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## VOUCHER INITIATIVE

The school voucher initiative which may be on the ballot next June could revolutionize education in California. Whether the proposed new voucher system will benefit all or even most children is an issue that will build up considerable steam in the coming months.

Are proponents correct that vouchers will improve the educational opportunities for California children? Or are opponents closer to the truth in arguing that poor, disadvantaged, and minority children will fare worse under vouchers?

### 1. How would the Voucher Proposal Work?

The petition now being circulated in California to place the voucher program on the June 1980 ballot is expected to gain the required 554,000 signatures. The proposal is to amend the state constitution to allow the state to issue tuition vouchers directly to parents for financing their children's education. The parents could then pick the school of their choice for each child and spend the voucher for education at that school.

There will be five types of schools available. Public schools will continue to exist. School districts, public universities, or community colleges could develop schools to be known as "independent public schools." Citizens could organize voucher schools to be known as "family choice schools." And private schools could elect either to remain private and receive no public funds or to accept voucher payments and follow voucher rules. In the case of some private schools that accept vouchers, parents may have to buy a supplemental voucher whose price will depend on family income.

All voucher schools would have to accept children as they applied. However, in each school priority would be given to students currently attending the school and to their brothers and sisters as well as to the children of former students and current full-time employees. If the number of applicants exceeded the number of places in a school, a lottery would be held to determine who could attend. Both voucher and public schools would have to satisfy current state standards for teaching and curriculum. The voucher system would be administered by the state. The cost of administration of the plan, which could involve many children and most schools in the state, could be large. This money must come from educational funds.

### 2. What are the Arguments For and Against?

Voucher proponents claim that the system will expand the types of education available to all children. Choices for parents in most areas will certainly be greater, but will be limited by the priority of those who want to stay in the "good" schools. Also, many parents won't have full information about all schools, on which to base their decisions, and many will not be able to find convenient and cheap transportation to alternative schools.

Moreover, the choice of parents will be among a stratified system of schools. The voucher proposal does not increase the amount of money invested in education. It seeks only to direct the available money to the types of schools that parents find most attractive. If many parents' first choices are the private voucher

schools, or the "independent public" schools, or the "family choice" schools, the public schools will be certain to receive less funding than they now receive. The result will be a system of increasingly unequal schools.

The voucher system is not likely to affect the affluent parent. Spaces in private schools will still exist for those who can pay. Starting new schools will require substantial amounts of time, effort, and money, so school programs are likely to adjust only very slowly to parents' and students' needs. It might take several years of student assignments to less desirable schools before the voucher system could satisfy a very large fraction of all parents. And parents unable to afford private schools will face the possibility that their children may not get into the type of school they desire because of space limitations.

### 3. Conclusion

A more reasonable and less costly way to improve the responsiveness of schools to parents' concerns would be to develop stronger community control of schools, and more open communication and advisory input between parents/students and teachers/administrators. Whatever the benefits of the voucher system to some parents and children in some situations, the system itself moves away from local control and toward centralized state control. More importantly, it moves away from the ideal of equal education for all children.

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