Although few and of relatively recent vintage, these educational concerns have made their way through the judicial maze into the Supreme Court. 30

As important as these legal considerations are, they could have been bypassed by voucher proponents. The voucher plan could simply have excluded participation by religious schools at whatever constitutional risk that entailed. But several reasons counselled against this solution. First, voucher proponents were by and large committed to relatively unfettered parental choice of schools. Although many voucher supporters expressed no particular sympathy for schools segregated on religious grounds, they did not find this form of discrimination as invidious as racial segregation, and the principle of free choice led them toward rejecting outright elimination of participation by religious schools. They preferred to leave that decision to local communities of parents or the mandate of the state and federal constitutions.

Of more importance, perhaps, are the political and educational realities of religious schools and urban areas. Voucher proponents seek to open significantly more school choices to parents, even if the schools are not all ones that they would choose for their own children. The creation of new schools would be slow and difficult. Therefore, already existing alternatives became important. Only a small percentage of children attend private schools now, perhaps 10-15% of the school age population, according to preliminary 1970 census estimates. Although exact figures are hard to come by, there is general agreement that the overwhelming majority of these children attend schools with religious affiliations. In the cities most of these schools are affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church and most of them with local parishes. The fate of these parochial schools inevitably became of concern to voucher planners. 31

Even a casual newspaper reader is aware that parochial schools have been in serious financial trouble for some time. Many have closed and more threaten to do so. Religious vocations are down; teaching nuns are fewer in number. Lay teachers have increased in number and they have become more militant in their demands for higher wages. At the same time, other costs have increased, both for schools and for other activities financed by local parishes. The result has been heavy financial pressure on parochial schools. The alternative to increasing the strain on the parish treasury and the collection plate has been to raise tuition levels. Where this has not been possible or desirable, the schools have been closed. The resulting pressures have created a scramble for ways to provide support for religious schools. Consequently, the political and legal reaction from those who oppose public aid to parochial schools has increased.

In response to these pressures and counterpressures several states passed laws to aid private schools religious schools among them. Pennsylvania was one of them, and its action led eventually to a U. S. Supreme Court test of the commonly adopted approach—purchase of services—in which the state "purchases" certain "secular educational services" from non-public schools. In Lemon v. Kurtzman, 32 the Supreme Court overturned the Pennsylvania statute and with it, presumably, this avenue to public support for religious schools. 33 During the period all this activity was taking place, some did look to vouchers at least as an alternative approach to finding the requisite support for parochial schools. 34
Although it was not the centerpiece of the most recent round of church-state tensions, the voucher proposal was seen by the protagonists in this struggle as a critical factor.

One of the ironies related to vouchers is that liberals who might have found the approach attractive for educational reasons, opposed it out of concern over the separation of church and state. Voucher proponents had counted for example, on support from reform-minded members of school boards. Yet these “liberals” were also apt to oppose substantial indirect aid to religious school as violative of the spirit, if not the letter, of the First Amendment. On the other hand, where the local supporters of aid had chosen to pursue purchase of services, they tended to view voucher proposals as less desirable. They feared that vouchers would draw energies away from the legislative battle for their preferred approach. They, therefore, quietly opposed or did nothing to assist voucher legislation at the state level. All in all, the issue tended to weaken the base of support for the voucher approach at the local, state and national levels.

Other issues. A host of other issues developed around the proposal. Many, perhaps most of them, involved doubts that the plan would operate as its proponents predicted. For the most part, these were genuine arguments about substance and are implicit in any proposal for significant social change. To discuss them one by one here would recapitulate the lengthy process of debate which occurred at each possible site for a demonstration. I will, therefore, mention only two arguments which seem to have carried weight at the local level and with nationally based educational lobbies.

The first is that a voucher approach, essentially freer parental choice, would “destroy the public schools.” This issue was often raised by public school officials and representatives of teachers unions. There is an irony, however, in the extent to which the CSPP proposal was actually designed with the situation of the public schools squarely in mind. The voucher planners estimated that a relatively low percentage of parents would choose to send their children outside of the existing public system, at least at the outset. Where possible, therefore, guidelines were designed to encourage change in public school systems and to give them a reasonable opportunity to compete with private schools. The level of the voucher would be set, for example, at or slightly above present average public school per pupil expenditures. Rules for admission and expulsion of students were designed to prevent the public schools from becoming “a dumping ground” for children who were unable to gain entrance to private schools. In these and other ways, the system was designed to assure that the private schools would not reap an unfair financial advantage or be able to exclude easily children whom they viewed as difficult to educate. Partly as a result of these guidelines, some local school officials felt confident that they would be able to “outcompete” the private schools under the CSPP guidelines.

The other issue which I wish to discuss here has two aspects: information and trust of parents. Or perhaps more accurately, it couples fear of misinformation and mistrust of parents. Significant opposition in public and private meetings developed over the question of whether enough accurate information could be provided and whether parents would be able to make intelligent decisions in the choice of schools for their children even with good information. The opinion that they could not was widely held, both by school officials and residents of the cities which explored the possibility of a demonstration project. The point of interest is that this skepticism was shared so widely. That public school officials would argue this position is not surprising. That other parents would adopt this view is more of a puzzle. It is difficult to tell whether the attitude stems from cynicism, elitism or paternalism; most likely, it flows from some combination of the three. But whatever the cause—and the possible validity of the concern aside—the result was to create a climate of mistrust and skepticism around a fundamental aspect of the system. This climate eroded support for a concrete test of issue: whether parents could and would choose wisely. Only a demonstration could supply that test, yet people were unwilling to take the risk of a demonstration unless they knew the answer to this and other difficult questions in advance.

