

Editorial

*"Offer vouchers instead:
Public school system too bureaucratic
to expand"*

By Alan Bonsteel, M.D.

USA Today,

November 3, 1999

The movement toward universal preschool in the United States reflects the strong evidence of its benefit, especially to our many immigrant children for whom English is a second language. Unfortunately, to a great extent that movement has become a power grab for the public school establishment.

The reasons for the meltdown of our public schools are clear. Our public school monopoly is run by interlocking layers of dysfunctional bureaucracies at the federal, state, county, and local levels. Why would anyone want to expand a system that has been such an abject failure despite record-high funding?

In stark contrast to our failed K-12 public schools, we now have successful school voucher programs in place in Milwaukee and Cleveland that have seen higher test scores, lower dropout rates, and dramatically higher parental satisfaction—all at far lower per student spending rates than our public schools. As a result of these success stories, several national opinion polls show that a clear majority of Americans now favor school choice.

At the federal level, we already have a preschool voucher program, the Child Care and Development Block Grant, that was passed in the Bush administration and tripled in size by the Clinton administration. As with the GI Bill, Pell Grants, and the new Hope Scholarships, the CCDBG vouchers can be redeemed in religious schools.

Given the tidal wave of "Baby Boom Echo" kids and new immigrant children hurtling toward our public schools, it's not at all clear that this is the right time for a universal preschool program of any description.

However, if we do decide that preschool should be a priority, wouldn't it make far more sense to establish a program that empowers families by giving them a wide range of choices, and the right to walk out the door if the quality of the product they are receiving isn't satisfactory?

The elements are there for a grand compromise-preschool for those who now can't afford it, but financed via vouchers or tax credits that would support, rather than destroy, our excellent existing private preschools, and that would give our low-income families the freedom of choice that wealthier families have always enjoyed.

Alan Bonsteel, M.D., is President of California Parents for Educational Choice and the co-author of A Choice for Our Children: Curing the Crisis in America's Schools, published by the Institute for Contemporary Studies.