



LOUISIANA SCHOOL VOUCHERS: SUBSIDIZING SUBSTANDARD EDUCATION

Louisiana's statewide voucher scheme – one of the most sweeping in the nation – began with the 2012-13 school year. Under the plan, taxpayers subsidize tuition at private and religious schools for voucher students. A state judge ruled in November 2012 that the program unconstitutionally diverts public funds from the state's Minimum Foundation Program to private and parochial schools.ⁱ Gov. Bobby Jindal has appealed the case to the state's Supreme Court. Meanwhile, today Louisiana students who left struggling public schools are using publicly funded vouchers to attend private and religious schools that in many cases are not even required to show the state that they also aren't failing.

Substandard Schools

- Private and religious schools may get state approval to accept publicly funded vouchers even if they haven't received accreditation from any entity, public or private.ⁱⁱ
- The state's most prestigious private schools had only a handful of slots for voucher students for the 2012-13 school year. The schools with the most openings – hundreds in some schools – were those that have had trouble attracting tuition-paying students. Among them.ⁱⁱⁱ
 - A Ruston school with no library and in which students spend most of the day watching DVDs that mix Biblical verses with subjects such as chemistry or composition.
 - A New Orleans Bible school in a bunker-like building with no windows or playground.
 - A school just outside Lake Charles in which first- through eighth-grade students sit in cubicles for much of the day and move at their own pace through workbooks.
- Some private schools seeking students with publicly funded vouchers pass off myths and urban legends as science. For example, the Lake Charles-area school seeking voucher students uses a curriculum that claims the Loch Ness monster is real and evidence that dinosaurs still exist.^{iv}
- Some schools approved for state-funded vouchers use social studies texts warning that liberals threaten global prosperity, Bible-based math books that don't cover modern concepts such as set theory, and biology texts built around refuting evolution. Some ignore evolution altogether in their science classrooms.^v

Poor Accountability Standards

- Unlike public school students, voucher students are not required to pass the state's standardized tests in order to pass to the next grade. Moreover, private schools will not receive graded evaluations from the state as public schools do.^{vi}



- Private schools will not be penalized for poor scores on state standardized tests unless they have at least 40 voucher students enrolled in the upper elementary or secondary grades. Schools with fewer than 40 voucher students can continue to receive public funding even if those students fail to demonstrate basic competency in math, reading, science and social studies.^{vii}
- Even if it has more than 40 voucher students, a school scoring less than 50 on a 150-point state evaluation scale (based on the scores students get on standardized tests) can continue to receive public dollars for voucher students already enrolled. They just can't take new voucher students.^{viii}

Threats to Religious Freedom

The Louisiana program makes voucher funding available to any religious school – Christian or non-Christian. But lawmakers who supported the scheme at first later expressed shock that public tax dollars could be used to subsidize tuition at Muslim and other non-Christian religious schools.

For example, Louisiana Rep. Valarie Hodges, R-Watson, said she had “liked the idea of giving parents the option of sending their children to a public school or a Christian school.” But she opposed funding vouchers for Muslim schools: “Unfortunately it will not be limited to the Founders’ religion. We need to insure that it does not open the door to fund radical Islam schools. There are a thousand Muslim schools that have sprung up recently. I do not support using public funds for teaching Islam anywhere here in Louisiana.”^{ix}

ⁱ “Program ruled unconstitutional,” *The Advocate* (Baton Rouge), December 3, 2012.

<http://theadvocate.com/home/4557918-125/judge-to-rule-friday-in>

ⁱⁱ “Louisiana superintendent John White offers details on state plans to scrutinize private schools,” *The Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), October 12, 2012.

http://www.nola.com/education/index.ssf/2012/10/john_white_offers_details_on_s.html

ⁱⁱⁱ “Louisiana’s bold bid to privatize schools,” Reuters, June 1, 2012.

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/06/01/us-education-vouchers-idUSL1E8H10AG20120601>

^{iv} “Loch Ness monster cited by US schools as evidence that evolution is a myth,” *The Scotsman* (Edinburgh, Scotland), June 25, 2012. <http://www.scotsman.com/news/odd/loch-ness-monster-cited-by-us-schools-as-evidence-that-evolution-is-myth-1-2373903>

^v “Louisiana’s bold bid to privatize schools,” Reuters, June 1, 2012.

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/06/01/us-education-vouchers-idUSL1E8H10AG20120601>

^{vi} “White: Some voucher schools will have to meet state standards,” *The Advocate* (Baton Rouge), August 3, 2012. <http://theadvocate.com/news/3422272-123/white-some-voucher-schools-will>

^{vii} “Louisiana sets rules for landmark school voucher program,” Reuters, July 23, 2012.

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/07/24/us-usa-education-louisiana-idUSBRE86N00J20120724>

^{viii} “Louisiana sets rules for landmark school voucher program,” Reuters, July 23, 2012.

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/07/24/us-usa-education-louisiana-idUSBRE86N00J20120724>

^{ix} “Hodges now leery of Jindal reform,” *Livingston Parish News*, June 29, 2012.

http://m.livingstonparishnews.com/mobile/news/article_6c2da5fe-c1e5-11e1-ae3b-0019bb2963f4.html