These vouchers flunk

Vote no -- Prop. 38 is a subsidy for kids already in private school

There may yet come a time when Californians get to consider an education voucher plan that's worth supporting. Next month's ballot initiative, Proposition 38, which would create the most massive voucher system in America, is not that plan, by any stretch.

It's an ill-conceived effort that will cost the taxpayers billions of dollars and yet may never achieve its goal of enabling students to leave bad public schools.

Under a voucher system, parents would receive a tax-funded tuition payment for the private school of their choice, including, under Proposition 38, religious schools.

We don't dismiss vouchers out of hand. We can imagine a pilot program worth trying. It would be targeted to low-income, urban areas where the schools are bad. It would give all of those students, not just the brightest and the most talented, an equal chance at a private education. It would be generous enough that poor families could attend good private schools, and it would induce those schools to compete for voucher kids.

The chief architect and funder of Proposition 38, Timothy Draper, a Silicon Valley venture capitalist, could have designed a voucher program like that. Had he learned the lessons of the first voucher initiative, which voters overwhelmingly defeated in 1993, he would have. Had he sought out the advice of long-time voucher advocates, like Hoover Institution scholar Terry Moe, and UC-Berkeley law school professor StephenSugarman, he would have.

Instead, Draper is selling the same snake oil in a new multibillion-dollar bottle: a $4,000 voucher for every child, with little accountability and lots of expense.

Proponents are selling it as the salvation for the poor, a ticket out of South Central Los Angeles or East Palo Alto. That promise, we suspect, would prove a mirage. Proposition 38 would be a windfall for families already sending kids to private school and a boon for private schools catering to middle-class kids in the suburbs, whose parents could supplement the voucher with their own money.

We'll admit this much: Our predictions of what would happen under Proposition 38 may be no better than Draper's. That's the problem. Currently, in all of America, only 14,000 children,
mostly minority kids in Milwaukee and a handful of other cities, are receiving publicly or privately funded vouchers. The programs are in their infancy. Evaluations of student achievement, while definitely encouraging, are not conclusive. Proposition 38 would create a mammoth program, based on tenuous evidence, for California's 6 million schoolchildren.

One can speculate about whom vouchers would benefit but the costs to taxpayers would be substantial: $2.7 billion, once the families of the kids currently in private schools get their voucher, after a four-year phase-in. That money wouldn't be taken from current public school expenditures -- the initiative guarantees that -- so it would come from a new tax or spending cuts elsewhere in the state budget.

Proponents say that vouchers would be like water soaking a desert: A thousand flowers -- new schools -- would bloom, eventually generating a net tax savings. That's because the average state expenditure for public education is about $7,000 per pupil. Every public school kid who goes to private school would save taxpayers about $3,000, the difference between the cost of a public education and the cost of a voucher. (The Proposition 38 advocates use different figures, claiming higher savings.)

But for the program to break even, the legislative analyst's office projects, about 10 percent of public school kids -- double the current private school population of 670,000 -- would have to use a voucher. Since there are fewer than 50,000 current private openings, mostly in Catholic schools, that would require a daunting amount of private school expansion.

Proposition 38 proponents claim that over a hundred urban ministers have pledged to open schools in churches and storefronts. We'll credit their intentions. But will they be able to buy computers and attract well-trained, experienced teachers, or will the best teachers go to better financed schools for middle class-kids in the suburbs, where the $4,000 voucher acts as a supplement to a higher tuition? We'd bet the latter.

And will the new private schools admit difficult kids, with learning disabilities and a history of bad grades? Not necessarily. Voucher programs elsewhere require an open admission policy. Proposition 38 has no such requirement. As long as they don't discriminate by race or ethnicity, voucher-receiving schools could admit whom they want by any criteria they choose (yes to athletes, no to special ed). The result, some predict, would be cherry-picking, leaving the public schools with the most expensive and disruptive kids.

And to whom would the voucher schools be accountable? Not to the public. Voucher schools would have to administer a standardized test (not necessarily the SAT 9 that public school kids take), and voucher high schools would have to offer at least one University of California-certified course.
Other than that, they'd be unregulated, exempt from high-school exit exams, policies banning social promotion, performance reviews -- all parts of the new reforms that public schools must face.

Not only that, Proposition 38's architects go to extraordinary lengths to immunize voucher schools from future oversight. It would take a three-quarter majority of the Legislature to pass any new regulations affecting private schools.

Proposition 38 would divert energy and resources from the public schools just when the governor and legislators have renewed their commitment to them. It would be disruptive and counterproductive.

Vouchers have promise as an experiment. Proposition 38, creating a universal entitlement, would be a reckless gamble.