

Dr. Sarah M. Stitzlein's Argument for Why School Vouchers Harm American Civic Life

Vouchers work against the public good and the path to productive citizenship. Dr. Sarah Stitzlein, in a January 5 Washington Post article addresses these matters.

The attached article shows how vouchers affect civic life.

By Valerie Strauss

Reporter for *The Washington Post*

January 5, 2022 at 3:06 p.m. EST

This week a coalition of 100 school districts in Ohio sued the state for its school voucher program, which deploys public money for families to use at private and religious schools. The lawsuit calls the voucher program “an existential threat” to public schools in the state, arguing in part that vouchers take money away from districts that are open to all students and that they are unconstitutional.

According to the [Education Commission of the States](#), there are 27 voucher programs in 16 states and the District of Columbia, but there are a number of other states with legislation to create or expand these programs. There are also other programs that use public money for private/religious education, including education savings accounts and scholarship tax credits.

School choice advocates say it is important for families to have alternatives to traditional public schools — with the public paying for those individual choices. Indeed, we've watched then-Education Secretary Betsy DeVos and her allies, including Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis (R), offer a new definition of “public education” — one that says nothing about public control of education but simply this: “Look, if it’s public dollars, it’s public education.” DeSantis [said exactly that](#) in 2019 and in other language since. If a child uses public funding to enroll in a religious school that doesn’t teach secular subjects and that discriminates against LGBTQ and other students, it’s still public education, according to that view.

This post takes a different view. Written by Sarah M. Stitzlein, professor of education and affiliate professor of philosophy at the University of Cincinnati, it argues that while school vouchers may help individual families, they harm U.S. democracy.

Stitzlein is president of the John Dewey Society, co-editor of the [Democracy & Education](#) journal and author of “[Learning How to Hope: Reviving Democracy Through Schools and Civil Society](#),” which is freely available to all. Most recently, she helped to write the National Academy of Education’s report [“Educating for Civic Reasoning & Discourse.”](#)

An argument for why school vouchers harm American civic life

By **Sarah M. Stitzlein**

In recent decades, school-choice proponents have increasingly called for giving parents greater control over their child’s education by providing taxpayer funded tuition vouchers that parents can cash in at private and religious schools. While vouchers may seem like an admirable way to enable families to pursue their desires, they actually pose significant problems to our democracy. Rather than expanding choices, as proponents often tout, vouchers actually limit our choices and how we make them in our democratic communities.

States across the country are considering legislation to expand school voucher programs. [Ohio](#) and [New Hampshire](#), the states where I have lived most recently, are both considering programs that would make vouchers universal for all students in the state. Vouchers would be given regardless of income, quality of local public school, or other parameters that were once set on eligibility — parameters intended to reserve vouchers for the families or school districts most in need.

While we tend to describe vouchers in terms of parental rights and the marketplace, I suggest instead that we should think about vouchers in terms of democracy, foregrounding our perspective as citizens.

Some families see vouchers in terms of parental rights, choosing what they say is best for their children. Some policymakers describe vouchers in economic terms, looking to decrease state spending and increase consumer satisfaction. Some education researchers talk about vouchers in terms of data, comparing student achievement in voucher and traditional public schools. Some public school teachers in public schools talk about vouchers in terms of potential harm, reducing pay or union protections for teachers and reducing educational opportunities for students. But the people outside of school contexts often isn't sure what to make of them.

As a [philosopher of education](#) concerned with the relationship between schools and civic life, I suggest that all of us should focus on what we see and value around us every day: our communities. We should consider how vouchers impact our responsibilities to each other and the decisions we make together about what we hope for in our communities.

Shifting to this perspective may help us better understand what is at stake for all of us as states consider expanding voucher programs. When we do, the significant drawbacks of vouchers become clearer.

Community deliberation

Where do citizens start when making sense of voucher expansions? Perhaps they begin with the most fundamental civic question that arises whenever we face problems, such as dissatisfaction with our traditional public school system: "What should we do?"

Engaging in this question pushes us to consider what our goals are — what we believe schools should provide to society and to children. It also pushes us to consider who benefits from schools and vouchers and in what ways. This sort of political deliberation is a hallmark of democratic citizenship. It enables us to shape our community to meet our needs and desires.

In contrast, instituting universal vouchers leads to foreclosing political deliberation. Voucher programs hand over decision-making power solely to guardians of school-aged children, who compose less than a quarter of American adults. Those guardians then independently decide where to spend a taxpayer-funded voucher. Often, they look for schools that already affirm their particular worldview or personal wishes for their child. This strips our communities of deliberation about what we want from our schools and what we desire for children collectively.

The public loses the opportunity for voice and influence over how it spends public dollars. Communities lose the ability to determine what content schools should teach, which skills are necessary for our workforce, and the best ways to develop active citizens. And because private schools are not required to accept all students or to provide equitable services to all children, communities lose the ability to demand fair educational opportunities without discrimination toward any child.

Political theorist Benjamin Barber summarizes this shift well [in his book "Strong Democracy"](#):

Vouchers transform what ought to be a public question ('What is a good system of public education for our children?') into a personal question ('What kind of school do I want for my children?'). It permits citizens to think of education as a matter of private preference and encourages them to dissociate the generational ties that bind them to their own children from the lateral ties that bind them (and their children) to other parents and children.

Vouchers take not only public dollars and direct them toward private interests, but also take public problem-solving and replace it with private, self-serving decisions. These approaches abandon key democratic elements, including: common living, shared aims, and mutual protections.

As Justice John Paul Stevens warned in his 2002 dissent against the use of vouchers, writing:

[T]he voluntary character of the private choice to prefer a parochial education over an education in the public school system seems to me quite irrelevant to the question whether the government's choice to pay for religious indoctrination is constitutionally permissible ... Whenever we remove a brick from the wall that was designed to separate religion and government, we increase the risk of religious strife and weaken the foundation of our democracy.

Schools and community hope

Part of what citizens do in a democracy is craft a vision for the future together. Communities that hope together, work together on shared projects. Public schools have long been a place where hope happens through conversations, planning, and taking action to achieve shared aims.

But when we turn over our power to voucher programs that regard schools as mere providers of services sought by parental consumers, we lose schools as the centers of our communities and locations of hope. Rather than a robust hope constructed with and binding us to others in our area or across our nation, vouchers are a form of individualized hope. It can often be boiled down to a desire for the success of the particular child who cashes in the voucher.

Voucher programs largely operate within an economic framework rather than a civic one. When parents buy a service — in this case, education at a specific, often private, school — they expect the school to provide and oversee the quality of the service. Parents, and all of us, rely on the school without a sense of our own obligation to participate in shaping the service or its outcomes. To assert the language of citizenship: we abandon our responsibility to the well-being of children other than our own.

When vouchers are used to move children into private schools, we lose our avenues for enacting that obligation to our youngest generation of citizens. We cannot access or directly influence voucher schools with closed meetings, unelected leaders, and uncertified teachers. Nor can we steer what is taught in those schools. Nor, in many cases, can we even require that they be held accountable for the content or quality of instruction they deliver using our public taxpayer dollars.

When considering voucher expansion plans from the perspective of citizens, one is likely to find that, rather than providing more choice, vouchers limit the choices we can make together as citizens and restrict our hopes for the future.

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