Examinations of the CSPP field reports confirms the reality and consistency with which these and other related issues were raised. Among them, racial problems seem the most divisive and widespread. The reports and on-site experience also yield a sense that the debate over issues often masked other, more personal concerns. These publicly inflammatory issues, however, served to polarize people and groups with potentially similar interests and to draw attention away from the basic educational aims of the voucher plan. This is not entirely surprising due to the complexity of even a relatively simple voucher plan and the depth of feeling about racial and church-state issues.

Finally, meetings and debates sometimes left voucher proponents with a nagging feeling that there was an unbridgeable polarity between real and rhetorical issues. Were people perhaps less concerned about the debated issues than about their jobs, their power, the uncertainties which a voucher system would create? Were most of the meetings, public more than private, a sham at worst or a show at best? To the extent this more or less unprovokable suggestion is accurate, factors other than those discussed thus far are more important in explaining the politics of vouchers.

Beyond the difficult issues raised by vouchers certain structural aspects of American education—an extensive system of checks and balances, and a lack of positive power—help to explain the difficulty in implementing a demonstration. Further, the voucher system challenges the entrenched structure and requires an unpopular shift of authority from the haves to the have-nots.
Checks and balances. We are, or at least used to be, fond of talking about our political system as characterized by a government of checks and balances. Politicians, social commentators and ordinary citizens seem increasingly impatient and disturbed at what they see as the inability of the governmental system to respond creatively and experimentally to changing times. A look at the number and diversity of actors who participate in determining whether a voucher demonstration could occur illuminates this concern:

- Federal level: the Office of Education, OEO; U. S. Congress, which considered the proposal in hearings, educational and related lobbies, including the NEA, AFT, Chief, State School Officers, NAACP, National Committee in Support of the Public Schools and many others; possible White House clearance because of the controversial nature of the project;

- State level: the State legislature and its several committees, which in most cases must pass enabling legislation; state department of education, usually the chief state school officer; the Governor, or his personal education advisor if there is one; various boards of education or regents; the state counterparts of the national educational lobbies, with particular concern for the teacher unions or similar organization;

- Local level: the School board; the superintendent and various aides who review such programs before the superintendent will consider them; school principals; representatives of the teacher unions; local counterparts of the national and statewide educational lobbies, in some cases, the Mayor and or City Council; local community leaders; Model Cities education directors; the local poverty program officials; a wide variety of local parents and interested citizens, although their numbers were discouragingly small in some instances;

- At all levels: courts in which legal challenges based on local law, state statutes and state and federal constitutions are lodged.

To the reformer or advocate of careful educational experimentation, this list, though incomplete, is staggering. The time, energy and patience required to deal with such an array of participants is phenomenal.

Probably no one connected with the voucher project would argue that social experimentation and reform on a relatively large scale should be started too easily. Social experiments involve people and how they live; educational experiments involve children, who have even less control over their own lives than do adults. Reform experiments must, therefore, be carefully constructed and the risks made clear to people. Also, the ideology shared by CSPP staff counselled that people must enter such experiments voluntarily. But few would have predicted—or thought necessary—the degree of difficulty encountered or the complexity and number of steps involved in obtaining approval for a demonstration.

After all, the project might mean a long-term federal investment of as much as $25 to $50 million to a local school district. Most of this sum would cover additional costs of the demonstration, but some portion would at least defer predictable increased costs. The demonstration might, for example, forestall the closing of parochial schools and thereby defer increased public school costs due to additional student enrollment. Moreover, it could place a district in the forefront of educational reform efforts, with the cost borne by the federal government.

Beyond the problems encountered in obtaining approval from each, or most, of the many constituencies involved, there were considerable problems of protocol, prestige and power. Whom did one see first and why? Was the choice to be made on ideological or practical grounds? In at least one instance, for example, the superintendent of a major school system was either unable or unwilling to meet with the CSPP field representative, despite local interest in a demonstration project and repeated efforts to arrange a meeting. Frustrated by continual rebuffs, the field representative decided to "light a fire" under the school official and began meetings with representatives from other agencies concerned with education. Although this finally led to a meeting with the school superintendent, the conversation and subsequent process was characterized by expressed and latent hostility created by the CSPP representative's initial intervention. The superintendent after careful consideration of the substance of the proposal, eventually denounced it at a school board meeting. The board voted down a feasibility study proposal and that ended the matter. The field representative, who had predicted opposition from the superintendent, was nevertheless surprised by the vehemence of his objections and attributed it to the initial hostilities created by the mode of intervention. Perhaps, perhaps not, but the initial problem was clearly present.

From the point of view of the superintendent, beset by racial and financial difficulties, the voucher representative had added a potentially uncontrollable new dimension to his problems, another proposal and a new set of factors to assess. The superintendent was intent upon pursuing his own solutions to the educational problems of the city and faced a need to gain approval from a large number of actors. In private conversations and in public discussions of the superintendent, this official has expressed his own sense of lack of control over the system and frustration at the difficulty in creating viable educational reform. The intrusion of vouchers was seen as a complicating factor not as a potential solution to at least some of his problems.

