

The Debate Over School Vouchers For Douglas County & The Nation

Michael Cook

University of Colorado Denver

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Dr. Susan Giullian

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Introduction

Only within the past 30 years has the debate over school vouchers really become a hot topic within the halls of education in America. Little do most people realize, but the concept and conversation over school vouchers has a deep history in American education, reaching all the way back to the mid-1800's in Maine and Vermont. (Enlow, 2007, para. 12) Since then, and with a recent push from President George W. Bush, vouchers have bounced back to be a main focal point in the discussion in hopeful solutions for educational improvement and reform. (Paley, 2007)

School vouchers are described as “... a government cash grant or tax credit for parents, equal to all or part of the cost of educating their child at an elementary or secondary school of their choice.” (Dictionary.com, n.d.) Within the past couple decades a number of cases regarding school vouchers have been tried in the courts having gone before the people and many judges, Supreme Court included. The outcomes of these have been eye opening and riveting to say the least. There have been a number of cases that have fallen in favor of supporting the application of school vouchers, while in other states several court cases have stopped the voucher movement cold in its tracks. Nevertheless, the debate over the true motive behind school vouchers continues amongst those opposed to the concept; whether those in favor of vouchers really are trying to model free market competition within the educational system or simply setup the system to fill the pocketbooks of the already well-off demographic.

And now, within our own backyard, another groundbreaking program to pass school vouchers is under way, rising quickly to not only local, but also national headlines. Just recently, a perfect storm has come together concerning school vouchers in Douglas County, Colorado. So, in recognizing that such a landmark movement is occurring in a county so close to many of us I

will be focusing in on this specific county's voucher program, as well as various programs across the nation as a whole and their success.

One might be surprised to see that this discussion has come to be within Douglas County, considering the counties' makeup, which according to *Forbes Magazine* ranks as the nation's 8th richest county in America (Frobes.com, *America's 25 Richest Counties*, n.d.). Why would such a highly affluent group of people be debating at school board meetings for hours upon hours over such an issue? One may have assumed that the students and families of this widely wealthy area are completely content with what's been called a "Public School Paradise" by many and should have no desire to leave their public school for a private school option, but school board meetings and plans of school vouchers have recently shown otherwise (Riccardi, 2011).

In the past 6 months it has become a rather heated district discussion point, from schoolteachers and parents in Douglas County to lawmakers and governors across the nation, all eyes are on what is happening in the school board meetings in Castle Rock, CO. The board is already hoping to launch a pilot program next year that would allow up to 500 students to take part in the voucher program. (Mitchell, 2011) From this pilot program the school board hopes to see how the program impacts student educational goals and school performance, many believing that the competition and options this would create would drastically increase the public school system.

Arguments for a Douglas County School District Voucher System

Currently, the Douglas County School District consists of roughly 60,000 students (K-12), they rank as the 9th top school district in the state for number of top schools and is tied for 1st in the state for academic CSAP scores. (Mitchell, 2010) However, the newly elected school

board wants to compete at an international level and firmly believes that they need more academic competition and development within Douglas County to be a leader in great education for their children.

According to the Douglas County School District a school voucher program, or as they prefer to call it, an “Option Certificate Program” (OCP) may be a step towards actually becoming a leader in American educational reform and international education standards. (Douglas County School Board, 2011) Douglas County School District Board President John Carson said recently in an interview with Colorado Public Television “We want to look at our school district and what is offered to our parents and students right now and if the current system is not meeting a current need ... [and] if we identify areas where services might provide it better through a private school then we believe the parents ought to have that choice.” He goes on to explain that by allowing these vouchers/certificates to play a role in Douglas County they can “unleash the power of the neighborhood [public] schools to compete effectively, to market their programs, develop magnet programs ...” and he continues by saying, “I’m a proponent of it [the certificates] because I believe it will improve the overall system of public education, it will improve the quality.” (Colorado Public Television, 2010, Part 1 and Part 2)

How the Douglas County School District justifies this movement financially is by banking on the idea that the more than 3,000 Douglas County students who are currently not attending a school within the District boundaries will return to either attend private schools inside the District or the many other public or charter schools they offer. Simply put, the District will automatically receive the tax money for those students who return to Douglas County, since the students’ tax dollars follow them. The District would then write voucher/certificate checks payable to the parents of participating students and those parents would then write them over to

the private schools they choose to attend. The vouchers would award parents up to 75% of the tax dollars (roughly \$4,575) in the Option Certificate Program to use at the school of their choice, consequently leaving 25% of the tax dollars (\$1,525) in the hands of the District to invest back in to the public school system and assist a newly developed administration in running the certificate program. (Mitchell, 2011)

This program is being declared as a groundbreaking and innovative movement among educators and lawmakers, one of the first local school districts in the nation to take the school voucher debate in to their own local hands. The Douglas County School Board believes very strongly in this measure and has been very transparent through the accounting and legal process, hoping to gain the trust with its families and students.

Additionally, as a condition and safeguard to opening their doors to the Optional Certificate Program the private (nonpublic) schools would be required to administer the CSAP tests to all students. (Douglas County School Board, 2011, para. 4) This would allow for a clear insight in to the playing field amongst the Douglas County Schools and thus creating healthy competition between all schools in Douglas County.

All in all, the program is a win-win situation and would benefit everyone involved. It would allow free choice to parents to send their child wherever they choose with their tax money. The District would benefit financially off of students who return to Douglas County for education, and students will have the opportunity to be assisted by schools that can specialize in specific areas that certain students show talent or expertise in.

The idea of school vouchers in Douglas County may sound absurd and ridiculous to some, but to a confident school district that has already seen improvement from school choice why wouldn't you open the doors to even more competition and challenge? Encourage students

to leave the public system and head to private/nonpublic schools may seem extreme, but this district is sure that it can and will only increase its education. (Mitchell, *State Releases District Ratings*, 2010)

Additionally, not only would this bring more revenue to the public school system with fewer students, but also it would open up classroom space and teachers to teach more effectively. In a nation strapped for space and classroom instruction time, this groundbreaking concept could revolutionize the concept of vouchers forever. When students leave the district schools, they leave behind an open seat in the classroom and 25% of their tax dollars, thus allowing for more funds with fewer students.

Facts from National Studies Proving the Success of Vouchers

Across the nation, in the few areas that voucher programs have been endorsed, results are beginning to show that students and schools who take part in them are seeing improved test scores and student success rates. (Glod, 2009) Study, after study, show that contrary to the popular belief that these programs are not improving the foundation of education, voucher programs are actually having a resounding impact amongst the 26 voucher programs, which includes over 190,000 students across America.

According to the Greg Foster and Foundation for Educational Choice “Nineteen empirical studies have examined how vouchers affect outcomes in public schools. Of these studies, 18 find that vouchers improved public schools and one finds no visible impact. No empirical studies find that vouchers harm public schools.” (Foster, 2011) Additionally, the same study shows that not only do voucher programs have high success rates, but they also “found that

vouchers improved graduation rates by 12 percentage points. The voucher students had an 82% graduation rate ... “ compared to the traditional 70% in those areas. (Foster, 2011)

All that to say and according to the key findings for voucher programs used across the nation “Every empirical study ever conducted in Milwaukee, Florida, Ohio, Texas, Maine and Vermont finds that voucher programs in those places improved public schools.” (Foster, 2011) So why wouldn't we give School Vouchers more of a chance, allow them to create competition and improve our education system?

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