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The Market Approach to Education: An Analysis of America's First Voucher Program. John F. Witte. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.

As an institution that shapes the character and skills of future generations, that strongly influences the allotment of opportunities in the labor market, and that is formally accountable to the citizenry who pay for it, public education has been no stranger to controversy and critique. Despite the many contests over purposes, content, organization, funding, and governance, only recently has the legitimacy of public schools been questioned in a way that has serious policy implications. In an important brief for educational vouchers written in 1990, John Chubb and Terry Moe opined that public education "has structured criticism and reform–but it has never been their target" (Chubb & Moe, p. 6). Since publication of their *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools,* however, a movement in behalf of vouchers has made public education itself the target of criticism and has made advocates of public schools take notice.

Essentially academic exercises prior to the 1990s, voucher proposals trace to the now-famous essay of conservative economist Milton Friedman (1955) that called for separating education funding from its governance. Friedman's plan reduced the role of government to providing families with vouchers for at least part of private school tuition and to certifying that schools complied with basic safety standards. Writing at the time of *Brown v. Board of Education,* Friedman was mindful that his ideas could promote segregated schools. Although he regretted such a potential outcome, he maintained that individual freedom was more important than integration. Voucher legislation did proliferate in the South, and in the late 1950s, a voucher program commenced in Prince Edward County, Virginia that was designed explicitly to sabotage desegregation by closing public schools and providing tuition for White students to attend private academies. The scheme was declared unconstitutional in 1964, a quarter century before public funds again would be made available to attend private schools. With the establishment of the Milwaukee Parent Choice Program (MPCP) in 1990, the association of vouchers with the extreme right wing diminished.[1] Chubb and Moe (1990) contributed to this by constructing their argument in a way that made vouchers seem ideologically neutral. Rather than stressing individual freedom as Friedman did or invoking White rights the way many other

critics of government did, Chubb and Moe couched the argument for vouchers in the technical language of school improvement.

The nature of the choice program in Milwaukee also shifted political perceptions. Proposed by an African-American legislator, the MPCP on the face of it was the antithesis of its Virginia forebear–in effect an affirmative action program. It subsidized only low-income students to attend private schools, and the vast majority of participants were (and remain) students of color. Equity-oriented safeguards stipulated that participating schools must accept the voucher–initially $2,446–as full tuition, and, with the exception of special education students, they stipulated as well that the schools must accept all applicants, regardless of previous academic record. (If there were more applicants than spaces in a school, students were chosen by lottery.) Furthermore, the substitution of "choice" for "voucher" in the program's title has been widely adopted by voucher advocates and carries connotations of expanded rather than diminished opportunity.

No longer identified with only free market zealots or blatant racists, vouchers have become legitimate policy instruments. This does not mean that support for them has been bipartisan. Conservatives have been major defenders of the MPCP from its inception, while liberals and leftists often have been vocal foes. Certainly, neither side of the political spectrum represents the MPCP as an affirmative action program, however. Conservatives–at times careful to call it a "remedial program"–tend to see the MPCP as an instance of markets breaking up a sclerotically bureaucratic public school monopoly and claim that it provides the same choices to the poor that the well-to-do have long enjoyed. Liberals often view it as a step toward dismantling a fundamental democratic institution and claim it further balkanizes a racially divided society. Each side selectively scrutinizes the MPCP for harbingers of large-scale voucher program outcomes. In response to the polemics on both the right and the left, John Witte's *The Market Approach to Education* sets out to look at the choice program on its own terms and makes sense of the school voucher politics that have focused extraordinary national attention on the MPCP from the moment it began with a mere 341 students.

In 1990 Witte was selected by State Superintendent of Instruction Herbert Grover to produce legislature-mandated annual reports on the MPCP. From the beginning Witte's impartiality and independence were assaulted from all sides, but the most vigorous attacks came from voucher supporters who mistakenly assumed that Grover, an adamant opponent of vouchers, would select an evaluator to undermine the MPCP. Witte, in fact, acknowledges "the temptation to turn against educational choice because of vicious attacks on my character and my work by voucher advocates" (p. xiv). He successfully resists such a temptation in this

relentlessly measured book, which stakes out a sober middle ground. Witte maintains that the voucher program in its most restricted form provided real options, though of varying quality, to low-income students; however, he prognosticates less positive results for the current, expanded program and maintains that a fully market-driven program would serve the wealthy at the expense of the poor. Witte's book is an effective counterweight to inflamed rhetoric and tendentious scholarship, but it is not completely satisfying. Probably no one knows more than John Witte does about the MPCP schools, families, and student performance during the early years of the program, but his presentation of the data suggests too positive an assessment. Moreover, his reading of choice expansion politics fails to acknowledge or explain significant, ongoing African-American support for the program. Most importantly, the framing of the book legitimates educational policies that reinforce racial inequality. None of this means, however, that his argument is fundamentally wrong or that he has made no valuable discoveries about the MPCP.

