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Why not school vouchers, too?

By JERRY F. CAMMARATA

Last fall, the Clinton administration announced that it would issue \$280-million worth of housing vouchers to low-income families to help them find safe, comfortable housing within a reasonable commuting distance from the head of the household's new job. It was part of the welfare-to-work program appropriated by the president from Republican models.

This year, the president wants to spend some \$690 million on such vouchers. They could be a very good idea, a way to level the playing field for these new workers entering the job force, allowing them to compete with others for good jobs in neighborhoods or suburbs they might never have had access to without them — giving them something they cannot get from public housing.

Vouchers for housing, giving people a boost so they can compete.

Apply the same logic to vouchers for education, though, and suddenly this administration, and so many other people, panic. We can't do that, they say; that's giving people too much choice.

Yet, the principle is exactly the same. Families struggling to break the cycle of dependency, who live in poor neighborhoods far removed from good jobs, need a hand in finding better housing. Why shouldn't we give those same families the right, through vouchers, to choose for their children whatever school they believe will give them the education they need to compete in the marketplace?

There are many good arguments for housing vouchers; they will allow workers to seek new jobs in new neighborhoods; they will stimulate the construction industry to build modest homes because vouchers will create a new class of consumers; they will give families the dignity of choos-

ing where they want to live and of seeking jobs that will be a step up, not merely settling for whatever employment may be available.

Let's think about what educational vouchers might really accomplish:

* Private schools have traditionally been predominantly white, while public schools have served the minority population that oftentimes can't afford tuition. Vouchers give minority students access to the same educational opportunities that white students have, and would, therefore, also give white students in private schools a less myopic view of their city.

* Vouchers give low-income parents the dignity of choice. They need not feel bound to their neighborhood school — even if their child does wind up attending the nearest public school, it will be because mom or dad has chosen that school for their youngster. They will no longer feel as though they are powerless and without any options.

* Vouchers will encourage entrepreneurship in low-income neighborhoods. The very existence of vouchers would create a market that has not existed before. With vouchers, there would be money available in even the poorest of neighborhoods to open new schools, private schools, answerable directly to "consumers" — parents. Small churches, community organizations and perhaps even large companies will have both the wherewithal and the incentive to open new institutions in every part of the city.

* Vouchers create competition. While this point has been raised, many may still not grasp the simple power of the idea; there is no motivation for a public school's faculty to constantly strive to be better and better because they have a guaranteed student population, a guaranteed funding stream, and there are no consequences if they fail. It is absolutely true that many,

many public school teachers are deeply dedicated and admirably altruistic, but we are all still human, and there is a tendency in all of us to "settle" for what is "good enough." Competition will kindle a flame under less energetic teachers, and will encourage administrators to let the truly dedicated teachers burst forth in all their glory. I, for one, believe that in the long run our public school teachers and administrators are quite capable of competing with the very best private schools, and so I see no reason to shelter them from competition.

Vouchers would create greater educational equality in the long run. Just as competition in industry usually results in high standards for all major manufacturers of the same product (the inferior producers fall by the wayside), with constant incremental improvements and just as competition for housing vouchers will result in better housing for low-income families as landlords and builders compete for their business, so educational vouchers will give less privileged families just as much choice, just as much opportunity as wealthier families have now, and just as much clout as consumers.

In the long run, all voucher systems are about the dignity of the human person. To borrow an old epigram: Give a man a fish; he eats today. Teach a man to fish, he eats for a lifetime. But while he's learning how to fish, lend him a coin and let him choose his own meal and you've given him the respect his faculty of free choice entitled him to.

We've learned that lesson about housing it seems. When will we learn it about education?

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