

It is hard to believe it is already August and time to get the kids ready to go back to school. Schools have changed much over the years. Once, schools were mostly private and parents wielded great power over their kids' educations. Fast forward to today and parents find themselves ceding much to the professionals. They must accept programs being dropped. Illiteracy and high school dropouts are at intolerable levels. There is little recourse without being wealthy enough to afford tuition to a private school.

An international study of 15 year olds had some countries consistently beating out the US in math, reading and science. What do Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Hong Kong, the Netherlands, South Korea, New Zealand and Norway do different? They give the parents the control of what school the child goes to. Families are not assigned a school. They choose their school. Vouchers are publicly funded choice.

Of course, many oppose vouchers. They have a good point when they say Milwaukee's charter schools are not tested like public schools. There should be a standard exam for every student, public or private. How else will mom and dad decide which school is doing a great job?

Where the opposition is absolutely wrong is when they claim that vouchers have no oversight. Do they feel parents are incapable of making such a decision? Do they think parents do not care? I spoke with Ben Chavis of the American Indian Charter School in Oakland, California. He made it clear that the parents of the children in his school want the best for their kids. "Parents do not want their kids to be stupid.", he said. So many parents are choosing his school that they opened another. Parents know that a great school is a fantastic boost to the future success of their child. There will be the most personal oversight, that of loving parents.

Those who oppose vouchers claim that public schools will be short changed on funding. That is only true when the schools are under performing. In some countries with vouchers, forty to sixty percent of the students stay with public schools. Why? Those schools are holding their own against the private schools. No school which is successful need fear any reduction in funding. It is very simple. If, your school is full, you are fully funded. Administrators and teachers can keep their school full by providing an environment of excellence. By the way, American Indian has become the best middle school in Oakland. It spends thousands of dollars less per student while paying non-union teachers more than those at regular schools. It is not an issue of lack of funds, but funds not being converted to knowledge in the minds of children.

We value competition in virtually every facet of our lives, yet we resort to a government run monopoly when it comes to educating our children. We accept a generic education from our government instead of choosing the best environment for our children. It's like accepting a state provided Yugo instead of going to the Auto Mall and picking the best car for your family. Do we deserve to have an education tailored to our needs, not a homogenized, one size fits all solution? Yes, we do! One effect of vouchers in Milwaukee was that most non-voucher schools improved, too. A little competition goes a long way.

A great example where vouchers would provide much needed clout to the parents is program cuts like the recent reduction in the Unified music program. With many schools to choose from, parents would not be forced to squeeze their unique children into the proverbial round hole. There could be a wide range of educational solutions. From music schools to language schools, children would be given the education that best fits them. I can imagine high school graduates being fully employable when they leave a trade school as plumbers or electricians.

There is a better way and it is not even a new idea. The Netherlands has had their program since 1917. We ask our children to learn, why not ourselves? It is time to consider vouchers. It is time to put parents back in control.