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Heather Cox Richardson provides a condensed version of the historical background for the school choice private school voucher system

The attached communication by Heather Cox Richardson provides a condensed version of the historical background for the school choice voucher system.

The original purpose of school vouchers was to separate students into classes of folks. That motivation continues to this day. The public has been duped regarding the voucher scheme.

Read the attached piece and draw your own conclusions.

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Heather Cox Richardson

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On August 21, 1831, Nat Turner, an enslaved American, led about 70 of his enslaved and free Black neighbors in a rebellion to awaken his white neighbors to the inherent brutality of slaveholding and the dangers it presented to their own safety. Turner and his friends traveled from house to house in their neighborhood in Southampton County, Virginia, freeing enslaved people and murdering about 60 of the white men, women, and children they encountered. Their goal, Turner later told an interviewer, was “to carry terror and devastation wherever we went.”

State militia put down the rebellion in a couple of days, and both the legal system and white vigilantes killed at least 200 Black Virginians, many of whom were not involved in Turner’s bid to end enslavement. Turner himself was captured in October, tried in November, sentenced to death, and hanged.

But white Virginians, and white folks in neighboring southern states, remained frightened. Turner had been, in their minds, a well-treated, educated enslaved man, who knew his Bible well and seemed the very last sort of person they would have expected to revolt. And so they responded to the rebellion in two ways. They turned against the idea that enslavement was a bad thing, and instead began to argue that human enslavement was a positive good.

And states across the South passed laws making it a crime to teach enslaved Americans to read and write.

Denying enslaved Black Americans access to education exiled them from a place in the nation. The Framers had quite explicitly organized the United States not on the principles of religion or tradition, but rather on the principles of the Enlightenment: the idea that, by applying knowledge and reasoning to the natural world, men could figure out the best way to order society. Someone excluded from access to education could not participate in that national project. Instead, that person was read out of society, doomed to be controlled by leaders who marshaled religion and propaganda to defend their dominance.

In 1858, Senator James Henry Hammond of South Carolina explained that society needed “a class to do the menial duties, to perform the drudgery of life. That is, a class requiring but a low order of intellect and but little skill.”

But when they organized in the 1850s to push back against the efforts of elite enslavers like Hammond to take over the national government, members of the fledgling Republican Party recognized the importance of education. In 1859, Illinois lawyer Abraham Lincoln explained that those who adhered to Hammond’s “mud-sill” theory “assumed that labor and education are incompatible; and any practical combination of them impossible…. According to that theory, the education of laborers, is not only useless, but pernicious, and dangerous.”

Lincoln argued that workers were not simply drudges but rather were the heart of the economy. “The prudent, penniless beginner in the world, labors for wages awhile, saves a surplus with which to buy tools or land, for himself; then labors on his own account another while, and at length hires another new beginner to help him.” He tied the political vision of the Framers to this economic vision. In order to prosper, he argued, men needed “book-learning,” and he called for universal education. An educated community, he said, “will be alike independent of crowned-kings, money-kings, and land-kings.”

When they were in control of the federal government in the 1860s, Republicans passed the Land Grant College Act, funding public universities so that men without wealthy fathers might have access to higher education. In the aftermath of the Civil War, Republicans also tried to use the federal government to fund public schools for poor Black and white Americans, apportioning money according to illiteracy rates.

But President Andrew Johnson vetoed that bill on the grounds that the federal government had no business messing with education: that process, he said, belonged to the states—which for the next century denied Black people equal access to schools, excluding them from full participation in American society and condemning them to menial labor.

Then, in 1954, after decades of pressure from Black and Brown Americans for equal access to public schools, the Supreme Court under Chief Justice Earl Warren, a former Republican governor of California, unanimously agreed that separate schools were inherently unequal and thus unconstitutional.

Immediately, white southerners lawmakers launched a campaign of what they called “massive resistance” to integration. Some Virginia counties closed their public schools. Others took funds from integrated public schools and used a grant system to redistribute those funds to segregated private schools.

Within years, these segregation academies would dovetail neatly with the religious schools organized after the 1962 *Engel v. Vitale* decision in which the Supreme Court struck down state-mandated prayer in public schools, and the 1963 *Abington School District v. Schempp* decision prohibiting teachers from leading students in prayer and Bible reading. The Supreme Court decisions against prayer in schools reinforced the idea that the government opposed “family values,” and fundamentalists pulled their children out of public schools and created alternative religious schools. Fundamentalist leader Jerry Falwell began to suggest that public schools should be abolished entirely.