One of Witte's more interesting findings, for instance, is that the MPCP did not "skim the cream" of eligible students in terms of income and academic skills. Average family income was well below the stipulated ceiling of 175% of the poverty rate, and participating students generally had very weak academic skills. Nonetheless, Witte discovered that MPCP parents were relatively well educated. In particular, the MPCP mothers were not only better educated than other low-income parents but also better educated than Milwaukee Public School (MPS) parents in general. In addition, the families of MPCP students were small, the adults had actively interacted with the children's previous public schools, and the parents were dissatisfied with those schools.

Though Witte does not make the point, the parents essentially were "creamed" even if the children were not. Likely equipped with enhanced "skills of navigation," to use Jonathan Kozal's phrase (Kozal, 1991, p. 60), the parents were given the opportunity to act on their discontent, and they did so. Low-income parents with limited skills negotiating educational bureaucracies or who were satisfied with the public schools were unlikely to apply. The number who did participate, in fact, was tiny over the first five years of the program. Student applications ranged from 577 to 1,046 in a district of approximately 100,000 students, the majority of whom were eligible.

Another important finding has to do with parents' reasons for participating in the choice program. Contrary to scholarship on the educational choices of the poor that has shown academics to be a secondary motive (e.g., Gerwitz, Ball, & Bowie, 1995; Lee, Croninger, & Smith, 1996), Witte's survey results demonstrate that educational quality was the highest priority

of the MPCP parents. It did not automatically follow, however, that their children's educational opportunities were enhanced. Witte provides various forms of data–test scores, case studies, and surveys of satisfaction–that should be relevant to this matter.

In Witte's prior evaluations of the MPCP, his analysis of performance on the reading and mathematics sections of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills received inordinate attention from both advocates and opponents of choice. Opponents found support in Witte's finding that there was no difference in achievement gains between MPCP students and low-income MPS students. Advocates found support in the challenge to Witte–one that received national media attention–from Jay Greene, Paul Peterson, and Jiangtao Du (1996). Rather than follow Witte's strategy of comparing MPCP students to a random sample of MPS students, the three researchers compared MPCP students to students in MPS who applied to the program but were not admitted due to inadequate space. They found that choice students who remained in the program for four years (a small percentage of those who began it) held sizably higher mathematics score gains over the control group, although they did not hold a statistically significant gain in reading. This apparent improvement in mathematics has been trumpeted as a signal success for the choice program. Although Witte provides no new test-score data in the book, he does respond to Greene and his colleagues. He argues, for instance, that the control group of rejected students was not random, but likely a poorer achieving group than the large number of rejected students for whom there were no follow-up test scores because they chose other alternatives to MPS. More fundamentally, Witte finds such a large gain in mathematics suspect both because reading and math scores typically are highly correlated and because such a dramatic change in mathematics occurred in merely one year. Upon further investigation, Witte discovered that five students among those rejected from MPCP got scores so low that it is likely they failed to take the test at all seriously. Removing these students and the two lowest scoring students from the selected group wiped out the advantage of the choice students.

There is an emperor's-new-clothes quality about claims based on a sample so small (85 MPCP students and 27 rejected students) that inclusion or omission of seven students might have significantly different policy implications. Certainly, a greater sample size might have shown real differences that might have favored the MPCP schools. Instead, we learn much more about how politicized the voucher debate has become–as the appetite for spinning policy declarations from trivial data is enormous for proponents and detractors alike–than we learn about how well the MPCP educated children.