His view of his own lack of power is somewhat at odds with his clear ability to convince the school board to forego even full study of a possible demonstration, as well as with the conclusions of several political scientists who have examined the power of superintendents. But the conflict is more apparent than real. The superintendent in this instance was able to exercise negative or veto power. He could stop the process at an early stage of consideration. He would have faced far greater problems had he endorsed the proposal and supported further study. Had he endorsed it, he could not have been certain that at some later date he could
deliver on his promise that the program would become operational in his city. The negative course was far less risky. An experiment could fail but no experiment could not.38

In addition, the obvious risks of failure are probably not compensated for by an incentive structure that rewards innovative success. Innovation requires change and change is accompanied by conflict. The general approach toward conflict in the training of school administrators is to avoid it.39 Perhaps of more importance is the reaction to conflict of the school boards which appoint superintendents. The impressions gleaned from numerous meetings and conferences with board members is that they were interested in educational improvement so long as it did not create political turmoil. As elected officials, they saw their chances for continuation in office as enhanced if the city were calm and they had not created organized political enemies. This was true whether the school boards were directly elected or appointed by an elected official such as the mayor.40 The short half-life of urban superintendents seems to confirm this hypothesis. So does the recent appointment of Philadelphia’s innovative superintendent Mark Shedd, whose “resignation” followed the appointment of hostile school board members by Mayor Frank Rizzo, who had made Shedd’s innovative school program one of the targets of his successful electoral campaign. The result of this and other well publicized examples is to create pressures on superintendents, mindful of their precarious tenure, to avoid controversy and substantial change. In several instances, even where local enthusiasm for a demonstration had been generated, it was discouraged at the state level either at the department of education or in the legislature. A voucher experiment which involves public and private schools normally requires modification or waiver of provisions of the state education code. Some states vest considerable power in the state board of education to waive statutory provisions of the education code in order to accommodate experimental projects, but even this may not be sufficient to forestall the need, legal or political, for legislative approval.41 In most states, however, legislative action is a must and obtaining it from skeptical legislators has meant a replay of local and national difficulties at this level of government.

In addition to the usual run of issues, legislative politics inevitably has added a note of open political partisanship to consideration of a demonstration. This is especially true where one political party controls the legislature and its opposite occupies the governor’s mansion, a situation encountered more than once. In such cases, one side is often unwilling to support enabling legislation simply because it has the approval of the other. Since both executive and legislative approval are important, voucher proponents, once again, have been caught between contending forces who are ultimately concerned with something other than educational reform, in this case jockeying for political advantage.

Lack of power. Lack of power is a corollary of the fragmentation of power described in the previous section. With so many factors influential in any decision of major significance, no one group or person has sufficient power to impose a decision. Further, it is easier to put together a coalition of opponents to new measures than a coalition of proponents for new approaches. People can usually find something they dislike about any change, even if they dislike different things. But new measures require agreement on specific issues.42 Education is probably not much different on this count than are other social functions, but that is little consolation to the person who seeks a “yes” to change rather than a “no”.

Perhaps no public system which deals with multi-million dollar budgets and thousands of children can afford to vest power to create significant structural change in relatively few hands. The risks and costs of failure are viewed as too great. Moreover, the history of urban educational systems contains periods of political manipulation and patronage, which reinforce whatever mistrust of conflict and power educators might bring with them to their work.43

The previous section related the ability of a particular superintendent to stop further consideration of the voucher proposal. If that were an isolated incident it would be no more than an interesting story. To the contrary, however, CSPP experience indicates that the superintendent was the pivotal figure in most cities. If any one person did hold power, at least negative power it was the superintendent. In part this situation might have been a self-fulfilling prophecy. OEO required the approval of the school board before it would fund a local feasibility study of a possible demonstration. Since school board members were mostly unpaid and overworked, they tended to look to the superintendent for guidance on complex matters of educational policy.44

This reaction was also in part caused by the complexity of the voucher proposal. Although the fundamental idea is easily explained in a sentence or two, full understanding of the CSPP regulated compensatory model requires considerable time and thought. The rules are few, but the reasons for them are not always self-evident. School board members, therefore, commonly relied on the superintendent to help them understand the model’s complexity and its educational implications. Since they often had no paid, professional staff, they sometimes related to the superintendent as though he were a special assistant or counsel to the school board. There was, in effect, nowhere else they could go.

The existence of a paid professional school board staff would enhance the power of board members to make informed, independent judgments on policy matters of this sort. At the very least it would blunt the advantage provided by the superintendent’s status as a professional—i.e., his being regarded as an “expert” on educational matters. But this alternative might simply lead to a reduction in the superintendent’s professional
status and power without a compensatory shift to the board. The ironic result could be a loss of power for everyone.

Whatever the cause, the experience in attempting to gain approval for a voucher demonstration leads to the conclusion that the educational system is designed on the principle that with power, someone, somewhere might do something wrong. It is better then, to live with a system in which no one has sufficient power to accomplish substantial reform. Our experience suggests that the structure of public education reflects a preference for stability and certainty at the expense of risk and potential gain. The prospect for major change, therefore, seems minimal.

Shift of Authority The previous sections have suggested that almost any significant change is severely hampered by the public school structure, particularly when volatile social issues are involved. The depth of the challenge posed by voucher systems intensifies this already powerful resistance. Although one academic commentator sees the plan as no more than a “gimmick,” public school authorities and other with more of a stake in the present system have taken its thrust more seriously. The latter view is more consistent with the reaction of local school officials and school boards, as well as the national watchdogs of educational policy. The national groups known as “the Big Six” vigorously opposed the demonstration from the outset through policy statements, press releases, and even Congressional testimony.

