

Diane Ravitch's review of Josh Cowen's book, *The Privateers: How Billionaires Created a Culture War and Sold School Vouchers*.

Diane Ravitch's [review](#) was published in the New York Review of Books. Her review is an excellent resource for those who have concerns about the voucher raid on the public common school system.

Public school advocates need to be able to articulate the dark history of the voucher movement from the 1950's to date.

Ohio has been in the forefront of the voucher debacle since the mid-1990's when the governor at that time foisted vouchers on Cleveland Schools.



[Diane Ravitch's blog](#)

[My Article on the Plot to Sell Out Our Public Schools](#)



By **dianeravitch** on March 4, 2025

This article appeared in *The New York Review of Books*. As daily newspapers have shrunk or abandoned their book reviewing, the NYRB stands out as the nation's leading journal of literature, the arts, and politics. It takes books seriously. [This is an essay-review about the history of vouchers.](#) I reviewed Josh Cowen's outstanding book *The Privateers*, about the cabal that engineered the expansion of vouchers. I hope you will consider subscribing to the *New York Review of Books* and reading Josh Cowen's important book.

[Diane Ravitch](#)

For decades, the term "school choice"—and the programs it signifies, which divert public money to private schools—was widely and rightly dismissed as racist. Now it's the law in thirty-three states.

[March 13, 2025 issue](#)

Reviewed:

[The Privateers: How Billionaires Created a Culture War and Sold School Vouchers](#)

by Josh Cowen

Harvard Education Press, 200 pp., \$34.00 (paper)

Donald Trump promised that he will make public funds available to private as well as religious schools in every state, and this is what his party wants, too. Over the past quarter-century, Republicans have assailed America's public schools by supporting vouchers, which divert money from public education systems to subsidize tuition at private and religious schools.

But most voters today do not favor vouchers. In fact, since 1967 no state referendum on vouchers has ever passed. In 2024 three states had referenda on the ballot, and vouchers were again defeated. Voters in two of those three states, Kentucky and Nebraska, cast ballots overwhelmingly for Trump—and in both states public funding for private schools was decisively rejected. The story of how Republican politicians have twisted this widespread popular opposition to vouchers into pervasive education policy across the country is one that requires a deeper historical view.

*This opposition to public funding for private schools changed on May 17, 1954, when the Supreme Court ruled, in the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, that de jure racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional. The Court's decision had little to do with school funding, but it set off a frantic search*

among white elected officials in the South to find, or create, a legal mechanism through which to protect racial segregation. The overwhelming majority of southern whites considered the prospect of racial integration repugnant, and their elected officials were determined to block it.

Until the mid-1950s most Americans believed that the government should not underwrite the cost of private and religious schooling. Catholic organizations had periodically sought public subsidies for their schools on grounds of fairness; as taxpayers, they said their schools were entitled to receive the same funds as public schools. But they were repeatedly rebuffed by Congress, the courts, and state legislatures; most state constitutions explicitly prohibited the use of public funds for religious school tuition.

Southern governors and legislators found the rationale and language they sought in the writings of Milton Friedman, a prominent libertarian economist at the University of Chicago, who in 1955 published an essay called "The Role of Government in Education." The paper argued in favor of parents' rights to choose any school they wanted, as well as educational freedom, the right for a child not to attend a neighborhood school—music to the ears of segregationists. Friedman said that the government should finance schools but should not be expected to administer them. He recommended that government distribute money—in the form of what he called vouchers—to parents for each of their school-age children, and that parents should be free to spend this allotment at any institution, whether its operations were for-profit or nonprofit, religious or secular, so long as the school met certain minimum educational standards defined by the local government.

If Black parents wanted their children to attend a segregated Black school, Friedman said, or if white parents wanted their children to attend a segregated white school, or if parents wanted their children to attend an integrated school—all should be equally free to do so. Competitive private enterprise and parental choice, he asserted, would promote a "healthy variety of schools" while making teachers' salaries "responsive to market forces." He predicted that private schools would "spring up to meet the demand."

Southern governors used Friedman's rhetoric and arguments to fight the implementation of the Brown decision. They adopted his endorsement of "freedom of choice" as well as his belief that private schools would provide a better education than "government schools"; indeed, advocates of vouchers began to refer to "public schools" as "government schools," a term of derision that continues to appear in our ongoing debates about "school choice" today. As the historian Nancy MacLean demonstrated in "How Milton Friedman Exploited White Supremacy to Privatize Education," a 2021 paper posted by the Institute for New Economic Thinking, Friedman taught southern leaders that the best way to protect Jim Crow schools was to use "race-neutral arguments" and to "embrace both an anti-government stance and a positive rubric of liberty, competition, and market choice." As a result, seven states—Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia—enacted laws to subsidize the private school tuition of families fleeing the prospect of desegregated public schools.

