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Basics About EDUCATION VOUCHERS

What is a voucher?

An education voucher or “scholarship” is a fixed sum of *public* money a student may use toward K-12 *private* school tuition.

Voucher proposals vary

Some plans give vouchers to all students who then choose to spend the amount at a private or public school. Some plans limit voucher use to specific school districts, or certain students, such as Milwaukee’s program for low-income students. Some voucher plans allow any school to receive voucher funds, while others specify eligibility requirements of schools. Some proposals rely on free market approaches, others depend on a highly regulated system with provisions for disseminating school information, transportation, and admission policies.

Are voucher systems in use in the United States?

While vouchers have been proposed in a number of states, voucher measures have passed in Wisconsin, Ohio, and Puerto Rico.

Are vouchers constitutional?

All three jurisdictions that have passed voucher measures have been sued. In 1994, Puerto Rico’s Supreme Court struck down the 1993 law, ruling it violated the state’s constitution.

Ohio passed a pilot voucher program in 1995 and was immediately sued on the basis vouchers violated the separation of church and state as well as the Ohio constitution because only Cleveland was affected. In July 1996, an Ohio judge upheld the voucher program. She based her opinion on the basis that funds went directly to parents who then chose the school; therefore, sectarian schools benefited only indirectly.

Wisconsin is the only state with an education voucher program in full operation. It is limited to Milwaukee low-income students. In March 1996, the Wisconsin Supreme Court deadlocked over expanding the voucher program to religious schools, thus halting its expansion for the time being.

Costs

Cost estimates vary with the type of voucher plan proposed and the number of existing private school students who would avail themselves of it.

Oregon history

Oregon voters turned down a voucher initiative in 1990 (351,977 yes; 741,863 no). In 1994, proponents failed to gather enough signatures to get a voucher measure on the ballot.

During the 1995 legislative session a voucher system was proposed (HB 3464). While it was debated on the House floor, a vote on its merits was not taken.