Those members of the “education establishment” who have taken vouchers as a serious threat to the existing structure and allocation of educational power hold the more accurate view. This does not imply that a demonstration would deliver all the educational gains predicted by voucher advocates; the purpose of a demonstration, after all, is to determine whether their predictions are correct. Rather, a voucher approach would fundamentally alter the financial incentive structure and the power alignments of American education. People and practices presently rewarded might no longer be so fortunate; power—even though limited—over many educational decisions would be shifted from the haves to the have-nots, from school bureaucracies and boards to parents. Bureaucrats and politicians are sensitive to such changes and their intense opposition to modifications in the system which favors their hegemony over education is understandable.

The voucher plan proposes to reward schools which succeed in convincing parents that their children ought to attend them. Schools would not be guaranteed a pupil population. To attract students the schools would have to be responsive to parents; principals and teachers would have to act like other professionals—lawyers and doctors, for instance—and establish a reputation for success in order to attract “clients.” This would encourage increased professional responsiveness. But this increase in professional responsiveness—a strong client orientation—is disturbing to many “professional educators.” To them it implies competition, which they fear will lead to shoddy practices and, above all, to greater uncertainty.

The anxiety caused by uncertainty is heightened by two factors. First, there is widespread disagreement over the definition of educational success. It is better reading scores? Higher achievement in math? Entrance to college? A well adjusted child? A happy one? In this regard, education is unlike law and medicine, where standards are relatively clear or at least widely shared. Patients, after all, get cured or remain sick and lawsuits are won or lost. The predictable and observable result of this lack of agreement over the standards of educational success is that educators are understandably reluctant to embrace systems, like vouchers, which purport to reward performance particularly if parents determine what performance means.

Second, the impact of schooling and, by implication, the impact of educators on improving the achievement of poor children has been seriously questioned. The discouraging history of compensatory education programs, designed especially to develop and test methods of improving the educational performance of poor children, further reinforces the tendency to shy away from systems which reward performance. Assume that higher achievement is the accepted goal: If no one can be certain of the techniques to attain it, who would want to risk financial penalties for failure?

The voucher proposal, therefore, creates great anxiety in some educational circles partly because it implies competition and evaluation. More pointedly, it zeroes in on the fundamental problems of lack of goal consensus and mistrust of the technical tools available to solve educational problems. It proposes a reward or incentive structure which, theoretically at least, would require educators to face these questions squarely. Those who now share the rewards of the present educational structure, however inadequate, could not be expected happily to adopt the system, for they could not be sure that their educational goals would be shared by parents, nor, even if they were shared, that they would reach these goals.

This leads to a final comment on structure. We have already seen that power in education is limited and fragmented. At each level, however, our experience indicates that one group consistently has less than its rightful share of power—parents, and particularly poor parents. The voucher approach is clearly intended to remedy that deficit. Whether it would succeed is another question, but the intention is clear.

The clarity and directness of the aim of redistributing decision-making authority to the family has been a major obstacle to adoption of the voucher system. Despite the persistent public school rhetoric about democratic values, in the context of the proposed voucher experiment educators consistently expressed grave doubts about the capacity of parents to make wise educational decisions. Time after time, in private and public meetings, the plan was opposed on the grounds that parents would not understand the system; that they did not care enough to learn how it would work; that
only the most active among poor families would benefit. 51 Granted, these views might have been and probably were sincerely held. (They were opposed with equal sincerity and vigor by parents at public meetings.) But the motivation behind the view is far less important for present purposes than the effect. The claim is not that public school officials seek to hold their own limited power merely for the sake of holding power. Rather, it is that the basic impact of voucher schemes the shift of power from professions to parents practically assures the organized opposition of professional educators. This is so whether they are motivated by altruistic educational concerns for the education of all children or by more selfish urges to power.

In summary, structural aspects of American education have conspired against implementation of a voucher demonstration: complexity caused by the number of actors who must virtually simultaneously approve educational change; the inability of any person or group to muster sufficient power to impose change, and the direct threat to the already limited power of professionals posed by vouchers. The last factor leads to the final level of analysis.

If examined carefully, the processes required by OEO, by federal intervention programs and consciously chosen by CSPP weigh heavily against the successful operation of a voucher demonstration.

In determining the fate of a proposal for change, the way in which it is proposed and considered may be just as important as its substance. 52 Several aspects of the way CSPP voucher demonstration projects have been presented and considered have hampered their implementation. In light of experience with local communities, at least three factors related to process seem critical: the development and propagation of a model designed by outsiders; the need to acquire approval from mutually antagonistic parties to a demonstration—school systems and communities; and the atmosphere of bitterness and mistrust which characterizes the setting in which discussions and decisions take place.

The OEO-CSPP voucher model has its origins in academia, Washington bureaucracies and "the rarified air of Cambridge." With the exception of relatively small numbers of parents who have seen vouchers as a solution to racial or religious problems of schooling, the original impetus for such experiments did not emerge from local communities. Nor was it born in school systems. The voucher idea is not a folk notion appropriated by intellectuals and bureaucrats; it is an intellectual's construct appropriated and propagated by bureaucrats.