Unfortunately, other data Witte collected enrich our understanding of the program only modestly, and he presents them in an unduly favorable light. Witte, for example, finds that

parents were very satisfied with the MPCP schools, but he neglects to point out that this sentiment does not necessarily testify to the quality of students' experience. As Peter Cookson (1997), among others, has noted, "the very act of choosing creates an aura of specialness" (p. 278). Furthermore, Witte fails to acknowledge that the very high dropout rate he uncovered, though it declined over time, may not square with survey-based indications of satisfaction. The average annual attrition rate from the MPCP, according to Witte, topped 30%. Most dramatically, 4 years after the program began, only 57 students remained of the original 341. Witte allows that the percentage of students leaving the schools was very high. He moderates this judgment, however, by claiming that the rate was similar to that of students who did not remain in the same MPS school from year to year, which he estimates at between 22% and 28%. Similar rates of departure do not make either acceptable, but it is also not clear that they both have the same significance. Leaving a program for which enrollment required considerable initiative, we think, is a stronger statement than leaving a school within MPS that typically did not require active choice and that often meant remaining within the public system. At any rate, the dropout rate from the MPCP raises questions about the depth of parental satisfaction and the viability of the choice program itself.

In addition to providing data on test scores, parental satisfaction, and leaving rates, Witte offers descriptive and quantitative data on the MPCP schools. A number of the original schools, he relates, were experiencing major financial problems when the MPCP began. Instructional resources, therefore, were limited, and the ability to provide salaries that would hold faculty and administrators was compromised. Over time, according to Witte, the increasing value of vouchers contributed to higher retention rates of staff as well as to school improvements. After a teacher turnover rate of what Witte acknowledges "was an extraordinary 36%" in 1991-1992 (data were not available for the first year of the program), the average staff turnover dropped to 20% between 1992 and 1995 (p. 93). Witte, however, does not break down the turnover rate by school, therefore it is not clear to what extent the decline in teacher turnover resulted from the addition of better funded, essentially middle-class private schools that enrolled relatively few voucher students.

However much vouchers contributed to the financial viability of several MPCP schools, Witte leaves us with a grim picture of the early years of the program:

> Certainly in the first few years of the MPCP, most of these schools were operating with underpaid staff relative to public schools and modest curricular or other support help. They were using cast-off materials and equipment and in general enjoyed almost none of the frills of public schools. Their playgrounds were public parks, or in two cases,

> barricaded-off asphalt streets adjacent to the schools–hardly an ideal arrangement and obvious enough to warn off most middle-class parents. (p. 103)

Witte, nonetheless, believes that the impoverishment of the schools "ironically" carried advantages. It meant, for instance, that parents had to chip in their time and energy for the schools to function adequately. Consequently, "parents often became a real part of daily school activities" (p.103). Although mandated parental involvement might create closer connections between parents and schools, Witte does not acknowledge the injustice of this obligation. A necessity for these poor parents is a matter of choice for more affluent parents whose time and energy need not compensate for inadequately equipped and staffed schools.

More unsettling is Witte's second advantage to financially strapped schools: "Another positive aspect of economic scarcity was that these schools were more or less forced to stick to basics because they did not have the luxury to indulge in nonessential learning activities" (p. 104). Witte pulls back from this astonishing statement in his next sentence when he concedes that "the obvious downside was that the students may have missed enrichment activities or had them delivered in a nonprofessional matter," but he leaves the impression nonetheless that an education limited to the basics is satisfactory for poor children (p. 104).

The schools that participated in the MPCP were not of one mold, but Witte's descriptions are too attenuated to convey a real sense of their dynamics. He allots merely three paragraphs to the four Montessori schools, while giving a Waldorf school relatively lavish attention with six paragraphs. These schools, however, collectively included a small percentage of MPCP students. Although more than 80% of MPCP students were enrolled in four other schools, they do not receive more generous treatment. Three of them, according to Witte, had cultural emphases–two African American and one Latino–but cultural themes, described in a single paragraph, seem to have only weakly inflected the curricula. Witte, for example, notes with apparent approval that one African-American teacher relied on *The Little Engine That Could* and *The Red Hen.* Beyond this anecdote he offers little more than a summary of teacher-centered instruction that does not convey much of the flavor of classroom interactions or the distinctiveness of the main MPCP schools. And despite Witte's sense that these schools benefited from the increasing value of vouchers, he does not adequately describe how or whether instruction or school climate changed over time.

