



vast majority of the students who remain in the schools, nothing except siphoning off vital funds.

I also fear that the establishment of an alternative system of education will segregate children of different religious and ethnic backgrounds, with little or no opportunity to form the relationships that can prevent ethnic and religious stereotyping. Public schools have traditionally been a place of common meeting, a place that fosters common purpose and identity.

Another disturbing aspect of voucher programs is the certainty that governmental financial support would inevitably lead to governmental regulation of religious schools. It would be neither appropriate nor desirable for a government bureaucrat to develop curricula or regulations for Jewish or other sectarian schools.

Voucher programs benefit special interest groups

at taxpayers' expense, and even if Jews are among the special interest groups, ultimately we all will be harmed. Vouchers deflect our attention from our responsibility as individuals, families and synagogues to educate our Jewish children and make Jewish education a true priority; and vouchers wrongly relieve government from its responsibility to thoroughly and efficiently educate all children.

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## Why Not Let Parents Decide?

Steven M. Brown

**M**any years ago as Headmaster of the Solomon Schechter Day School of Greater Philadelphia (now the Perelman Jewish Day School, a Solomon Schechter Affiliate), I was invited to participate in a JCRC sponsored debate on school vouchers. Naïve lamb that I was, I agreed without realizing that my audience would be made up of very liberal Jews almost unanimously opposed to my pro-voucher position.

What hurt the most was that in most other things I, too, consider myself a liberal thinking individual. A quality education for all children in America is the single best way to insure a progressive society with equal opportunity for our increasingly diverse population. Indeed, the sea change in American culture and national self-understanding at the end of the 20th century is a recognition of the rights, aspirations, and sense of self expressed by the multi-cultural rainbow of our ever-changing citizenry.

So, I am a firm believer in the voucher concept not only to support Jewish day school education, but to reshape and reinvent American education as well. The current public school model that dominates the national educational landscape is a product of the industrial age, when a factory model, with highly structured, hierarchical, top-down management approaches formed the system of American public education. Its goal was cultural, ethnic,

and religious homogenization. At the end of the 20th century that factory system is incapable of meeting changing social, economic, and interpersonal structures and needs in this post modern age. The great rallying cry heard across America is "school based management." That's another way of saying, "let's make the public schools more like independent schools"—each controlling its own destiny and run by its own faculty, administration, and parent body.

Charter school legislation is the next logical step in that march toward more competition, independence, and constituency-based school structures. So as the American educational structure changes, as it must to meet the increasing variety of needs, and retools itself from a factory model to a more entrepreneurial, learner-centered enterprise, allowing parents to choose the kind, quality and brand of education they want for their children doesn't injure the American dream, it furthers it.

The ability of intensive Jewish day school education to produce committed and knowledgeable Jews, with competencies and dispositions that enhance Jewish self-worth is no longer a subject of debate in any segment of the organized movements in American Jewish life. As day schools have mushroomed in growth and enrollment, more and more families who a decade or so

ago would never have considered Jewish "parochial" schools are drawn to a form of education which seeks to embrace the whole child, integrating secular and religious learning as part of a complete educational package. A religious education integrated with a strong general education is not un-American, but stems from a realization that the people most comfortable in the American salad bowl of multi-culturalism are those most rooted in their own origins. Most recently, federation continuity agendas are filled with goals of providing more funds for scholarships, teacher salary and benefits enhancement, and capital funding for Jewish day schools.

The unexpected tragedy of this revolutionary readiness of liberal Jews to send their children to Jewish day schools is the growing exclusion of many families because of escalating costs. High quality independent schools are expensive to run, though they are on the average cheaper than equivalent public schools. The ability of the Jewish community to raise the resources necessary to make day school education accessible to all who would want it is not within the realm of possibility. In addition to tuition, which nationally averages close to \$5500 per year in Jewish elementary day schools, there are enormous capital costs for building new schools as well as funds needed to improve the quality of existing schools. And, at least 30% of families currently require one-third to half tuition assistance per child. The annual sums needed to sustain continued and growing enrollment, therefore, tally into the millions of dollars per year nationally. That won't come easily from existing Jewish philanthropic structures which are strapped to replace reduced federal allocations to health and welfare services, and must also contribute to synagogue schools so as to cement federation-synagogue partnerships, while still maintaining our historic commitments to Israel and world Jewry.

At the same time that many Jewish parents are heartbroken at their inability to handle day school tuitions, inner urban minorities grow more and more frustrated with the failure of school reform to make a substantial difference in their children's lives. According to the Center for Educational Reform, public school expenditures in 1996-97 were \$265,285,370,000. If we con-

servatively estimate 5% of the total as designated for various reform projects, the cost is in the billions of dollars. With public school per capita expenditures averaging \$6,500 and private school \$4,000, a voucher system offering several thousand dollars per child could substantially enhance the ability of minority cultures to survive in our society of competing values. (Very shortly, if not already, there will be many more Muslims than Jews in the United States, so we will become even more of a minority.) We should endorse a policy that permits parents to make choices for their children. For urban minorities, that might mean charter or church-sponsored schools paid for with vouchers. For Jews, it means having the same resources to offset rising costs of quality day school education.

