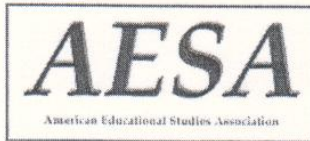


**When Ideology Sabotages the Truth: The Politics of Privately-funded
Educational Vouchers in one Urban School District**



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Introduction

School choice generally refers to the freedom that families have to select the schools their children will attend. Over the past several years, school choice has been offered as a strategy for school improvement because it is believed that when families are given a choice, they will select better academic environments for their children, and by doing so all schools will be stimulated to become more effective in response to market demands (Chubb & Moe, 1990). Low-income families often cite “lack of money” as the primary reason they cannot send their children to the best schools (Henig, 1994). Therefore, educational vouchers serve as one of several methods to increase choice by providing families with a credit that is applied toward tuition at public schools outside their district or toward private religious schools regardless of location.

Media coverage from newspapers, magazines, and syndicated television programs inform the public about choice, and initiatives put forth by recent Presidents Reagan, Bush Sr., Clinton, and Bush Jr. have all supported varying forms of school choice for families. Recently, the United States Supreme Court ruled 5 to 4 in favor of school choice involving public dollars for private, mostly religious, education in Cleveland city schools (Lane, 2002). The historic ruling reversed the decision made in 2001 by the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals. The Supreme Court justices asserted that vouchers given to parents for use at religious schools does not constitute an official sponsorship of religion, which is prohibited by the First Amendment of the Constitution (Friedman Foundation, 2002). Because school choice is a pressing issue, it is important that researchers study educational voucher programs in schools and the situations across the nation in which they exist.

The purpose of this paper is to describe our frustrations and misgivings with a privately-funded voucher program (PFVP) located in a large mid-western inner-city school district of approximately 25,000 students.

Method

This research was part of a larger project conducted at a Carnegie classified doctoral-intensive institution and entitled the School Effects Study (SESt). The SESt was proposed as a five-year study to investigate schools from which students entered or exited as a result of the voucher program. Major funding for the SESt research and vouchers was facilitated by the Thomas B. Fordham foundation, which distributed approximately \$1.5 million to families based on financial need. Individual voucher amounts ranged from \$1,700-\$2,500 per student.

The PFVP aspired to provide funds to low-income families to assist and encourage students to attend primarily private schools in the area. First implemented during the 1997-98 school year, the PFVP voucher program was publicized by local media such as radio, newspapers, billboards, and flyers. Parents who applied for PFVP vouchers were selected by a "lottery." However, unlike other school choice programs across the country in which families simply filed an application, families seeking to receive a privately-funded voucher in this program had to be persistent in pursuing the school choice of their choice. For example, families were required to have their children tested (and agree to repeated testing), to gather and reveal their financial statements, to complete a screening procedure, and to participate in an orientation program in addition to filing an application before they were considered possible candidates for the lottery. This process often took months before the families were informed of their status.

Qualitative study

Currently, many studies are underway across the country that examine the effectiveness of school choice; however few are examining schools qualitatively to provide a contextual frame from which school choice policies are developed and evaluated. The method used for this study was a naturalistic inquiry approach developed from an ethnographic case study perspective (Merriam, 1988). This method employs multiple research procedures to explore schools and is considered legitimate methodology for holistic and open-ended queries such as the day-to-day life in schools and policy development (Ely, 1991).

As is the case with ethnographic research, several types of empirical materials were gathered (i.e., interviews, observations, demographic profiles, curriculum descriptions, field notes, photographs, and documents). The bulk of our evidence came from field notes and the semi-structured interviews with teachers, administrators and parents. An interview guide was developed to encourage teachers and administrators to talk about the curriculum and their roles in the schools in a conversational manner. Another interview guide was used to ascertain the ways in which parents and/or family members were involved in their schools.

Having attended schools in other states as children, it is important to note that the researchers knew very little about the dynamics of the local school district prior to our entry into the study. In fact, we had no preconceived ideas about what we would find upon, in part because we lived and worked in a community located approximately 40 miles from city in which the PFVP was conducted.

