Vouchers: A False Promise
Vote No On Prop. 38

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PROPOSITION 38, the voucher initiative, would not necessarily deliver new choices for California families, and it may not do anything to improve public schools.

What it would do is commit the state to an unprecedented experiment that could either accelerate the recovery of educational quality or send it backsliding. The voucher plan, as conceived by Silicon Valley entrepreneur Tim Draper, depends so completely on the free enterprise approach to schools that it leaves almost no room for error or compromise. Even in the worst-case scenario -- if charlatans began opening private schools with taxpayer subsidies and struggling public schools fell into deeper trouble -- it would take a three-fourths vote of each house of the California Legislature to add even the most modest regulation to the voucher schools.

Is this a gamble worth taking with your child's education and your state's economic future?

Proposition 38, once fully phased in, would provide a $4,000 voucher for each child in a private school who met the very minimal requirements to receive the public subsidy. About 650,000 students are now in private schools in California.

To envision the rosy post-voucher world painted by Yes on 38 supporters requires a suspension of common sense. They see vouchers as a magical elixir that would create top-quality private schools at modest cost while public schools, jolted by the competition, would turn themselves around.
This happy world of choice and change hinges on the following dubious premises:

-- New private schools will emerge in sufficient quantity and quality -- with far less resources than are available to public schools -- to provide realistic options for families.

-- Unqualified or sleazy operators will not try to exploit this potentially rich and lightly regulated program. The Yes on 38 crowd regards parental research as the ultimate safety net of accountability. But the new voucher schools will not even have a track record for families to consider. It will be buyer beware.

-- Existing private schools will not merely raise their tuition when they get the windfall of the $4,000-per-student vouchers.

-- The private schools will accept a proportional number of the students who provide the biggest challenges to the public schools: those who arrive without a preschool background, a basic grasp of English or even an ability to sit still during class.

But in reality, the voucher schools would be under no obligation to take any of the more difficult-to-teach students. There is every reason to expect that the savviest and most motivated parents will be the most aggressive in looking for alternative schools for their children. Since parental involvement is one of the surest predictors of student success, the voucher schools are likely to get many students who would have performed equally well in public schools.

Meanwhile, the public schools would be left with a higher portion of the more difficult students as well as a potentially diminished level of resources. In one of its cruel twists, Proposition 38 ``guarantees'' public schools the national average in per-student funding, but determines it with an obscure formula that exaggerates California's spending in comparison with other states.

Yes on 38 proponents like to point to studies of voucher programs elsewhere to counter the concerns about this experiment. But it is critical
to note that none of the more widely acclaimed voucher programs -- in Florida, Milwaukee, Cleveland, New York City, Washington, D.C. -- was attempted on this scale.

Unlike Proposition 38, an entitlement program for all, the other programs were crafted to create opportunity where none existed before. They were targeted at low-income families or the most abysmal schools. By narrowing the scope, those voucher experiments did not tamper with the public schools that were doing well, and provided an opportunity for close scrutiny of the outcome. Still, the results to date are less than conclusive.

One of the most widely quoted studies by voucher proponents showed that African American students in New York, Dayton, Ohio, and Washington, D.C., improved their test scores in the first two years of voucher programs. The analysis was done by respected researchers from Harvard, Georgetown and the University of Wisconsin, but the results were hardly definitive. For starters, the sample of 1,470 students was relatively small, and some students were not tested in the second year. Also, while the scores of black students went up, scores of students in other ethnic groups remained static.

Meanwhile, in Michigan, voters in November will be considering a similarly focused plan to provide vouchers to students in ``failing schools,'' defined as those in districts that do not graduate at least two-thirds of their students. In California, by contrast, voters are being asked to believe that vouchers would help students and schools everywhere.

It would be sadly ironic for a state that is finally addressing its public schools' deficiencies -- by reducing class sizes, adding charter schools, upgrading teacher training, holding administrators accountable for performance -- to turn billions of dollars over to private schools that may or may not be dedicated to such standards.

Californians know that even the grandest-sounding educational reforms sometimes fall short, which is why Gov. Gray Davis and the California Legislature have been wise to include quantifiable benchmarks in this latest wave of remedies.
The voucher plan would be the biggest educational experiment yet, without the level of accountability that Californians demand and deserve.

Vote no on Proposition 38.

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