No on Proposition 38: Voucher scheme is false promise, reckless experiment

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Thousands of poor children deserve better education than California public schools now give them, and any responsibly focused plan to provide them an alternative would deserve serious consideration from every Californian. But Proposition 38, the sweeping voucher initiative on the Nov. 7 ballot, is neither responsible nor focused. Proposition 38 is a reckless experiment that would subsidize affluent parents who can already afford to send their children to private school - - to the tune of $3 billion a year -- without any assurances that families that most need educational alternatives would be able to find them, or afford them if they did.

Designed by Silicon Valley venture capitalist Tim Draper and overwhelmingly promoted with his personal fortune, Proposition 38 would make a $4,000, non-means-tested voucher available to any parent of any income level whose children are now in private school or who get accepted to a participating private school in the future. Only minimal standards would be imposed on private schools accepting the vouchers: They could not practice racial or ethnic discrimination or employ convicted felons and would have to administer the statewide achievement test to all students and publish schoolwide results. Proposition 38 would not, however, prevent private schools from rejecting applicants based on gender, religion, language skills, test scores or -- most worrisome -- physical or learning disabilities.

Proponents claim California would achieve big cost savings over time when as many as 20 percent of public school students -- more than a million of them -- shifted to private schools and public school spending was commensurately reduced. But two independent analyses of Proposition 38's potential fiscal impact -- made difficult by the inability to predict how parents and both public and private schools would react to the initiative's passage -- are far less rosy. The legislative analyst's office predicts a net loss to the treasury of $2 billion with a student shift of 5 percent; $700 million in savings with a 15 percent shift; and savings of $3 billion annually with a 25 percent shift. The California Budget Project, however, forecasts losses under all scenarios, from $3.5 billion for a 5 percent shift to $4.9 billion for a 20 percent shift.

What's certain is that by 2004 California would certainly be paying $3.2 billion for private school tuition that hundreds of thousands of parents had formerly been covering on their own. Worries about those and potentially higher costs have led both the California Business Roundtable and the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers' Association to oppose Proposition 38.

And there are serious doubts that private schools, which are thought to have fewer than 50,000 vacancies right now, could or would want to accommodate big new enrollments. Entrepreneurial ventures might spring up, including for-profit schools. But how eager would they be to accept many of the students who most need a ticket out of struggling public schools -- those who don't speak English well, who fare poorly on achievement tests or who have special needs? These are
the most expensive and labor intensive children to educate, and they would likely be left to a public system with declining resources.

Because it makes parochial schools eligible for vouchers, Proposition 38 could also run into constitutional trouble for allowing public funds to pay for religious instruction. But that’s the least of its problems. Proposition 38 gives educational choices to private schools, while assuring none for the students who most need them, and would do it at potentially huge cost to California taxpayers. Vote No.

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