Witte's school observations also yield quantitative measures of student learning and classroom environment that are presented too positively. He states, for instance, "our observers estimated a lack of comprehension for 26 percent of classroom periods. This was offset by 44

percent of the periods in which students comprehended the material for more than half the class" (p. 97). Setting aside the vexing problem of accurately determining comprehension based on classroom observation, a problem Witte acknowledges, it is troubling that students apparently comprehended the material for half the class or less in 56% of the periods. Witte offers further data in a positive light:

> Time-on-task ... was very high. Thirty-seven percent of the students were on task the entire period, 40 percent for more than half the period. Discipline in the classroom was modest, with disciplining students occurring less than half the time period in 82 percent of the periods observed. No disciplinary activity was observed in 14 percent of the classes. The vast majority of classes were either fairly clean or clean (61 percent). Physical and social order was also high. Eighty-eight percent of the classes were physically on the ordered as opposed to the chaotic side, and 81 percent were orderly in terms of the social setting. Most of the classes were quiet (62 percent); the rest perhaps appropriately noisy. (pp. 97-98)

Assuming that being left ignorant of the researchers' definitions of discipline, clean classrooms, and physical and social order does not render the data meaningless, the data would look more disturbing if presented differently: nearly a quarter of students off task for half the period or more, 39% of the classes dirty or fairly dirty, and 38% of the classes noisy. Such findings would be viewed unfavorably in middleclass schools.

Witte certainly does not skirt the most glaring problems with the MPCP–the failure of one school during the first year, the collapse of two others in the 1995-1996 academic year, and a fourth school closing the following summer. He warns that "these failures should at least produce a pause for those who champion private schools as the unqualified salvation for the woes of inner-city education" (p. 109). The rather damning data he accumulated notwithstanding, Witte seems relatively satisfied with the MPCP as it was configured in its early years. In fact, despite his depiction of the traditional, teacher-centered instruction most MPCP students received, he claims that "John Dewey would have been proud of the systemic innovation represented by the array of schools in the MPCP" (p. 109).

Part of the problem is that strictly educational matters do not seem to matter enough to Witte to get them right. Aside from the inappropriate invocation of John Dewey, he thinks the Laboratory School at the University of Chicago, founded by Dewey, was established as a public school. He calls the Milwaukee Teachers' Education Association by the name of the elementary school teachers' organization that preceded it decades ago. He blunders the number of poor students Thomas Jefferson's "Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge" proposed to

educate beyond five years of schooling, and misses the Bill's still-radical notion that government should fully subsidize the cost of an elite education for high-achieving, low-income students. Witte even garbles a thumbnail sketch of the creation of public education by missing its origins by about a half-century. At any rate, the strength of the book is not Witte's discussion of the educational work of the schools or his sense of educational history, but rather his keen understanding of voucher politics.

Much of the attention afforded the tiny MPCP in its first years was predicated on the belief that it was a crucial beachhead in the creation of broader, less restrictive programs. Witte does a fine job of demonstrating the tactical nature of the original program for those forces that sought universal vouchers. He points out, for instance, that Republican Governor Tommy Thompson had attempted to garner support for an essentially unrestricted voucher program in 1988, but the Democratic majority in the state legislature quashed it. Two years later the restricted voucher program won legislative approval by drawing more support from Democrats. Most notably, three other African-American legislators joined bill initiator Annette "Polly" Williams in voting for the bill. Witte notes the advantages of such a small-scale program to voucher supporters in a context of state and national politics where opposing coalitions, largely aligned with the major political parties, neutralized each other and prevented the development of comprehensive voucher legislation. He further notes that small beginnings are less likely to create rifts within the Democratic and Republican parties among constituencies whose interest in vouchers do not coincide with party positions. Finally, he articulates how small-scale programs like the MPCP can achieve larger ends over time: "Such programs can be structured to gain political acquiescence, engender the sympathy of the widest possible audience, and provide the best possible court case for establishing the constitutionality of vouchers" (p. 162).

Once the MPCP was created, according to Witte, advocates engaged in a number of strategies to build support for an expanded program. Witte emphasizes, for example, the development of what he terms "choice theatre"–media dramatizations that wildly exaggerate the failures of public schools and the successes of voucher schools in order to influence the legislature and the courts. In the liveliest writing of the book, Witte conveys a sense of these educational morality plays that both voucher partisans and, drawn to the dramatic elements of the program, seemingly non-partisan media–such as *60 Minutes* and the *MacNeil/Lehrer Newshour–created* and disseminated.

