refuse to send **their** kids to the public schools. This flight from the system has had ironic results. When 23 suburban public schools were recently in danger of closing due to low enrollment, black children were simply bussed in, and the state gave the schools an extra $12,000 for each. So, the failing suburban public schools received a guaranteed source of students and more than $22 million a year in additional government funding.

Private schools and parental empowerment

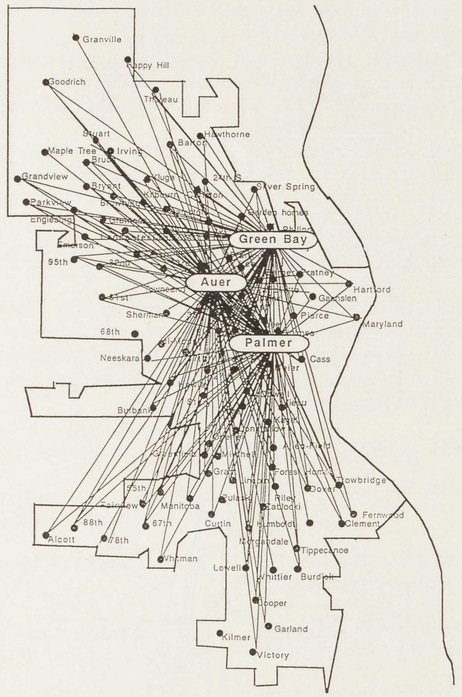
I opposed forced desegregation from the start. I wanted what most parents want: for my children to be educated in their own community. At the time, there were about a dozen private schools in the inner city of Milwaukee. They were previously Catholic institutions that had been reorganized as private nonsectarian academies, and they were a wonderful alternative for low-income and minority students-predominantly blacks, but also Hispanics, Asians and whites. They allowed students to get a good education in their own neighborhoods with teachers who really believed in **them**, rather than the educrats' stereotypes. What's really impressive is that these private schools had a 98 percent graduation rate.

But they couldn't get by on the tuition they charged, and although successful, they were in danger of closing their doors. Meanwhile, the public schools were getting millions of our tax dollars whether they did a good job or not. So a few years ago, a small group banded together and approached the state legislature. We said: "Why not allow tax dollars to go to the schools that **are** working? We didn't know that vouchers had already been defeated in every other state where they'd been proposed. We didn't even call our proposal a voucher plan; we called it "parental empowerment" or "choice." Meetings were organized to discuss our proposal. We hoped to attract a few dozen people, but hundreds of enthusiastic parents began showing up and staying for sessions that ran on for hours. This shocked public school officials, especially since they couldn't get more than a few parents to any of **their** meetings.

People often fall into the habit of saying, "How do you get the poor involved in the education of their children? They just don't care or they don't know enough to make 'intelligent' choices." But, in reality, if you give them a sense that they can make a difference in the lives of their children, if you give them some power, you'll find out that poor parents can care more than anyone. They don't take education for granted. They know that education is the only way out of poverty. And when you empower people and give them a sense of ownership, they become responsible, and they learn how to make decisions. And when they are treated with dignity and respect, they respond to it.

Choice empowers parents. It allows them to choose the best school for their children. It doesn't say, as the educrats do, that poor people are too dumb (they use the word "uniformed") to make choices. Poor people are the same as rich people. They may not have much money, but they have the same desires and the same needs. And poor people make decisions all the time. They decide where they are going to live, what grocery store to buy from, where to shop for clothes–they decide everything, but all of a sudden, the educrats claim that they don't have enough sense to make a decision about the education of their children.

But the teachers' unions, the NAACP, the bureaucracy, and the educational establishment didn't agree. In the name of protecting the poor, they all opposed choice. We didn't try to beat them–they were too powerful. Instead, we went directly to the parents, and we organized the community from the grassroots level, from the bottom up. And they kept coming to our meetings by the hundreds–even the Joe Six-Packs and the Archie Bunkers. Republicans, Democrats, Jews, Catholics, Protestants and Muslims publicly spoke up in favor of the plan, even when it had nothing to do with their agendas.



Busing from Palmer, Auer and Green Bay Elementary Schools

When we proposed choice, the parents in the audience said "Are you serious? You mean we can take our children out of public schools?" They began showing up and sitting in the galleries at the state capitol and watching the legislators, who, for their part, were shocked that the parents were there. Like the educrats, they also believed that the poor didn't care.

And to everyone's surprise, the parental empowerment bill–the first in the U.S.–passed into law. Starting in the 1990-91 school year, up to 1000 students could claim $2500 worth of tuition vouchers (a fraction, of course, of the per-student expense at public schools). This year, one private school had 600 applicants for 100 openings. Every private school in the inner city has a waiting list. Hundreds of low-income families want out of the public school system. Those who have succeeded in getting out are spreading the word: Their children, two to three grade levels behind in the public school, are now working at their grade levels. Once always absent, they are even refusing to stay home sick! A typical response is, "Please don't make me stay home–my teacher is expecting me." There are no gang problems and only a two percent dropout rate.