This fact has created several problems, the first of which is simply that it is harder for local people to understand the project than if they had developed it themselves. The basic idea behind vouchers is deceptively simple. Its elaboration into a working system consistent with egalitarian values is predictably complex. In this regard, it resembles many proposals for social change—the negative income tax, welfare reform, universal day care. Numerous discussions conferences and meetings showed that the CSPP staff members who helped to develop the model had a firmer grasp of its substance than school officials or community representatives. This does not imply that staff members necessarily have a more accurate view of the consequences of implementation, but that a certain investment of time and effort is necessary to understand the import of the proposal. Had it been developed at the local level by local people, this investment would already have been made by a coterie of local leaders. Since it was not, CSPP staff and consultants were forced to spend significant chunks of limited time simplifying explaining the idea and outlining its important details. Given limited time and resources, this often meant that the CSPP consultant had come and gone before discussion of the proposal had moved past its exploratory stages. 53 Since social reform, like God, is in the details, the complexity of the system, lack of information and misinformation have caused serious conflicts at the local level.

Of more importance, if the idea had been developed at the local level, the process of developing it could have engendered a more genuine local commitment to its implementation. Field staff reports indicate a fairly consistent pattern at the local level: a visit by the CSPP staff member, which is greeted with skepticism and then gradual growth of enthusiasm for the idea; a local group or local individuals take some responsibility for further development of the idea; the field staff person leaves, activity at the local level grinds to a halt.

In part this syndrome may have also been due to mistrust of another outsider, the federal government as personified by OEO. One CSPP report put the matter succinctly.

A final point which was raised frequently by board members, community people, and school administrators was, "How can we be sure that the funding of this project will be maintained for five years or more? If there is no such assurance, how can we be expected to go through the planning, dislocations, and building of hopes required with the possibility always present that the program may be yanked out from under us—especially an O.E.O. program with their history of start-stop funding and uncertain Congressional support."

Clearly, there is no way to answer this question satisfactorily. 54

This problem is endemic to federally funded reform efforts. Congress appropriates money yearly and this leads to unavoidable uncertainty as to the future fate of every project.

A further difficulty developed from the decision to design a general model which could be implemented almost anywhere with relatively minor modifications. This decision created tensions between specificity and generality in the plan itself and in the minds of its potential consumers. Since the basic model was not designed jointly with a local community to fit its particular needs, aspects of the plan beyond minimal safeguards are left for determination by the people who would participate in a demonstration. The lack of specificity is partly unavoidable and partly designed. Some questions simply could not be answered outside of
a local context, for example, the exact value of the voucher or the shape of the transportation system. Others could have been answered but were left to local determination, for example, whether profit-making firms could participate in the system. In part this latter group viewed as the autocratic, nonparticipatory operation of others could have been answered but were left to local context, for example, the exact value of the determination, for example, whether profit-making firms at the most important safeguards. This discrepancy was accurately noted by the local leaders most interested in participation. It did not increase their trust in the plan or the planners, for they saw the imposition of solutions to the important problems as analogous to what they viewed as the autocratic, nonparticipatory operation of local school systems.

If too much specificity created problems, so did too little. The CSPP regulated compensatory voucher model goes beyond a skeletal outline. When local leaders and school officials found that it did not answer all their questions about implementation, they reacted skeptically. Were the CSPP consultants hiding something? Didn’t they know the answers to the difficult questions? Since the unanswerable questions often dealt with the specifics of local implementation, this lent credibility to the oft-repeated contention of school officials that the plan was “all right in theory, but that it could never work in practice.” Here was the best of all positions for an opponent of the demonstration: simultaneous endorsement and rejection. Ironically, the opportunity for opponents to occupy this position was aided by CSPP’s concern for a process that included local participation—a concern that cannot be fully implemented.

But couldn’t the concern for local process have been fully implemented? Probably not. To do so would have meant selecting a site, providing planning money and asking local school officials or community leaders to create a voucher plan with minimal outside guidance. OEO and CSPP were convinced that a plan developed by school officials would not be a plan that tolerated significant change. A plan developed mainly by local people outside of the school system would stand little or no chance of acceptance by the public schools. More importantly, the social and political implications of a grant to local parents to create a voucher system, without a guarantee of racial and other safeguards were simply too dangerous. Neither alternative, then, appeared plausible, and the problems of establishing a combined and equally representative local planning group of school officials and other local people outside the school system were just as complicated.

The second major process problem revolves around the need to gain approval from the school system and the community. More accurately, the major difficulty was the necessity of obtaining at least an initial “go ahead” from the school system before extensive work with community groups could proceed vigorously. Gaining such approval was necessary, as indicated above, if the public schools were to become involved. Since the voucher planners were convinced that most children would continue to attend public schools under any feasible model, the public school system was a critical partner in the demonstration. Moreover, the prospect of starting a “federal” school system in a city contrary to the wishes of local school authorities was out of the question, particularly for an administration rhetorically and politically committed to returning power to the states and localities.

Nevertheless, this requirement put voucher proponents in the awkward position of seeking initial approval from the very parties most threatened by the proposal. Since school officials finally had effective veto power over whether a demonstration would occur CSPP staff were reluctant to assist community groups before obtaining a positive signal from school officials. To have done so would have put them, outsiders in the uncomfortable position of creating expectations which they might lack the power to fulfill. Yet the result was to place the proposal before school officials without indications of significant community interest, and without the support of a political constituency behind it. Since there is little reason to think that school board members differ from other politicians, voter support would have increased their enthusiasm for a voucher demonstration. The lack of it could and probably did hamper development of a demonstration. This conclusion does not imply that CSPP staff, technical consultants, should (or should not) have acted as community organizers or advocates. Other considerations are involved in such a judgment. Putting that question aside, the point is simply that the role of the technical consultant and the mode of operation insulated the decision-making procedure from at least part of the legitimate customary political process—the development of voter support.

