

Support for school vouchers promises to be one of the hottest and most complex debates facing American Jewry as it enters the 21st Century. We invite you into this conversation, one that will likely shape Jewish education and identity.

The Many Faces of School Vouchers

Daniel J. Elazar

Like the overwhelming majority of Americans of my generation, I was raised on the idea that one of the greatest achievements of American society was the American public school. A common school educated all children to be Americans, taught them the skills they needed to survive and prosper in the American economy, the ways of democracy and patriotism, socialized them into the patterns of American life, and, if they were the children of immigrants or other deviant populations, acculturated them to the American way of life.

As a Jewish child in the 1940's, I was taught by my parents and the Jewish community around me that we owed a special debt of gratitude to the United States because of the public schools which opened up all vistas before us. A handful of *yeshivas* existed in New York and one or two other cities around the country. Even the most ardent supporters of Jewish survival and continuity concentrated on educating the new generation through afternoon Hebrew schools supplementary to the public school. For those who sought a serious Jewish education, those Talmud Torahs succeeded far more than is recognized. We are just now coming to the end of the generations of rabbis, teachers, and scholars they pro-

vided for American Jewry.

I was a product of the Hebrew-national movement in Jewish education and its afternoon Talmud Torah. Founded by students of the European *Maskilim*, this movement saw the primary goals of Jewish education to be Zionist and Hebrew oriented, to teach Jews texts, history and culture so as to perpetuate the Jewish national heritage. Today, I support day schools.

As my interest in day schools grew, I had many arguments with my father, Albert Elazar, a Jewish educator and perhaps the leading exponent of Hebrew-national supplementary education in his generation. My father never quite accepted that times had changed, that the day school environment was needed not only to teach Jewish subjects but also to provide a Jewish environment lacking with the demise of the Jewish street in

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In those days, just about the only educational challenge to the public schools came from the Roman Catholic community. Coming to the United States in substantial numbers in the mid-nineteenth century, the Roman Catholics

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discovered that the "neutral" American public schools essentially were neutral in teaching a brand of Protestant Americanism that left Catholicism out in the cold. Hence, the Church found it necessary to promote separate schools for its children. This was reinforced in the first generations by the desires of mostly Catholic immigrant groups to preserve their languages and cultures and to pass them on to their children.

Today the situation is entirely changed. The public schools have lost the confidence of at least half and perhaps as many as three-quarters of the American people. The combination of the professionalization of educational personnel, accompanied by the spread of "progressive" education and its offshoots, the massive school consolidations which have reduced the number of school districts to less than one-fifth the number of those that existed in my childhood, and the consequent removal of the public schools from the kind of control by parents and neighbors that had been a major feature of their earlier success, has completely transformed the public school.

Rather than serving as a common school for the community, advancing community goals which, in their essence, were also national goals, in all too many cases the public schools have become partisan and bureaucratic. In the place of a benign Protestant Americanism, they now teach "scientism" (the new religion of the public schools) and reject virtually all teachings associated with the great monotheistic religions, allowing only the teaching of traditional pagan religions as "folklore." Admittedly, this sea change was stimulated, if not provoked, by the United States Supreme Court decisions eliminating the earlier Protestantism of the public schools. It has also been fostered by professional educators in the schools of education. The impact of the latter two groups, however, is most intense in connection with teaching methods which many American parents have come to believe have robbed the public schools of serious

intellectual content in the name of child-centered education.

Moreover, the Americanizing tasks of the public schools have passed into other hands, in part because the overwhelming majority of Americans are native-born and do not need to be "Americanized." As well, recent multi-cultural understandings of what is "American" no longer enables the possibility of the homogenized Americanization of the past. The rise of the mass media (TV, radio, movies) has provided a set of far more powerful socialization and acculturation tools that "Americanize" in their own way in a manner that has far greater influence than the public school and that is not only accessible to everyone but sought by everyone.

As a consequence, an increasing number of groups (religious, cultural, ethnic, ideological, and class-based) have developed their own schools to transmit the knowledge, norms, and attitudes that they wish to foster among their young. They hope to offer their children a better version of American society, or, perhaps, just a more effective method of

teaching that shared version. They have raised a claim on public resources to support their efforts. As we all know, today every taxpayer contributes to the support of the public schools, whether he or she uses them or not, and not even tax exemptions are available for those who seek alternative education. The idea of school vouchers was developed as a means to remedy that situation.

Today, 10 percent of American elementary and secondary schools are defined as "private," that is to say, outside of the public school system. The United States Department of Education has a division to service them even though the United States Supreme Court has prevented the states and localities from aiding them in similar ways. With the spread of fundamentalist and evangelical Christian schools, much of the support for vouchers seems to be coming from the religious community. As in an earlier time when Protestants and Jews were united in strong support of the public schools, many Protestants, Catholics and

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Jews are now finding themselves in an alliance on school vouchers.

There are those who oppose vouchers on behalf of the maintenance of national unity. There are others who support vouchers with the expectation of finding panaceas for what they view as the weaknesses of contemporary public education. There are still others who see vouchers allowing them to educate their children along their particular religious or ideological lines, and there are those who see vouchers as introducing an elementary fairness into the financing of the American education system.

Nowhere in the United States has the school voucher idea aroused more controversy and opposition than in the Jewish community. The Jews have been among the very strongest proponents of the public schools and at the forefront of this effort to make those schools "neutral" with regard to the monotheistic religions. Often we seem to have done so without weighing the consequences to our own desires for continuity.

We came to day schools relatively late in the

game. To the best of my knowledge, the first truly non-Orthodox Jewish day school was founded at Anshe Emet Synagogue in Chicago in 1946, but the big push did not come until the 1960's, often reinforced by less than the highest motives of Jewish continuity. Today, a majority of Jews still fervently supports the public schools, but a growing minority is seeking alternate strategies for the education of Jewish children. Many of these parents, having come to recognize the costs involved, have become supporters of voucher plans that will enable the schools they support to benefit from public assistance. So the debate continues, with many clinging to the old arguments and others claiming that those arguments are no longer valid, a new situation prevails, and new remedies are needed. This issue of *Sh'ma* raises these questions in its usual manner of expressing varying points of view.

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Wrestling with School Vouchers

Martha Minow

Both the winners and losers in November's elections put education high on their list of promises. Nationwide exit polls of voters showed that education is their top worry. Repeated rounds of task force reports simply confirm what so many parents and children already know: a great many of America's public schools are cheerless and sometimes dangerous places where students fail to gain competitive competencies in math, writing, new technologies, and analytic thinking. Islands of individual excellence do not alter the apparent inability of any single urban school district to achieve excellence even in most of its schools.

Against this context, I find myself joining the '90's bandwagon for school reforms. Given their track record, public schools must be challenged to change, from within and from without. I don't feel justified in closing off any alternative before

giving it a chance. Competency testing and high standards for principals, teachers, and students may work, if coupled with appropriate supports. So may competition from public charters for new start-up schools, and publicly funded vouchers, allowing students to enroll in private schools. Even when parents use vouchers to opt for religious schools, individual children will benefit, while offering a valuable competitive challenge to the public schools from which they depart. Some of the most ardent supporters of vouchers — including vouchers for parochial schools — are inner-city parents of color. They argue powerfully for access to choices about their children's schooling, and the chance to exit bad schools just as families with their own wealth do. The ideal of the inclusive public school, they point out, is long gone with the departure of upwardly mobile families to exclusive suburbs and expensive private schools.