In the following decades, existing private schools for white students expanded, and new private schools opened—"white flight academies" or "segregation academies"—to enroll students whose parents opposed racial integration. Often the enrollment of a single Black student in a previously all-white public school was enough to spur an exodus of white families. This happened in New Orleans in 1960 when six-year-old Ruby Bridges enrolled at the William Frantz Elementary School. She had to be escorted into the school each day by federal marshals, on the direct orders of the federal judge J. Skelly Wright. Each day Ruby withstood the screaming of angry white parents at the schoolhouse doors. And Ruby was the only child in her classroom; only a handful of white students remained in the school.

As late as 1965, less than 3 percent of Black children in the South attended schools with white children. Until then southern states engaged in a strategy of "massive resistance" to school integration, blocking the implementation of the Brown decision by providing "tuition tax credits" (a form of vouchers) so that white

students could go to all-white private schools, by intimidating Black students so that they would not apply to attend white public schools, or by closing public schools altogether.

Virginia was at the forefront of this “massive resistance.” In 1959 its general assembly repealed the compulsory school attendance law and allowed localities to close their public schools. Prince Edward County was ordered by two courts to integrate its schools but chose instead to shutter its entire public school system. Officials provided tuition grants (vouchers) for white students to attend all-white private schools but made no such arrangements for Black children. Some Black families organized makeshift schools, but for five years there were no public schools for Black students in Prince Edward County. It wasn't until 1968 that the Supreme Court outlawed Virginia's tuition grants to private all-white schools.

After the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1965, which made federal funding available to public schools, the federal government had the legal and financial tools to end resistance to integration. Federal courts across the South struck down laws authorizing public funding for vouchers and private schools, as well as any other state laws intended to block racial desegregation. The US Office of Education informed school districts across the South that they would not receive federal funding unless they desegregated promptly. Because of this well-known history, the term “school choice” was so closely associated with resistance to the Brown decision that it was widely and rightly dismissed as racist. It fell into disrepute for decades.

Now, seventy years after Brown, vouchers have not only been rehabilitated, since the 1990s they have been enacted in various forms in thirty-three states and the District of Columbia. Some of these programs are euphemistically called “education scholarships” or “tuition tax credits” or “education savings accounts,” but the fundamental principle is the same in all of them: public money pays for private school, even—in fact, most often—for religious schools. Republican-controlled legislatures in states such as Florida and Arizona enacted voucher programs that started small (in 1999 and 2011, respectively), intending to “save poor kids trapped in failing public schools” or supposedly only for children with disabilities. Over time these programs expanded, increasing the number of eligible students. Now both states have removed all limits, and every student, regardless of family income, is eligible for a tuition subsidy, at a cost to taxpayers that is expected to rise to \$1 billion a year in Arizona and \$4 billion in Florida.

Josh Cowen, a professor of education policy at Michigan State University, explains this remarkable turnaround of voucher policy in his superb book **The Privateers: How Billionaires Created a Culture War and Sold School Vouchers**. Cowen has researched vouchers for most of his career. He worked with teams of academics who received millions of dollars in federal and philanthropic funds to study the results of voucher programs in different cities and states. Like many of his fellow researchers, he hoped that vouchers would provide better education for low-income students. But three years ago he published an article in *The Hechinger Report*, a nonpartisan education journal, in which he bluntly declared that vouchers were a failure.

Cowen explained that his initial enthusiasm for vouchers cooled as the evaluations were released. He participated in a study of Milwaukee's vouchers from 2005 to 2010 that concluded that “there was very little difference on test scores” between students in public schools and carefully matched students in voucher schools. Furthermore, when low-income and Black students left voucher schools and returned to public schools, their academic performance in reading and math improved. At the same time that the Milwaukee study ended, a new report showed “shockingly bad early test score results for students in the Louisiana voucher program in the years following Hurricane Katrina.” Those poor results persisted and were replicated by studies in Ohio and Indiana.

The Privateers tells the story of how and why public policy on funding private and religious schools changed. As the consistent failure of state referenda shows, vouchers were never a popular idea; it was the politicians' dependence on big campaign donors that made school choice a staple of Republican rhetoric.