Once school officials expressed approval or at least enough interest to allow the process to continue, another reaction set occurred. The moment that the educational establishment supported a proposal many local leaders and parents began to question its virtue. How could a fresh young idea keep its virginity in that company? In part this reaction was due to a general climate of mistrust, which is discussed further below. But it was also due to an accurate sense that school systems, like other institutions, would not readily adopt a proposal which required fundamental change in their governing structure. The history to date confirms that the judgment of local leaders and parents has been correct.

A city is a social organization and its general atmosphere, the “organizational climate,” is bound to have an effect on the receptivity of its various parts to new ideas and change. The social and political history of American cities in recent years has been torn by conflict. School systems have not escaped unscathed and, in fact, have often been in the midst of the most bitter strife. One legacy of this conflict is a climate of suspicion, bitterness and mistrust between school
officials and local communities. Neither group is immune from these feelings and the resultant name-calling, anger and mistrust were evident at most voucher meetings where both groups were present. Our experience in this regard is not unique. Anyone who has attended public school board meetings or watched them on television has had similar experiences. Some of the confrontation-type behavior experienced at such meetings was presumably political showmanship or simply an opportunity for people to release pent-up emotions. Over time and with appropriate assistance, this process of emotional confrontation may be useful, perhaps necessary, in order that "psychological and social energy . . . (not) . . . be played out in indirect and destructive ways. . . ." But time was usually short and the relationship between the parties at meetings was not continuing, but occasional. Moreover, the CSPP representatives were not simply neutral, disinterested parties but usually people who, over time, had developed some commitment to the development of a voucher demonstration. Thus, the emotional climate often did no more than create an atmosphere in which genuine conversation about the merits and demerits of vouchers was impossible. This tended to drive meetings into private which, in turn, led to further feelings of mistrust. These feelings would explode at later public meetings. The process, by then, had become frustratingly circular.

In addition to the general climate, there was, as indicated previously, pervasive skepticism about the viability of educational and other reforms. Too much had been promised; too little had been delivered. One field representative found that both parents and school officials were simply tired of the complexity and disappointments of the federal grant process, particularly where complicated educational reforms were involved.

The end result of the process, which is partly necessitated by politics and partly chosen by CSPP and OEO, has been to place additional obstacles in the way of development of a voucher demonstration project. Perhaps a cautiously phased planning process, with greater local participation at all stages, would ease the problems created by the sponsorship and development of the original model by outsiders—the federal government and CSPP. However, the climate of social and personal mistrust prevalent in American cities today dims current prospects for any significant educational change.

Attempts so far to implement a demonstration voucher project highlight the political problems of educational reform in America. The danger, of course, is that general conclusions drawn from a particular case are not generalizations at all, but peculiarities of a given set of circumstances. In this case, however, the interests and issues at stake are not limited to an attempt to finance education by payments to parents. Perhaps the modestly radical nature of the proposal creates unique difficulties; more likely, it merely intensifies and, therefore, underlines the obstacles that educational reformers face time after time.

At least one aspect of the voucher story is, of course, unique to its own history: the particular cast of characters involved (including the author) and their inevitable human errors. The development of the plan and the search for an appropriate demonstration site has not been without flaw. Voucher advocates, for example, may not have fully appreciated the complexity of the implementation process and the deep divisiveness of the issues involved. Probably too little time was allowed for the development of the original report, additional time would have permitted more detailed attention to planning implementation strategies and fuller elaboration of the problems later encountered in responding to local inquiries for information and technical assistance.

Yet, damaging as such errors on the part of voucher advocates may have been, it would still be virtually impossible to conclude that such flaws have been critical. Opponents of education experimentation and reform are equally human, and they too have made mistakes in seeking to prevent a voucher demonstration project. However, comparing the errors of the opposing sides in the voucher controversy obscures the structural reality that the educational reformer faces: the educational system places heavy burdens on reform, regardless of merit, and even when the proposal is carefully limited, reasonably controlled and only designed for demonstration purposes.

In describing the voucher proposal, I have used the terms "experiment," "demonstration" and "reform" more or less interchangeably. In part this usage reflects the complexity of the proposal, for it has many aspects, but it also represents the general ambiguity of proposals to create reform projects in education. The voucher proposal, and others like it, support reform by proposing a new structural basis for educational systems. It is a demonstration, as well, for one of the most pervasive doubts concerning the viability of voucher systems is whether they could operate on a practical day-to-day basis; the project is designed, in part, to show that they could. But it is also experimental in the attempt to determine how parents, teachers and children would behave under significantly changed educational ground rules.

Herein lies a final irony, not only of vouchers but of similar proposals in education and other areas of social concern. Because it calls for new arrangements, the proposal creates uncertainty: Are the changes workable? How will people respond, e.g., will parents choose wisely if they are free to select schools for their children? To obtain the answers to such questions is a primary reason to mount an operating project for a limited time. If there were no uncertainties, there would be less reason for a demonstration. But since the demonstration would not take place in a laboratory, it would involve real people with legitimate interests. They understandably seek unequivocal answers to their questions before they
are willing to risk a demonstration which might adversely affect them. Thus, their desire for assurance runs directly counter to the unanswered questions which are part of a demonstration proposal. Ironically, therefore, the uncertainties characteristic of the demonstration proposal are both a primary source of its justification and of its opposition.