Sure it's only one thousand in a city that has one hundred thousand students, and the educrats are fighting the bill in the state supreme court, but I think it's a real victory – and we've only just begun. If the poor people of Milwaukee can achieve something no other group in the nation has been able to do, then anything is possible.

Private vouchers: a new idea in education reform

By J. Patrick Rooney
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Advocates of choice in Indiana have worked hard to achieve meaningful education reform, but we just can't get an educational choice bill through the state legislature. (If you have ever worked with any government branch, you know that it is a lot easier to prevent something from happening than it is to get anything innovative done.)

The odds are clearly on the side of the bureaucrats, even though there is considerable evidence that choice, where it has been tried in states such as Minnesota and districts such as East Harlem, is a phenomenal success. We know that educational choice in Indiana might be realized someday, but, in the meantime, we are abandoning another generation of children who are not getting a decent education.

Recently, we at the Golden Rule Insurance Company decided to do something about education reform right now. In 1991, we created **private** vouchers; that is, as a company in the private sector, we offered to pay half of the tuition of any student who wanted to leave the public system and go to a private school. (Most of the nonpublic schools in Indianapolis charge $1600 or less–our cap was, therefore, $800.) This voucher program is for grade school children. We would have loved to extend it to the high school level, but we have limited resources, so it was a matter of priority.

The only criterion is financial need. If students qualify for the free or reduced cost lunch program in the public schools, then they qualify for our educational grant. This is purposely a very generous criterion. We do not impose academic requirements of any kind, and there is a "first come, first served" basis for awarding the vouchers. (When we began, we tried elaborate questionnaire forms but quickly abandoned them. We are a society that is accustomed to filling out too many forms that are of dubious value.) We make no attempt to decide which private schools are eligible. We are about the business of helping parents and students; hence, they are free to choose any school that meets their needs.

The beauty of private vouchers is that they are so simple–no red tape, no need to depend on bureaucrats to administer them, no worries that the vouchers will be used later as a way for the government to claim that private schools are accepting federal or state subsidies. And they start working right away.

Golden Rule's private vouchers are a great success, much greater than we expected, in fact. We called a press conference to announce the start of the program only three weeks before the commencement of the 1991-92 school year. We stated very cautiously that we anticipated that only 100-200 students would want to be involved in this program. Well, within the first three days, Golden Rule had 621 requests for applications, and at the present time, we have distributed more than 2,000 applications.

A temporary obstacle is that most of the private schools already have full or near-full enrollments. But the response to our private voucher plan will inevitably lead to expansion, as it has created a whole new supply of potential students for private schools. In the first school term of this year, 705 students were awarded vouchers and there were 199 on the waiting list. (This list would have been larger, but many parents knew that the private schools were full.)

Why do we support private education through vouchers? There are three reasons. The first reason is that Golden Rule is interested in helping the disadvantaged, particularly the minority citizens of our country. Our vouchers are not awarded on the basis of race or ethnic background—they are colorblind—but since they go to mainly inner city residents, the natural effect is to help blacks, Hispanics and other minorities.

Sources such as the Hudson Institute's report, Workforce 2000, estimate that over the next decade, the work force will be very slowly growing older, more female, more minority, and more disadvantaged. Only 15 percent of the new entrants to the labor force during that period will be white males compared with 30 percent today. The demographic opportunity of the 1990s will be missed unless something is done now–the problems of minority unemployment, crime and dependency could be far worse than they are today.

The second reason for Golden Rule's interest in vouchers is very practical. New jobs in service industries will demand much higher skill levels than the jobs of today. Many companies are already forced to run remedial education programs for their employees. We can't put off educating people until the time they apply for work–that is the wrong time to fix the problem. But according to their own standardized tests Indiana public schools are failing to teach adequate basic skills and are far behind the private schools in terms of overall student achievement. If for no other reason than this, competition is needed at the elementary and secondary school levels where the monopoly position of the public school has stifled innovation.

Write for more information

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The third reason is linked to the second: It is vital to the public interest that students work hard and learn basic habits like punctuality and diligence. Yet, the Committee for Economic Development published a study several years ago arguing that one of the most important failures of the public schools is that they have failed to teach even a basic "work ethic."

Add drug abuse and violence to the list: Public schools have failed there too, resorting to metal detectors, locker searches and security guards. And despite all such efforts, many students do not learn to respect or heed authority. Lastly, there is the dropout rate in public institutions. In one Indianapolis high school 80 percent of the student body typically does not graduate.

The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA) have recently begun a new media campaign to convince Americans that the public schools are doing every bit as well as the private schools. I don't think Americans will be convinced, simply because there is too much evidence to the contrary. Who, for example, has ever heard of a private school with metal detectors or with an 80 percent drop out rate?

In summary, with private vouchers we have made a real and practical investment in the future of our own business as well as our society. Every business and charitable organization should start its own voucher program, for one or one thousand students it doesn't matter. What does matter is that they will have taken a step toward helping others as well as themselves.