The widespread adoption of vouchers, Cowen explains, was basically a policy coup staged by billionaires who were libertarians or religious zealots or both. Cowen explains

how a small band of interconnected and insular groups of conservative advocates, tightly networked to some of the wealthiest and most influential players in right-wing US politics, invented a rationale for school privatization largely from nothing and out of nowhere.

He describes the agenda of that “network of scholars, lawyers, donors, and activists” as religious nationalism.

The main organizations in this movement to break down the wall of separation between church and state were two right-wing philanthropies, the John M. Olin Foundation and the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, which funded both the Harvard professor of government Paul Peterson and the libertarian lawyer Clint Bolick. The Bradley Foundation, based in Milwaukee, supported the creation of the nation’s first publicly funded voucher program in that city in 1990 and played a crucial part in funding the three pillars of the voucher movement: research, policy advocacy, and litigation. Peterson became the point person for voucher research and advocacy; he also mentored a cohort of graduate students at Harvard who became the nation’s most prominent evaluators of voucher projects.

Bolick, who ran the libertarian Institute for Justice (funded by the billionaire Koch brothers), oversaw litigation and appeared on behalf of the Milwaukee and Cleveland voucher programs in state and federal courts. When more money was needed for research or litigation, members of a secretive right-wing group called the Council for National Policy were available to help; the CNP included the Koch brothers and the DeVos family, who used their fortune from the multilevel marketing company Amway to fund conservative candidates and think tanks and deployed their philanthropy to advance public funding of religious schools. Reviewing the players and their strategy, Cowen concludes that “there is nothing in education policymaking today that comes close to the conservative political apparatus accessed by and...even driving, at times, the creation of evidence on behalf of school vouchers.”

In 1990 the political scientists John Chubb and Terry Moe published *Politics, Markets, and America’s Schools*, in which they asserted that school choice would heal American education; the book was funded by the Olin and Bradley Foundations. Many seemed to have forgotten the racist origins of school choice. Chubb and Moe argued that small-d democratic politics was a handicap for public schools because it kept them in the grip of vested interests, like teachers’ unions and associations of school superintendents. The result of this stasis, they claimed, was poor academic performance. They maintained that “reformers would do well to entertain the notion that choice *is* a panacea.” School choice “*all by itself*,” they claimed, could transform American education. The book was a sensation in the education world because it offered a simple solution to complex problems and, of course, gave ideological and scholarly weight to the growing movement for charter schools and vouchers.

That same year, the Milwaukee voucher program started at the behest of the local Black leaders Howard Fuller, a militant social worker who became Milwaukee’s school superintendent, and Polly Williams, a state legislator. Fuller and Williams were disappointed by the academic performance of Black students in public schools. The Bradley Foundation, which was eager to see a demonstration of the success of vouchers in its hometown, quickly provided funding. The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program began as a project that enrolled 341 low-income students in seven private schools. By 1994 it had increased to 830 students in twelve schools.

The legislation authorizing the voucher program required that the students take a state test and that the results be evaluated by an independent researcher. The state superintendent, who opposed vouchers, appointed John Witte, a professor from the University of Wisconsin, to conduct the evaluation. When Witte eventually concluded that the program had minimal impact on students’ academic outcomes or attendance

and that voucher recipients returned to public schools at high rates, voucher advocates denounced him as biased. Cowen says that Witte was fair and that his study was accurate.

The loudest voice deploring the negative evaluation of the Milwaukee voucher program was that of Peterson, who wrote a letter to *TheNew York Times* eviscerating the Witte study for minimizing the academic gains of the students and the importance of parental satisfaction. Cowen points out that Peterson was a political scientist with minimal experience in statistical evaluation. Peterson worked with his then graduate student Jay P. Greene on a study, funded by the Bradley and Olin Foundations, of the Milwaukee program. They concluded that, contrary to the state evaluation, vouchers produced significant academic benefits. The voucher system produced these positive results, they wrote, despite legislative burdens such as income limitations and the exclusion of religious schools.

Peterson and Greene's favorable review persuaded the Republican-controlled Wisconsin legislature to renew and expand the voucher program in 1995 by including religious schools and increasing the number of participants to 15,000. The inclusion of religious schools led to a court battle that voucher advocates eventually won, litigated by Bolick and the high-powered lawyer Kenneth Starr, who later became famous for his part in the investigation of President Bill Clinton. The Bradley Foundation underwrote his firm's fee of \$300,000 for one month of work, Cowen writes.