Despite difficulties, the likelihood is that before too long a voucher demonstration will take place. Proponents and opponents of vouchers should support this end. To argue this is not to advocate one particular solution to educational problems as a panacea. Rather, it is advocacy for a varied, experimental approach to the problems of necessary educational reform.

2. As one current example of the difficulties of the change process, see Gross, Giaquinta and Bernstein, Implementing Organizational Innovations (1971).

3. The Center is a nonprofit corporation located in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

4. A report on the project, Education Vouchers: A Report on Financing Education by Payments to Parents, is available from CSPP or from the Office of Economic Opportunity in Washington, D. C. The report is sometimes known as the “Jencks Plan” after its principal author, Christopher Jencks. It is hereafter referred to as Education Vouchers.

5. I have served as Associate Director of the Project and participated in the development of the model as well as the field activities of the Center. Some of the data for this essay is drawn from personal experience. The rest has been developed from extensive Center field reports and personal interviews with the staff, as well as with local officials, parents and others. In most instances, cities and individuals will go unnamed. My intention is to tease out some tentative generalizations about politics and change in American education, not to add to the abundant supply of gossip. At the moment, no school district has gone through all the steps necessary to become a demonstration site. Some have considered the prospect and decided against it; others still have it under consideration.

6. Some districts have open enrollment plans which theoretically allow children to attend any school in a district. Administrative practices and the practical problems of getting from one part of town to another can minimize the impact of such plans. Some “freedom of choice” plans have been held unconstitutional where districts are under order to eliminate racially segregated dual school systems. Green v. County School Board of New Kent County, 391 U.S. 430, 88 S. Ct. 1689 (1968). Attendance outside of the school district in which a child resides is relatively rare. Hartford’s Project Concern and Boston’s Metco, which bus city children to suburban schools, are notable exceptions.

7. In situations where the school board is appointed by the Mayor or other elected officials—as in San Francisco, for example—parental pressure on school practice though real, is even less direct.

8. For a more complete examination of the voucher plan discussed here, as well as others, see Education Vouchers, especially pages 1-58. Chapter 2 of the report contains a description and analysis of several different models of voucher systems.


11. Some plans call for “partial vouchers,” i.e., less than the full cost of education, which could be spent on supplementary or remedial educational services. These will not be discussed here. See, for example, Coleman, Toward Open Schools, The Public Interest, Fall, 1967.

12. One of the least enlightening rhetorical battles attending voucher proposals revolves around the free market analogy sometimes used to describe the underlying idea of free choice. Rather than debate the analogy, it has generally proved more useful to deal directly with the problems related to freer parental choice in education.

13. For a more complete listing of the rules, see Areem and Jencks, Education Vouchers: A Proposal for Diversity and Choice, 72 Teachers College Record 327, 331 (1971), from which this list was culled, or Education Vouchers.

14. This feature of the plan has not created a great deal of difficulty so far, but might in a final planning state. The approach is similar to Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education ACT (ESEA) but assures that the extra dollars go to the school which the poor child attends. See chapter 2 of Education Vouchers.

15. For a more historical view see West, Education and the State (1965).


19. See chapters 5 and 9 of Education Vouchers for further discussion of the demonstration.

20. The search for a demonstration area began before the intensification of the current court battles asking to find unconstitutional segregation of the schools in northern cities. See Dimond, School Segregation in the North: There is But One Constitution, 7 Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties L. Rev. 1 (1972). Even so, at least one promising northern possibility has been ruled out of current consideration because of a desegregation suit initiated since the inception of discussions with school authorities and the local community.


22. For an analysis of another OEO sponsored experiment, see Morris and Rein, Dilemmas of Social Reform (1969).

23. By comparison with other reform projects, the voucher proposal would be rather modest in size. Conversations with local groups have generally revolved around a five to eight year commitment of amounts of anywhere from $2-$5 million per year of federal funds. Granted, this is a large sum of money, but it must be considered in the context of the annual operating budget of the school systems which examined the proposal. Figures of anywhere from $100 million to more than $300 million were not uncommon. I resist the inevitable invitation to compare the cost of the voucher projects to the cost of a day in the “reform” of Vietnam, although just barely.

24. See Appendix B, Education Vouchers for an examination of these cases.


27. Quoted from a CSPP field staff memo discussing local reaction to vouchers.

28. This position was vigorously argued, for example, by a former civil rights official in the Johnson administration at an Advanced Administrative Institute at Harvard Graduate School of Education in the fall of 1970.

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30. Reviews of these cases abound. For two essays specifically related to church-state tensions and vouchers, however, see Appendix A, Education Vouchers and Azzen and McCann, Vouchers and the Citizen—Some Legal Questions, 72 Teachers College Record 389 (1971).

31. Although inaccurate, I will conform to the common practice of using the terms religious and parochial schools interchangeably. Parochial schools are actually schools supported by a local parish and the term, therefore, does not even include all Roman Catholic schools. Since they enroll the largest number of children they are, for our purposes, the most central to this discussion.


33. For review of state legislation and its limitations, see Vouchers and Other State Plans for Aiding Private Schools: A Comparison in Education Vouchers.

34. The Citizens for Educational Freedom, a private group, has long proposed a children's bill of rights and others have also adopted the GI Bill as a model for tuition support approaches similar to vouchers. They have been opposed with equal vigor by groups such as the Americans United for the Separation of Church and State.