In addition to media activity, Witte notes that Michael Joyce, head of the conservative Bradley Foundation, played a prominent role in solidifying business support for expanded vouchers. Major businesses, furthermore, allied with religious schools to create the privately

funded Partners Advancing Values in Education (PAVE) as a temporary organization that provided low-income students partial tuition for private schools. These scholarships, mostly subsidized by the Bradley Foundation, were overwhelmingly used for parochial schools and were meant to press the case for including such schools in an expanded voucher program.

As important as these strategies were, it was Republican political power that made a less restrictive voucher program viable. In 1995, a Republican-majority legislature passed an expanded voucher program that included religious schools, dropped the requirement that schools must enroll a significant percentage of non-voucher students, raised the ceiling on enrollment to 15,000 students, and ended annual evaluations. The State Supreme Court deadlocked 3-3 on the legality of the expanded program and sent it down to the county court which found it unconstitutional. The appeals court concurred in a 2-1 decision, but the State Supreme Court then upheld the program 4-2. The majority maintained that the MPCP adhered to the stipulations of the *Lemon* tests, which determine whether there is a violation of the separation between church and state. The courts, Witte makes clear, are not above politics, and the imprecise *Lemon* tests–which Witte calls "a postmodernist wonderland of multiple meanings"–gave relatively free reign to political partisanship. What Witte does not point out, however, is that the favorable vote was made possible in part by the election of conservative justice N. Patrick Crooks following the retirement of Chief Justice Roland B. Day, who previously had voted against the MPCP. In addition, unprecedentedly large contributions by voucher supporters to the reelection campaign of Justice Jon Wilcox, a conservative, arguably enabled him to defeat the liberal Walt Kelly. (For questions raised about the legality of the fund-raising effort for Wilcox, see Murphy, 2001.)

Although the expanded choice program remained limited to low-income students and barred both charging students additional tuition and establishing admission requirements, Witte questions whether admissions were ever completely open in the MPCP. He points out that participating schools, like all private schools, chose their own students prior to the creation of the voucher program and that they would not eagerly give up this prerogative under the MPCP. Witte suggests, in fact, that interviews of prospective students by MPCP school staffs may have been a subtle form of screening. Moreover, he produces a memorandum from PAVE director, Dan McKinley, that responds to admission concerns of parochial schools that had been permitted to join the expanded program. The document hints that open enrollment could be circumvented by the interviewing process. Witte does not find fault with the private schools for wanting to select their own students. He has no tolerance, however, for those who advocated the initial program in order to create a foundation for a program permitting private schools to

select students by their own criteria and providing vouchers to families regardless of income while allowing schools to set tuition rates exceeding the value of vouchers. Losing his tone of moderation for a moment, Witte maintains that "it is duplicitous and fundamentally perverse for a democratic process to enact a policy with the rationale of helping a population in need, but ending with a policy that in all likelihood will do the opposite" (p. 192).

Even though supporters of unrestricted vouchers were among the advocates of the MPCP from its inception, Witte views their subsequent dominance as particularly ominous: "The coalition supporting the expansion has grown from the core of black supporters representing poor, minority constituents to include the white political, business, and religious community. The process has marginalized black leaders, many of whom have withdrawn support for the newly formulated program" (p. 169). Witte further states that "by 1997, the only significant black political leader left who supported vouchers was Howard Fuller" (p. 169).[2] (Fuller is a former superintendent of MPS and a nationally recognized community activist since the 1960s).

Although the drive for universal vouchers poses a threat to educational equity and many key supporters of the 1995 legislation supported an unrestricted program, Witte overstates the change in the coalition. On one hand, business interests may have been increasingly galvanized in support of vouchers following passage of the initial legislation, but there appears to have been strong business support for vouchers from the beginning and no documented opposition. Witte, in fact, acknowledges that unrestricted vouchers had been the goal all along of "many of the private and religious groups and most of the key business elite in Milwaukee" (p. 183). On the other hand, Fuller is not alone among Black political leaders who continue to support the voucher program. Witte, for instance, makes much of the apparent defection of State Representative Annette "Polly" Williams, the crafter of the initial choice legislation. Yet she applauded the State Supreme Court decision that affirmed the expanded choice program ("Religious schools," 1998). There was additional, though minority, African-American support in the state legislature and the Common Council, as well as support from the editor of Milwaukee's largest African-American newspaper and an organization of approximately 30 African-American ministers (some of whom have created their own schools under the program).