Meanwhile the voucher push shifted to Ohio, where the Republican governor wanted Cleveland to be a model for the nation. The program was designed for low-income students, but—unlike in Milwaukee—it did not exclude religious schools; nearly all of the fifty-two participating schools were Catholic. The official evaluator, the Indiana University professor Kim Metcalf, found “few overall differences in student achievement,” but once again Peterson and Greene dismissed the official evaluation and produced their own report—this time funded by the Walton Family Foundation in addition to the Olin Foundation—which showed “large gains” for voucher students. Cowen notes that Peterson's work was typically reported in newspaper editorials (usually the pro-voucher *Wall Street Journal*), not in peer-reviewed scholarly journals.

Cowen points out that Peterson's research findings were more clearly directed toward the Supreme Court than toward other scholars: he filed an affidavit on behalf of the Cleveland program in the crucial 2002 case *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*, which concerned the legality of public funding of religious schools. The Court decided 5–4 in favor of including religious schools in the voucher program—a significant reversal of numerous decisions upholding the separation of church and state. Justice Sandra Day O'Connor cited Peterson and Greene's work in her concurring opinion.

Since that Supreme Court decision, vouchers have been sold to the public as a way to “save poor kids from failing schools.” School choice has been described as “the civil rights issue of our time” by Betsy DeVos, Ted Cruz, and Donald Trump. Republican elected officials adopted school choice as party dogma, and state after state enacted laws authorizing vouchers, despite a distinct lack of public support. Voters in Utah rejected vouchers in 2007, voters in Florida rejected vouchers in 2012, and voters in Arizona rejected vouchers in 2018, but the Republican leaders in all three states ignored the referenda and continued to expand voucher programs. Republican legislatures and state courts have also ignored explicit provisions in state constitutions that forbid the public funding of religious schools, claiming that the voucher goes to the parents, not to the religious schools where they pay for tuition. Where there's a will, partisans find a way.

Voucher advocates continually promised academic gains, especially for the poorest students, but after 2010, as the voucher programs grew in scale, the academic results turned sharply negative. Cowen realized that poor kids were actually harmed by using them. Low-income students did not use vouchers to enroll in elite private schools, which mostly did not accept these students—either because they were behind academically or because the voucher was worth far less than the school's tuition—but to enroll in religious schools whose teachers were uncertified or in pop-up private schools created to capture the government money. When the outcomes were disappointing, the right-wing foundations and Republican officials promoting vouchers

moved the goalposts: test scores didn't matter, they said, but graduation rates and parental satisfaction did. When the test scores and the graduation rates were surpassed by local public schools, the pro-voucher foundations, elected officials, and researchers shifted to a different rationale, one that was "always the underlying goal," Cowen argues: to satisfy the "values" of parents. Just as segregationists in the 1950s invoked "the right of parents" to avoid integration, voucher advocates in the twenty-first century believe that parents "have the express *right to use* public dollars to self-segregate." And these advocates claim that parents have the right to receive taxpayer support for their children to attend religious schools; denying them that "right," they argue, infringes on religious freedom.

Cowen describes how he came to this understanding. From 2013 to 2016 two teams of researchers—one from MIT and another from the Walton-funded Department of Educational Reform at the University of Arkansas—reached the same dire conclusions about vouchers in Louisiana: they "caused unprecedented large, negative impacts on student achievement." The Louisiana voucher students were mostly Black and low-income. They entered voucher schools at the fiftieth percentile in math; after a year in private school, they dropped to the twenty-sixth percentile. They improved in the second year but remained behind their peers in public schools. This was solid evidence from two separate groups of researchers "that voucher interventions actually caused damage" to the poor students they were supposed to help. Voucher advocates insisted that the experiment needed more time and that it was overregulated by the state.

The bad results kept rolling in: from Indiana, where independent evaluators documented negative outcomes in 2015; from Ohio in 2016, in a study funded by a conservative think tank; and from Washington, D.C., where evaluators found poor results in 2017 and 2018. Cowen concludes that

no explanation then or now has fully explained the learning loss displayed in locations so different as Louisiana, Indiana, Washington, and Ohio as does the simplest one: that for all of Milton Friedman's purported brilliance, and for all the millions of dollars pumped into the effort by Betsy DeVos, Charles Koch, and the Bradley Foundation, the idea simply did not work. The bigger and more recent the voucher program is, the worse the results have been.

Republican-led states simply ignored the evidence that low-income students who used vouchers fell behind their peers in public schools, and they continued to enact the policies, thanks to large contributions from right-wing billionaires to the campaigns of like-minded state officials. Furthermore, several of the Republican-dominated states removed income restrictions and other limitations, thus abandoning the rhetoric of "saving poor kids from failing schools." A dozen states currently have "universal" voucher programs, meaning that any family may apply for a voucher, without regard to their income. Tennessee enacted universal vouchers only weeks ago. Other states are likely to follow their lead.