35. Usually at odds with one another, the public stances of both groups, when they feel threatened from outside, is mutually defensive. To some extent this behavior is predictable and understandable. Robert Crain found similar defensive behavior on the part of school superintendents faced with desegregation crises. For a brief summary of his explanation for their behavior, see The Politics of School Desegregation, in Kirst (ed.), The Politics of Education 133-139 (1970). Perhaps the surprise is that a number of school officials privately took a different stance. They viewed the voucher proposal as a possible way to regain some latitude which they felt they had lost to increasingly powerful teachers unions. This attitude seemed more common among school board members, although no accurate count of those who responded in this fashion is available.

36. At the very least, these meetings were characterized by competitive or "selling" behavior. The negative results of this style of operation in another context is described by Chris Argyris in Management and Organizational Development (1971) at 98-99.

37. Some board members indicated an interest in pursuing the study but voted not to.

They explained that they tended to support the superintendent on such matters unless they were in strong disagreement. CSPP field reports. See also the Introduction to Kirst, The Politics of Education, supra note 35.

38. It is interesting to note that this same superintendent has developed a subsystem within his school district in which the schools represent alternative educational styles. Parents in the subdistrict are able to choose which schools their children will attend regardless of which school is closest to home.


40. For a brief description of the policical context of education as seen by a former principal, now superintendent see chapter 11 of Foster, Making Schools Work (1971).

41. The State Board of Education in Connecticut, for example, has wide authority to waive legal requirements for experimental projects, but voucher proponents have still sought enabling legislation. See Connecticut General Statutes Annotated (rev. 1971), § 10-76(c).

42. Kirst and his associates have found evidence to confirm this notion in voting behavior on educational issues. See The Politics of Education, supra note 35, at 11.


44. The pattern has been noted elsewhere. See Bendiner, The Politics of Schools, chapters 1 and 2 (1969); Cf., Kirst, The Politics of Education, supra note 35.

45. Economist Eli Ginzburg, who sees the voucher plan as gimmickery, prefers housing desegregation and more money for ghetto schools as a solution. How he proposes to reach these objectives other than by angry denunciation of the current situation is unclear. The Economics of the Voucher System, 72 Teachers College Record 373 (1971).

46. David Selden, President of the American Federation of Teachers, views the voucher model as a more serious danger to public education. Undoubtedly and rightly influenced by his responsibility as a representative for so many teachers, he too calls for more money for education; yet he does see the voucher scheme as involving "dynamite" and fears that it is a "little lizard [which could grow] up to be a firebreathing dragon . . ." Vouchers—Solution or Sop? 72 Teachers College Record 365 (1971).

47. The Big Six includes the National Education Association, the Association of Chief State School Officers, the National Association of School Boards, the American Association of School Administrators, the National Parent-Teacher Association, and the National Association of State Boards of Education. See NEA resolution 70-13, "Voucher Plans", June 1970. On January 18, 1972, the Legislative Council of National Organizations, the legislative arm of the Six when they act in concert, issued the following statement:

Public Funds and Nonpublic Schools

We oppose the use of public revenues for the direct financing of nonpublic school systems at the elementary and secondary education levels; the use of the voucher system as a method of school finance; and tax credits for expenditures or living expenses at any elementary or secondary educational institution. (Emphasis Added).

The source of this information is NEA Legislative Office Director, Stanley McFarland, who indicated that before the Legislative Council can act all six organizations must adopt a policy and all must agree.

48. The relatively widespread acceptance of performance contracting experiments appears to contradict this conclusion. A closer look at performance contracting, however, indicates that it still has yet to be widely adopted by professional educators. Moreover, the groups being measured against performance standards were outside, independent contractors. Teachers have not been quick to adopt this method of establishing salaries and other reward. For an excellent discussion of performance contracting, see D. Richard, Performance Contracting for Equal Opportunity and School System Renewal unpublished paper, Harv. Univ. Graduate School of Ed. (1971).


50. For an analysis of compensatory programs which supports this view, see Rivlin, Systematic Thinking for Social Action, chapters 3-5 (1971). For a contrary view, see Levin, et al., Schools and Inequality (1972). Once again contrary to law and medicine, there is little faith that a given practice will lead to a particular cure or that the result in one case will yield experience that predicts the outcome in the next.

51. I have reached this conclusion from personal experience at voucher meetings, from interviews with public school officials and from repeated conversations with other members of the CSPP staff whose experiences have been similar to mine.

53. This in-and-out problem was cured to some extent by the affiliation of local consultants with CSPP staff or by relatively longer visits by CSPP staff in cities where the prospect of serious consideration was high.

54. Excerpts from CSPP memo on field activities. For a somewhat different but consistent analysis of OEO sponsored educational reforms, see Morris and Rein, *Dilemmas of Social Reform*, supra note 22, at 58-71.

55. The reluctance of school officials to consider more than a minimal voucher approach, limited to public schools only, is evidence that this conclusion was correct. The first year of the first actual demonstration may be so limited. For an analysis of similar problems of education reform, see Katz, *The Irony of Early School Reform* (1968).


57. Of five feasibility studies conducted at the local level, only one now shows a strong possibility of leading to a final application to OEO for support of a full-blown planning effort, the last major step before the award of an operating grant. Obviously, most cities never even went as far as applying for the feasibility study.

58. For an analysis of this process in organizations, see Thompson, *Organizations in Action* (1967).


60. Some school boards, Philadelphia's for example, have regularly televised special meetings concerned with the selection of a new superintendent.


62. CSPP memorandum on problems of field activities. For a brief description of the frustrations of one parent active in the struggle for educational reform, see Lurie, *How to Change the Schools* (1970).