

Freedom of choice can only make it better

by Kevin Donnelly

Published in *The Australian*, 2 September, 2006

IMAGINE shopping at a supermarket, buying a car or choosing a holiday and being told that the only option you have is government-funded, designed and controlled, that you must choose from what the state makes available. Forget freedom of choice, the power of the market in successfully meeting personal needs and tastes, and the failure – as evidenced by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union – of the state monopoly represented by communism.



Going by a recent paper from the Australia Institute arguing against parental choice represented by school vouchers – whereby parents receive a government-funded voucher and are free to choose between government and non-government schools – it is clear there are still those who are committed to state control.

The authors of the report *School Vouchers: An Evaluation of their Impact on Education Outcomes* are in no doubt that what they describe as a “radical change” represented by vouchers is unacceptable. They conclude: “On the basis of the available evidence, universal voucher schemes do not appear

to be a cost-effective policy option because they are likely to be expensive, pose a significant risk to social cohesion and equality of opportunity, and are unlikely to significantly improve academic outcomes. They could further erode the separation between church and state.”

Far from being radical, Australia’s education system already has a de facto voucher system. The cost to parents of sending their children to non-government schools is subsidised to varying degrees by state and federal governments.

Conveniently, the report also ignores how much money parents who send their children to non-government schools are saving governments. Based on the Productivity Commission’s 2005 Report on Government Services, the average recurrent cost of educating a student in a government school is about \$10,000. On average, non-government school students receive about \$5595 in government funding, a saving to government of about \$4400 a child. The Productivity Commission estimates that the financial sacrifice of parents who send their children to independent schools (excluding Catholic schools) amounts to a saving of \$2.2 billion for state governments.

While those on the cultural Left, such as teacher educators and the Australian Education Union, are opposed to choice in education, it is also the case that parents are voting with their feet and picking non-government schools in greater numbers.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics publication *Australian Social Trends 2006*, in 1995 about 29 per cent of students were in non-government schools. By 2005 the figure had grown to 33 per cent and, notwithstanding declining

One of the defining characteristics of an open and free society is the belief that individuals should be allowed to choose. It's ironic that those on the cultural Left – often the most vocal about empowerment and local decision-making – are the ones most hostile to parental choice when it comes to schools.

overall enrolments, projections place the figure at 35 per cent by 2010. The figure at years 11 and 12 for non-government schools increases to about 40 per cent.

Contrary to claims that private schools are the preserve of supposedly wealthy elites, the greatest increase in the non-government sector has been in relatively low-cost, non-denominational schools, and many parents from poorer backgrounds are choosing non-government schools. As noted in

the recent ABS publication, according to the 2003-04 figures, 17 per cent of parents who send their children to Catholic schools and 16 per cent of parents who send their children to independent schools are from low-income households, compared with a figure of 26 per cent for government schools.

Instead of applying a one-size-fits-all approach to education, governments should ensure more parents, especially those least able to afford it, are in a better position to choose what's best for their children. Instead of imposing a state-mandated monopoly on education, with all its inefficiencies and flaws, governments should be freeing up the system and ensuring the focus is on improving learning outcomes and raising standards.

Such is the case in the US, where the Bush administration recently announced a \$US100million (\$131 million) plan to offer vouchers to low-income students at under-performing public schools to attend private schools.

Since the mid-1990s, several US states and cities have introduced state and privately funded voucher schemes directed at disadvantaged groups. Contrary to the Australia Institute report's argument that there is little evidence of benefits from vouchers, a survey of results from voucher experiments by the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research argues there is a "positive consensus" in relation to vouchers.

In Milwaukee and Cleveland, surveys show parents expressing greater satisfaction with schools. To quote from the Cleveland research: "Nearly 50 per cent of 'choice' parents reported being very satisfied with the academic program, safety, discipline and teaching of moral values in their private school." The equivalent figure for state schools was 30 per cent.

Although acknowledging that not all agree on the academic benefits of vouchers, the Manhattan paper concludes that parental choice leads to improved academic standards, especially for disadvantaged children, and that there is some evidence that competition and fear of losing students forces government schools to improve.

One argument put forward in Australia against vouchers is that if more students attend non-government

schools there will be increased social instability and a loss of social capital. The US research proves otherwise.

Based on several surveys evaluating tolerance, the Manhattan paper concludes: "Rather than being the bastions of intolerance they are sometimes imagined to be, private schools appear to be more successful than public schools at instilling tolerance in their students." Studies of inner-urban black communities also show that school choice increases parental involvement in education.

One of the defining characteristics of an open and free society is the belief that individuals should be allowed to choose. It's ironic that those on the cultural Left – often the most vocal about empowerment and local decision-making – are the ones most hostile to parental choice when it comes to schools.

This article does not necessarily reflect the views of the Education Forum

Kevin Donnelly is director of Melbourne-based Education Strategies

Education Forum

P.O. Box 10 539

The Terrace

Wellington, New Zealand

Telephone: +64 21 607 636

Fax: +64 4 471 1304

Email: info@educationforum.org.nz

Web: www.educationforum.org.nz