Witte, we think, rhetorically isolates Fuller from the Black community not only by failing to acknowledge that Black leadership is divided on the issue of the expanded choice program, but also by presenting inaccuracies about him that represent him as a right-wing mole. There is no question that Fuller, long associated with the political left, has created new political enemies. In part this is simply because he supports vouchers, but it is also because of his alliances with conservatives and his willingness to take money from right-wing foundations, including Bradley.

Fuller's advocacy of school choice, however, can be seen as consistent with his other controversial efforts to promote Black self-determination–from his founding of Malcolm X Liberation University in the 1960s to his efforts to preserve an all-Black public high school in the 1980s. Furthermore, he never has been an advocate of a free market approach to education as Witte characterizes him. He did not, as Witte claims, leave the superintendency of MPS because the board would not support his choice agenda–an agenda he did not pursue at that time. And he did not, as Witte alleges, accept a position at Marquette University that was provided by Bradley Foundation largesse. His salary, in fact, initially came from a combination of Marquette money and support from a liberal foundation.

Witte's take on Howard Fuller and Black leadership is meant, we think, to identify support for the expanded voucher program exclusively with the interests of powerful Whites. Conservative moneyed interests certainly have played a powerful role in promoting vouchers. Perhaps nothing symbolizes this more than hiring Kenneth Starr, the Whitewater Special Prosecutor, to defend the expanded program. As Witte notes, Starr's firm reportedly was reimbursed at a rate of $390 per hour with money that largely came from a Bradley Foundation grant to the state. Moreover, from an equity standpoint, the expanded program has unfavorable characteristics. In particular, it abandons safeguards and forms of accountability that inhibited the participation of fly-by-night schools. It is likely to breed many more weak MPCP schools like the shaky Alex's "Academic" of Excellence, whose name alone is a perfect advertisement for choice opponents.[3] Nonetheless, the expanded choice program is far from a universal one; it is still limited to low-income children and still officially bans selective admissions. Whatever the stances of elected officials and other prominent figures in the Black community, it only makes sense that many African-American families who have had or who predict unfavorable experiences in the public schools would see the MPCP schools as alternatives. The expanded voucher program has permitted many more African-American students to participate, and they have. Although Witte believed that the larger program would be majority White, his prediction missed the mark widely following the decision of the State Supreme Court. During the 1998-99 school year, of the 6,086 choice students for whom ethnicity was known, 61.4% of MPCP students were African American and 20.2% were White (Legislative Audit Bureau, 2000, Table 10, p. 37).

Although Witte is almost certainly correct that as voucher programs become less restricted they will serve more inequitable ends, he pays too little attention to the educational aspirations of the poor families of color who currently opt for voucher programs and the difference greater educational opportunity could make. Witte seems to think that education

cannot make much of a difference for these children. He sets this tone as early as the introduction when he offers a classroom observation that focuses less on kids' educational experience than on their comments about the violence in their environments. Witte states that this classroom is part of an MPCP school that had existed many years before, that it was considered one of the strongest in the choice program, and that, according to school officials, most of its eighth-grade graduates completed high school. Witte recognizes that this graduation rate masks the very high percentage of students who never made it to eighth grade. "In citing these numbers," he allows, "they of course did not acknowledge that their eighth-grade class was about one-third of the kindergarten or first-grade classes, thus begging the question of what happened to those who slipped away" (pp. 4-5). Nonetheless, he seems to hold the school harmless for the attrition since he continues by stating that "by most standards, to those familiar with inner-city schools, this school was a success. It was orderly, clean, and disciplined. Parents were constantly around the school, and classrooms were, for the most part, competently staffed" (p. 5).

With the exception of strong parental presence, the previous sentence could apply to nearly all the public elementary schools in the city of Milwaukee. It is not clear why these characteristics signify a success for poor children when quality of instruction and academic achievement would be considered integral to success for all other children. At bottom, it appears, Witte does not think these students–due to environment and culture–have much promise. In fact, he ends the Introduction and implicitly frames the rest of a book with a statement that emphasizes the inadequacies of the poor rather than the failure of schools to educate them: "When faced with conditions of abject poverty, with families that have great difficulty focusing resources on education, and with students who are immersed in a culture that often undervalues education, schools fight an uphill battle to provide top-quality, equal education for the majority of children" (p. 10). Witte's own evidence, of course, contradicts his belief that education is undervalued, and while poor families axiomatically lack resources, well-endowed schools would be appropriate compensation for such circumstances.

