

## **BOOK REVIEWS**

Edited by N. Stephan Kinsella\*

**JOHN MERRIFIELD. *SCHOOL CHOICES: TRUE AND FALSE.***  
OAKLAND, CALIF.: INDEPENDENT INSTITUTE, 2002. PP. 97.

Thanks to the wholesale failure of the K–12 public school system, the mantra of “school choice” is getting louder, and “education reform” has become a common topic of politicians. By far, the most popular reform proposal is to give parents a choice about where to send their children to school. What this usually entails is an educational voucher that parents can redeem at a private school.

John Merrifield’s book *School Choices: True and False* is a critique of current school choice programs and proposals that emphasize competition in education as the means of bringing about real reform in education.

Between a brief introduction and an even briefer conclusion, *School Choices* contains eight chapters that progress from the current state of the public school system to problems with current reform proposals to the author’s policy requirements for a competitive education industry. The main focus of the book is on voucher proposals and programs, although other related topics are also addressed. Because Merrifield is an economist, principles such as supply and demand, competition, cartels, the price system, the profit motive, barriers to entry, incentives, efficiency, monopoly, regulation, and entrepreneurship are raised in the text as they relate to the subject at hand. An extensive reference list, explanatory notes, and a detailed index enhance the usefulness of this slender volume.

Merrifield begins in the introduction with a clear thesis: “Genuine competition is the only true reform catalyst” (p. 2). He focuses on both

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“the critical elements of a competitive education industry” (p. 2) and the failure of current voucher programs and proposals because “choice advocates have forsaken and endangered the only truly effective reform catalyst—competition” (p. 2). However, because Merrifield falls short of advocating the complete separation of school and state, he fails to present us with what real competition in education would actually be like.

Although Merrifield harshly criticizes Charter schools and tuition tax credits, his greatest attention and disdain are focused on voucher programs currently under way in Florida, Milwaukee, and Cleveland. However, this is not because they are voucher programs, but because they limit participation to low-income parents and low-performing schools (with the state grading its own schools), do not allow for add-ons (supplementing the tax-funded voucher to send a child to the higher-priced private schools), and are just plain too small to provide us with any meaningful results.

As these reform proposals relate to Merrifield’s theme of competition, he concludes:

The modest voucher, tax credit, and public-school choice programs (including charter schools) widely touted as experiments lack nearly all of the key requirement for competition. They move only a relatively few children, mostly among existing schools; leave the broken system intact and sanctify its key elements; and mislead observers as to the nature of the real K–12 problem—a low-performing system, not isolated low-performing schools. (p. 45)

Merrifield’s solution to the school reform problem is not an end to the public school system, voucher programs, or the federal control of education; instead, he advocates government-funded, universal, child-based vouchers.

There are several problems with Merrifield’s proposals. First of all, there would be no school choice for parents who wish to send their children to “non-traditional” private schools that do not take orders from the state regarding textbooks, teacher qualifications, integration, or curriculum requirements. Likewise, there would be no school choice for parents who wish to send their children to “non-traditional” religious schools that, by their very nature, are highly discriminatory in regard to hiring and admissions.

The second problem concerns government regulation of private schools that take vouchers. Naively, Merrifield states:

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I am not convinced that a refundable tax credit or fully funded voucher risks any more regulation of the private sector than exists now or will exist in the near future. But even if the risk were greater than with other approaches, the potential benefits of system transformation are worth it! (p. 65)

Of course, it is unlikely that the state would provide money to parents or schools without strings attached.

The third problem, then, concerns the increased dependency on the government that vouchers will foster. The state may well embrace universal vouchers if it sees how it can use them to its advantage.

The fourth problem relates to the distortion of the marketplace that universal vouchers will cause. As an economist, Merrifield should realize that his universal voucher program will establish a price floor, and tuition will not go below it. No private school would have any incentive to compete on cost, and, as a consequence, prices will be higher for everyone. This would be true even if a fully refundable tax credit was used instead of a voucher.

The fifth, and most egregious, problem is the matter of funding. Merrifield's universal, child-based voucher is government funded. In fact, under his proposal, there would be government funding of education even if there were no public schools. So whether we have public schools or not, why should each citizen be forced to pay for the education of each other citizen's children? And to make matters worse, voucher funding comes from "fresh money." No current voucher proposal even hints at a reduction in funding for public schools to pay for vouchers.

Merrifield, who is clearly indebted to Milton Friedman, points out that "the modern voucher debate began with Milton Friedman's 1955 proposal that was first read widely in chapter six of his 1962 book *Capitalism and Freedom*" (p. 35). He even explicitly endorses Friedman's ideas in the last note in the book: "Libertarians should note that Friedman-type proposals are the best and probably the only political feasible way to achieve complete separation of school and state" (p. 90).

Besides endorsing Friedman's voucher proposals, the book also suffers from some glaring mistakes in the index. The entry for Friedman, for example, includes pages where his name is not mentioned and omits pages where his name is mentioned. The index includes

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page numbers for those subjects amplified or referred to in the notes, a commendable feature except when the page numbers are wrong. They are, in fact, so wrong in this book that every reference in the index to a page in the notes is incorrect.

*School Choices: True and False* should cause libertarians and conservatives who favor current voucher programs and proposals to rethink their position. Critics of vouchers will find in this slender volume much useful information and insightful analysis on the problems with current voucher programs in Florida, Milwaukee, and Cleveland. However, for those principled libertarians who reject, root and branch, government- (i.e., taxpayer-) funded education, the book will be a disappointment, since the author advocates government-funded, universal, child-based vouchers.

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