Both of these developments provided constituents for Ronald Reagan’s rise to political power with a message that public employees had gotten too powerful and that public enterprises should be privatized.

After Reagan’s election, his secretary of education commissioned a study of the nation’s public schools, starting with the conviction that there was a “widespread public perception that something is seriously remiss in our educational system.” The resulting report, titled “A Nation at Risk,” announced: “the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people.”

Although a later study commissioned in 1990 by the secretary of energy found the data in the original report did not support the report’s conclusions, Reagan nonetheless used it to justify school privatization. He vowed after the report’s release that he would “continue to work in the months ahead for passage of tuition tax credits, vouchers, educational savings accounts, voluntary school prayer, and abolishing the Department of Education. Our agenda is to restore quality to education by increasing competition and by strengthening parental choice and local control.”

The drive to push tax dollars from public schools to private academies through a voucher system remained a top priority for those on the right. In his first term, Trump asked Congress to fund “school choice for disadvantaged youth, including millions of African-American and Latino children. These families should be free to choose the public, private, charter, magnet, religious or home school that is right for them.” His education secretary, Betsy DeVos, was a staunch supporter of school choice and the voucher

system; she and her family gave $600,000 to promote school choice ballot laws in the decade before 2017.

The coronavirus pandemic sped up the push to defund public schools as Trump pushed hard to transfer funds from the closed public schools to private schools. That push helped to change the nature of vouchers from ones targeted at students from poor families or students with special needs toward vouchers for everyone. In 2022, Arizona lawmakers passed the biggest school voucher program in the nation.

Advocates claimed that the new program would "save taxpayers thousands per student, millions statewide," but in fact, as Eli Hager of ProPublica explained in 2024, the parents most likely to apply for subsidies already had their children in private school or were homeschooling them, using the vouchers to replace what they had been paying in the past. The state's spending on vouchers ballooned to $886 million in 2024–2025 as families from wealthier, whiter school districts used vouchers for children who were already in private school. The costs blew a hole in the state's budget: in 2024, Arizona faced a shortfall of $1.4 billion, forcing the state to slash spending for water infrastructure, road repair, and community colleges.

But voucher programs continued to expand, helped by DeVos's continued promotion of vouchers after Trump left office. In 2022 a nonprofit she founded poured about $9 million—about $2.5 million of which came from DeVos and her husband—into state elections, backing nearly 200 candidates who would push school vouchers to subsidize private schools with public tax money.

In May 2025, Texas governor Greg Abbott signed into law a voucher program in Texas under which, beginning this fall, families will receive about $10,000 a year for each school-age child to spend at a private school or $2,000 for children being homeschooled. The program is capped at $1 billion in its first two years, but experts predict it will rise to almost $5 billion by 2030.

The measure had faced opposition from Democrats and also Republicans from rural districts who worried about money draining from their public schools. It passed only after national pro-voucher advocates poured money into replacing the Republican state legislators who had stood against a voucher system with pro-voucher candidates. Abbott said that one of those donations, $6 million from Republican megadonor billionaire Jeff Yass of Pennsylvania, was the "largest single donation in Texas history."

Earlier this month, Jaden Edison and Sneha Dey of the *Texas Tribune* explained that a report from the state comptroller showed that of the more than 100,000 families participating in the new private school voucher program, most are white and from urban areas. Their families make less than twice the federal poverty level. About 70% were already attending private schools or being homeschooled.

Austin Democratic state senator Sarah Eckhardt said the report "proves this program is a billion-dollar handout to exclusive private schools concentrated in big cities, while public schools across the state are underfunded and closing at an alarming rate."

In Arizona, opponents of the voucher program tried to put onto the ballot this fall a measure that would have limited eligibility for the program by income and cracked down on the misuse of funds by homeschoolers, who used voucher money for ninja warrior training centers, trampoline parks, pianos, and so on. But voucher supporters sued over the signatures on the ballot measure, and on Tuesday the Arizona Supreme Court decided in their favor, throwing the measure out of this fall's election.

Elvia Díaz of the *Arizona Mirror* wrote: "Arizona school vouchers that are pulling $1 billion away from students in K–12 public schools are here to stay, whether we like it or not." She noted that "the real challenge is a public school system left underfunded and a voucher system left unchecked."

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In 1831, southern lawmakers tried to create a white nation by making it a crime to educate Black Americans. In 2026 the intent to exclude certain Americans from participation in the Enlightenment principles that undergird the nation remains the same, only less explicit.