Cowen reports that, with or without income restrictions, the majority of applicants to voucher programs were not trying to leave public schools; they were already attending private schools. This is the case in every state with vouchers. Right now between 65 and 80 percent of students who claim vouchers are using them to pay the tuition of private schools where they were already enrolled. Vouchers are also used in many states to pay the expenses of parents who teach their children at home. In Arizona, according to reports in *The Arizona Republic* and ProPublica, parents have used their "education savings accounts" to buy trampolines, swing sets, expensive Lego sets, horseback riding lessons, kayaks, trips to Disney World, chicken coops, skiing trips, cowboy roping lessons, and ice-skating lessons. Republican governor Doug Ducey led the campaign to make public funds available to all students in the state. His successor, Katie Hobbs, a Democrat, predicted in 2023 that the state's voucher program could cost nearly \$1 billion, with over 53 percent of all new funding paying for 8 percent of Arizona's students.

Just as troubling to Cowen as the academic results of the voucher project is the publicly funded discrimination that these schools make possible. Right-wing rage in response to the pandemic enabled the eruption of the so-called culture wars over masking, vaccines, and teaching about race and sexuality in

schools, as well as the presence of these topics in library books. In 2022 Christopher Rufo, the right-wing provocateur who first raised an alarm about “critical race theory” in public schools (few public school teachers had ever heard of the term; it refers to a course usually taught in law schools, if at all), called on conservatives in a speech at Hillsdale College to promote universal distrust in public schools in order to arrive at “universal school choice.” This distrust was fueled by right-wing groups, which made wild accusations about teachers allegedly “grooming” their students to be gay or Marxist, and about the curriculum allegedly turning students against their own country.

Vouchers appeal to those who want to escape lessons about racism, diversity, or gender equality. Religious and private schools that receive publicly funded vouchers are not bound by civil rights laws, and many openly bar the admission of LGBTQ+ students and the hiring of LGBTQ+ staff. Some bar students with disabilities. Some religious schools accept only students who are members of their own religion.

Trump issued an executive order on January 29 titled “Expanding Educational Freedom and Opportunities for Families,” which called for the diversion of federal funds to underwrite tuition at private and religious schools. He claimed that “rigorous research demonstrates that well-designed education-freedom programs improve student achievement and cause nearby public schools to improve their performance,” which according to Josh Cowen’s book *The Privateers* is not true. Trump issued the order on the same day as the release of the latest national test scores by the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Florida, which has a robust voucher program, experienced a sharp decline in its scores, the state’s lowest in twenty years on this test.

Cowen considers the manipulation of culture-war issues like race and gender to be a feature of vouchers, not a bug. Groups like Moms for Liberty and Parents Defending Freedom use the clarion call of “parents’ rights” to condemn the discussion of race and LGBTQ+ issues, as well as access to books about these subjects, in public schools. Such groups want to censor what is taught to all children, even those whose parents disagree with them and want their children to learn about race, gender, and sexuality. Imagine teachers in a segregated Black school being told by the state that they cannot teach accurate Black history. Why should those parents have no rights?

Cowen writes that the learning loss of poor children who used vouchers was larger than the learning loss caused by the pandemic, and at this point the evidence against their efficacy is overwhelming. Yet more states adopted vouchers in 2022 and 2023 than in any previous legislative sessions. Texas is the only large Republican-controlled state that has not enacted legislation to implement them, owing to the combined opposition of parent groups, Democrats, religious leaders who believe in the separation of church and state, and rural Republicans defending their district’s only public school. Yet Governor Greg Abbott has said that vouchers are his highest priority. He received millions of dollars from billionaires to defeat many of the rural Republicans who opposed vouchers. The issue will soon come to a vote in the legislature.

The reality is that when states offer charter schools and vouchers, public schools lose. Each time students leave for private alternatives, public schools must reduce their teaching staff, increase class sizes, and cut back on curricular offerings. States cannot afford to pay for three different school systems. Is the goal to eliminate public schools? That argument seems inherent to some who share Friedman-style thinking.

What does Cowen recommend?

Fund public schools. It really is that simple.... The more money we spend on schools, the better off children are, not simply academically, but in later-life outcomes like higher wages and fewer encounters with the criminal justice system.

Wealthy parents spend amply to educate their children—to make sure that they have certified teachers, small classes, a well-supplied library, and a curriculum that includes the arts and sciences as well as

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physical education and time for play. And, of course, wealthy children never go without food or medical care. We should give the same to all children.