

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 So the debate continues, with many clinging to the old arguments and others claiming that those arguments are no longer valid, a new situation prevails, and new remedies are needed.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.



It is the height of hypocrisy to bar choice for those still trapped in bad public schools to protect the common school already defeated by the exit of those with more privilege.

But . . . there is another context for the debate over public vouchers and parochial schools, one that keeps me wrestling with the issue. We are in the midst of a legal, civic, and cultural sea-change in the relationship between government and religion in this country. Evangelical Christian groups press for their preference in the public realms affecting reproductive freedom, the definition of family, the status of gays and lesbians, and the content and shape of schooling. Clinton's welfare reform authorizes states to delegate their public assistance tasks to religious entities and guarantees the religious a right to provide those services. Efforts to lessen, if not demolish, the separation between church and state appear in city hall holiday celebrations, funding for student religious and prayer groups, and state contracts with churches for alcohol rehabilitation programs. As a Jew, each of these developments worries me. For the conventional wisdom (among most Jews except some Orthodox groups) holds that a firm wall between church and state ensures the freedom for our religious expression — and the safety and opportunity for Jews to flourish in both religious and secular settings.

On the one hand, we need to explore everything possible to improve schooling for all children. On the other, vouchers for parochial schools not only chiefly support Catholic and evangelical Protestant schools, they will mean even more erosion of borders between religion and government, sectarianism and preparation for adulthood.

I need a third hand, for the religious revival in America includes Jews, and we should participate in any national effort to reformulate government/religious relations. Jewish schools, too, could benefit from vouchers. Boston, New York, and many smaller cities are witnessing a flowering of Jewish schools as baby-boomer parents themselves embrace religion,

seek values for their kids, and feel secure enough to see that both Jewishness and secular success are possible in America. Vouchers in particular provide a reasonable context for encouraging religiously-inspired activity while preserving private choices from public orthodoxy. The public dollars involved in vouchers are handed to parents who in turn make their own choices for their children's education. In this way, vouchers do not transgress the line between church and state, but instead facilitate plural, private choices. No constitutional problem.

But now I need yet another hand. How could the Constitution itself not speak to so fundamental an issue as the role of religion in education paid for by the state? What other matters could so profoundly affect the character of our polity, the values of voters, the experience of equality, the practice of freedom? If large numbers of children depart from public schools and enroll in religious schools, won't this change the nation's

politics and relations among people of different religious backgrounds?

The Supreme Court recently decided not to review the constitutionality of a voucher plan that includes religious schools in Wisconsin, over the dissent of a Jewish justice. This seems to dilute if not eradicate constitutional worries that state and municipal governments currently may have about voucher plans that include religious schools. Now all of us will have to wrestle with whether to vote in our own communities for or against similar plans. Which hand should I use?

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