The argument that American values and democracy will topple with state funding of vouchers is not convincing. The fact is, substantial state monies already go to private education. During my sixteen-year tenure as head of a Pennsylvania day school, we received tens of thousands of dollars per year for instructional materials in

general studies and "cultural" materials in Jewish studies. We also received in-kind resources in the form of free transportation for all our students provided by local school districts operating under a state law requiring them to do for their private school students what they do for their public; as well as state-paid services for reading and math specialists, speech therapists, counselors, and the services of an Intermediate Unit which conducted teachers training workshops at no cost to us.

Further, charter schools are already diverting tax dollars to fund the equivalent of private independent schools. When Pennsylvania became the twenty-seventh state to pass charter school legislation, one advocate rejoiced. He wants to establish an urban K-8 science and technology school where children will be taught to view the world through an African-centered lens. This was a hurrah for the notion that ethnocentrism is no longer un-American.

Americans are also coming to realize the problems created by a public school system afraid to teach par-

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### Why can't a free market system challenge the current American educational establishment?

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ticular values to children lest someone's values be offended. Independent schools, with clear and implemented visions and missions, can teach the values for living that will strengthen our children's commitment to justice, equality, and fairness, not weaken them. If we are successful in Jewish education our students learn that all people are created in God's image, and that Jews must take personal responsibility for all humanity. If our tax dollars may be used to set up "public" special-interest schools, other communities should be allowed similar opportunities. And why can't a free market system be allowed to challenge the current American educational establishment?

The billions of dollars spent trying to reform and re-reform the old industrial school model have largely resulted in *aroysegevorfene gelt* (a waste of money). So why not let parents decide what works? Those who wish to create strong, robust, effective independent schools modeled on the traditional public school may spend their vouchers to do so, and those who wish alternative models of education based on religious heritage or ethnic culture will have the resources to do that as well.

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## Jewish Resources on School Vouchers

**Vouchers For School Choice, Challenge or Opportunity? An American Jewish Reappraisal**  
*Edited by Dr. Marshall J. Breger and Dr. David M. Gordis. The David and Susan Wilstein Institute of Jewish Policy Studies; \$14.95 single issue, discounts on multiple copies. 200 pps. 43 Hawes Street, Brookline, MA 02446 (617/278-4974).*

A collection of essays, many of which support school vouchers, on the history, politics, legal ramifications and policy implications of vouchers on the American education system with a section focusing on the implications for American Jewish education.

### **School Vouchers and the Jewish Community: A JCPA Reexamination**

*Jewish Council for Public Affairs. \$3 per copy, discounts on multiple copies. 20 pps. including bibliography. 443 Park Avenue South New York, NY 10016 (212/684-6950).*

JCPA recently reviewed its policy on school vouchers and reaffirmed its position supporting the separation of state and church, improving public school education and funding Jewish schools with private philanthropic sources.

## The Best of the High Holidays 5759

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**Proposal for a Community Funded Jewish Education Voucher Program**

Dr. Getzel Cohen. [cohengm@email.uc.edu](mailto:cohengm@email.uc.edu)

A proposal for a mass scale community funded non-denominational voucher program for day school students, set up on the model of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee.

**American Jewish Congress Resolution on Public Education**

American Jewish Congress. 15 East 85th Street, New York, NY 10028 (212/879-4500).

American Jewish Congress' policy statement opposing school voucher programs.

**Vouchers and Other Forms of Public Aid to Parochial Schools: Why They Are Good for the Jews**

Dr. Jeremy Rabkin, *The Avi Chai Foundation*, 52 Vanderbilt Avenue New York, NY 10017 (212/6978836)

A proposal for policy reevaluation favoring school vouchers on the basis of the current state of the public schools, the public support of private colleges and universities, and the potential benefit to the Jewish community.

Multiple copies of this special issue of *Sh'ma* may be purchased from the editorial office for \$2 per copy.

שמע  
NiSh'ma

This month *NiSh'ma* is found at <http://www.shma.com>. Due to the complexity of the school voucher issue, we have included additional articles, as well as an annotated resource list. Our simulated *NiSh'ma* page has, temporarily, been transferred to our online website, [www.shma.com](http://www.shma.com).

This month's *NiSh'ma* features a centerpiece by Rabbi Daniel Lehmann. Commentaries by Marshal Breger, Rabbi Neal Gold and Carolyn Korn Flaumney address the hierarchy of values raised in Rabbi Lehmann's centerpiece and invite a lively discussion. You can print the *NiSh'ma* page from [shma.com](http://shma.com) to read at your leisure, or join the discussion online.

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