Conflict between Quantitative and Qualitative research

Regrettably, the SESt research project was ended after only two years. It is the opinion of the researchers that political pressures to conform to the ideology of the funders led to the

demise of the SESt project. For example, the funders “embargoed” research data for nearly one year during which time findings could not be publicized or manuscripts submitted for review because the data did not support the superiority of private school education. In fact, the research indicated that there was little difference between the quality of education at the public and private schools. Although the SESt research project was subsequently phased out, other Fordham foundation studies (presumably those that supported private school education) continue to operate in this urban community today (e.g., Howell & Peterson, 2002).

Abandonment of the SESt project was also attributed to the conflict that sometimes arises between quantitative and qualitative research. Howell and Peterson (2002) do quantitative research and the SESt was doing quantitative research. The funders saw more value in the quantitative results than they did in the qualitative approaches. This circumstance is not completely surprising. The current mantra in educational research relates to scientifically based studies, which is operationally defined by most conservative education reform critics as experimental studies. Howell and Peterson’s work was experimental in nature and the results were more valued especially given the political ideology, which is discussed next.

Political Influence

There are three areas of political influence which sabotaged the objectives of the SESt project and undermined the espoused purpose of the voucher program. The first area of political influence was, what we believe to be, the *“Deceptive Nature of the Marketing Campaign”* to attract parents to the concept of school choice. For instance, promotional materials supplied by the funders stated that vouchers could be used for attendance at all schools inside and outside the district. This was somewhat misleading because only parents interested in having their children attend private schools were encouraged to participate in a distribution lottery. Likewise, the

overwhelming majority of the actual vouchers were awarded to children who attended private-religious schools, giving the lottery the appearance that it may have been rigged. Interviews with several religious school employees revealed they viewed the PFVP as a direct method to help advance and support their formalized marketing campaign titled “fill-every-desk.” Additionally, the PFVP was initially operated from the School of Education offices at a local religious university. This included purchasing stationary, envelopes, and flyers with the PFVP logo and the University address. Later, the PFVP office was moved off-campus during the second year of operation and new business supplies were purchased with the new mailing address.

The second area of influence involves, what we have termed “*Implied Best-Practice Pedagogy*.” This concept refers to notion that the funders endorsed schools that solely provided traditional and direct instruction teaching methods. For example, a yes/no checklist developed by the PFVP and entitled “Elements of Good Instructional Practices” was used to assist parents in their decision making (school choice) process. The checklist only identified traditional direct-instruction methods such as lecture, teacher-centered lessons, grade-specific tasks, homework done at home, etc. The PFVP advertising and marketing campaign in essence limited parental access to information available about the public school curricula by overshadowing the district’s magnet programs such as nontraditional and theme-based schools (e.g., public-Montessori, Mastery Learning or Effective Teacher Training teaching models) currently already available in the district.

In interviews conducted with families, many parents revealed limited understanding of the PFVP. Some parents applied to the PFVP in hopes that it would assist them in keeping their children in their present public school (rather than transferring them to a religious private

school). Other families, however, applied believing their children would receive a better education from the local private-religious schools in the area.

The third area of political influence was sociological in nature. Decisions about the direction of the SESt project were made within the context of a group setting often with the direct leadership from representatives of the PFVP. This type of social situation cultivated a phenomenon known as "*Groupthink*" (Janis, 1972). Groupthink refers to a mode of thinking in which pressures toward uniformity cause members to seek information that confirms the beliefs of the group. A closed mindedness develops often resulting in an incomplete survey of ideas and failure to recognize alternative explanations. Because there was pressure to advance the philosophy of the PFVP, the funders exercised final oversight on all reports and manuscripts, many times deleting crucial information, berating the study's methodology, or putting "a spin" to research findings in order to appease their ideology.

Summary

Ferrero (2003) suggests that, "educational doctrines are not preferences or prejudices, but expressions of belief systems informed by deeper philosophical and ideological convictions" (p. 4). Therefore, it is not completely naive to expect people most closely associated with the PVFP to carry deep-seated, sometimes spiritual beliefs about education and the purpose of schooling. As researchers, our findings suggest that ideology sabotaged the truth in this PFVP. That is, several steps were taken to either mislead or purposely suppress information in order to advance the PFVP agenda, oftentimes confusing the very people it was meant to help.

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