Even so, a targeted, small-scale voucher program does provide expanded options to low-income students of color who have been served inadequately by public schools. Some of the original MPCP schools, for instance, have parent governance arrangements that, as Witte perceptively points out, are less fragile than the authority of local school councils in Chicago, the site of the most dramatic governance reform in urban public schools. Some voucher schools may be able to protect students from the racism that so often poses an obstacle to learning in public schools. A few may even provide high-quality instruction through the heroic efforts of

excellent teachers willing to forgo decent salaries. But expanded options do not necessarily mean expanded opportunities. By and large students in underfunded voucher schools face the compulsory inequality endemic to urban public schools, only with fewer resources. Furthermore, should the MPCP become available to all children, the value of vouchers would likely diminish. After all, many conservatives support vouchers not simply to get government out of the business of governing schools, but also to reduce government expenditures on schools.

Vouchers do not pose a threat to public education generally. Repeated failures of voucher initiatives at the state level indicate the public's reluctance to tamper with long-standing educational arrangements, and a significant economic downturn would likely tarnish the current romance with market solutions to social matters. Unrestricted voucher programs in cities, however, are a much stronger possibility. In places like Milwaukee such programs would draw support from the large group of Whites who have fled urban schools for segregated or nearly segregated private schools. Unrestricted voucher programs would subsidize this group's tuition and leave the poor with scholarships too small to provide access to decent schools.

Regardless of this potential consequence of vouchers, the voucher program in Milwaukee owes its existence to the active consent of many parents of color, particularly African Americans. The irony of this legitimate interest in leaving public schools for under-resourced private schools is perhaps best evoked by drawing upon the comparatively well-excavated history of African American education. As W. E. B. Du Bois (1935/1962*,* Chapter 15) first pointed out, African Americans' keen desire for education motivated them, following the Civil War, to play an essential role in creating state constitutional provisions for public education throughout the South. Because the South lagged behind the North in establishing these provisions, the achievement of universal public education for Blacks and Whites in the United States depended on African-American initiative. Yet Southern poverty, exaggerated by a race-based maldistribution of resources, made Black schools semi-private by requiring African Americans to make sustained, major sacrifices in labor, land, and money–what historian James Anderson refers to as double taxation–for these schools to be minimally viable (Anderson, 1988; Siddle Walker, 1996). The legal battles that culminated in *Brown v. Board of Education* and its progeny can be understood as efforts to remove the burden of double taxation–which in a sense the MPCP restored–and to make public education for all fully funded by the public.

The pursuit of funding equality through desegregation, however, did not rest easily with the equally important drive for self-determination that Anderson traces to the end of the Civil War. Where significant desegregation took place, it often led to a much more intimate control of Black education than had been experienced in Jim Crow Schools, as Whites would dominate

teaching and administration as well as governing bodies. Although substantial urban desegregation has been evanescent, White control often has not. In Milwaukee, for instance, the public school system serves mostly poor students of color, whereas Whites compose 80% of the teaching force and exercise predominant power on the school board. Adding the limited funding these schools receive compared to suburban counterparts, what emerges is more a vision of the colonial school than the common school. Within the framework of choice policy, parents of color may choose between public schools they do not control and the more financially challenged voucher schools they might control, but they cannot choose equality. Witte does not appear to be mindful of this. He rightly contends that an increasing reliance on markets will create graver educational inequities. Yet even he seem to acknowledge that this is an unremarkable formulation when he declares he does not consider that "the logic of the arguments ... throughout the book are complex or surprising" (p. 209). A greater problem than stating the obvious, however, is that by understating the inadequacies of the MPCP in its most restricted form and by failing to address larger matters of finance and governance that sustain racial inequality in public education, he implicitly supports policy arrangements that frustrate advances in equal education.

Notes

- We thank Cynthia Ellwood, Harvey Kantor, and Janet Matthews for helpful comments on previous drafts of this essay.

- [1] Some voucher proposals came from left-leaning liberals in the 1960s, but these received little attention. See, for instance, Jencks (1966).
- [2] Witte also notes that the voucher program in Ohio was opposed by all of its African-American legislators. See p. 198.
- [3] During the 1998-99 academic year, for example, 43.5% of the MPCP schools were not accredited. Of the 18 schools founded between 1995 and 1998 for which data are available, three were accredited and three had accreditation pending (Legislative Audit Bureau, Appendix 3, p. 6 and Appendix 1).

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