

Indiana enacts most expansive school voucher program in the US

Isabelle Belanger
2 June 2011

On May 5, Indiana's Republican Governor, Mitch Daniels, signed two bills into law establishing a statewide private school voucher program and expanding charter schools. The passage of these bills comes after two anti-teacher laws passed in April restricting collective bargaining rights to wages and benefits and tying evaluations and pay to student test scores. Together, these measures are a major step toward the dismantling of public education in the state.

One of the two new bills, HEA 1003, will provide tuition vouchers, based on a sliding scale fee, for students to attend private or parochial schools of their choice. Families of four, earning up to \$62,000, are eligible for some level of scholarship, making this the most expansive voucher system in the nation; 60 percent of Indiana residents will be eligible for the program.

The other bill, HEA 1002, creates a new state charter school board designed to open more charter schools, allows public schools to convert to charters under certain conditions, increases funding for virtual charter schools, and allows charter schools to move into closed public school facilities.

Indiana joins a growing number of states diverting public money from traditional public education to subsidize private schools. Many of these institutions have narrow admissions policies and oftentimes few to no credentials.

Indiana's voucher program is the first in the country to offer vouchers to higher-income families and to students in any public school, not just those considered failing. The only restriction is that the student must have attended a public school for at least one year prior to applying for a voucher. The program is being phased in over a three-year period: 7,500 scholarships will be awarded in 2011-2012, 15,000 in 2012-2013, with the program becoming uncapped in 2013-2014. At that time, there will be no restrictions on the number of scholarships awarded, as long as families are within income guidelines.

Private schools serving grades one thru eight will receive up to \$4,500 per student; those serving grades 9-12 will receive \$4,964 per student. Any additional tuition charged by the school must be paid directly by the families, meaning that the best private schools can charge higher tuition in order to exclude working class children, including many minority and special-needs students. In addition, families without access to transportation will be limited to choices available only in their neighborhood, meaning that many low-income families will have few to no choices at all.

The bill also includes a tax deduction of \$1,000 for each child in a private school or home school. This will lead to additional state revenue losses possibly totaling \$3 million, which will presumably create further budgetary shortfalls for public education.

Indiana Democrats, meanwhile, launched a hollow protest against the Republican sponsored bills: fleeing the state for 35 days, the Democrats were able to force Republican lawmakers to agree to lower the cap on the number of students who can receive vouchers in the first and second years of the program by 25 percent. However, because the program is entirely uncapped beginning in the third year, these concessions are meaningless.

While Democrats pose as the defenders of public education, more than half of the "school choice" programs enacted over the past five years have been passed by Democratic legislatures or signed by Democratic governors. At the same time, the failure of the two major Indiana teachers unions, the IFT and ISTA, not only to stave off the voucher and school charter legislation, but also the earlier attacks on teachers' collective bargaining rights and job security, is a clear indication of their bankruptcy.

The expansion of school vouchers is part of a long-standing attack on public education. The modern school voucher movement traces its history to the work of conservative economist Milton Friedman, who advocated a free market approach to education for nearly six decades. He is perhaps most notorious for providing the free-market blueprints adopted by Chilean dictator, Augusto Pinochet in the 1970s and 80s, which led to widespread privatization of public education, the segregation of poor students in low-performing schools and the driving down of teachers' wages.

Friedman's ideas initially met with little support. However, there was one state that did take up Friedman's voucher plan. Virginia established the first publicly funded school voucher program in the country. The goal was to dodge the Supreme Court ruling under *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), which declared schools segregated by race to be unconstitutional. Virginia's voucher plan was intended to help white families pay tuition at private schools so as not to have to send their children to public schools where black students were in attendance. This "freedom of choice" voucher system was quickly adopted by other southern legislatures. These vouchers were eventually ruled unconstitutional.

In the 1980s, under the Reagan administration, Friedman's free-market ideology gained in popularity, and vouchers reentered the political arena. However, this time vouchers were advanced as a mechanism for promoting the civil rights of poor and racial minority students stuck in low-performing public schools. This continues to be the narrative, casting anyone opposed to vouchers as racists unconcerned with the plight of minorities suffering from a lack of academic achievement. In reality, however, vouchers do not improve educational opportunities for the least fortunate, but defund public

education as a whole such that a decent education becomes the sole purview of the wealthy.

Vouchers have powerful corporate backing. Wal-Mart heir John Walton spent millions in support of Michigan's 2000 voucher ballot initiative. Financier Ted Forstmann runs a for-profit charter school management company and poured millions of dollars into an anti-public education ad campaign. The Indianapolis-based Mind Trust, a think tank supported by corporate investors, includes a "Venture Fund" which has spent over \$5 million to recruit school "reform" programs to Indianapolis, including the financing of private charter school operators.

A host of wealthy supporters fund pro-voucher political and public awareness campaigns, and provide support for pro-voucher research and legal assistance. In 1997, Indiana's insurance magnate, J. Patrick Rooney, who founded a private voucher group in Indiana, was the subject of an investigation into election law violations for his role in the re-election of pro-voucher Wisconsin Supreme Court Justice Jon Wilcox.

The privatization of education through vouchers poses a major threat to democracy and civil rights. First, vouchers undermine the separation of church and state guaranteed by the Establishment Clause of the United States Constitution. There have been a slew of court challenges brought against tax dollars being spent on religious education. In Wisconsin, religious parochial schools that accept voucher students are provided with generous public financing to cover their building or rental costs. Parochial schools often have admissions and other policies regarding students' religious affiliation. Though some states have laws making this practice illegal, there have been many complaints by parents that schools regularly violate them, refusing to admit students or forcing them to take part in religious activities.

School voucher programs work to remove government from any legal or administrative role in public education. Many private schools are run with minimal oversight, as well as freedom from rules relating to licensing, pay, testing, and curriculum. Private institutions are not required to share data related to the racial or economic make-up of their students, nor are they obligated to publish or share test scores. Unsurprisingly, voucher students from low-income households, as a rule, score worse than their public school counterparts on state tests, primarily because private schools do not offer specialized programs for students with disabilities, nor health or nutrition services.

Private schools are largely exempt from laws that guarantee the right to an equal education. The use of vouchers to pay for these schools means that public money is funneled to institutions legally allowed to discriminate against students with low test scores, emotional or mental issues, students with disabilities, non-native language speakers, pregnant teens, and many others, as they see fit.

At the same time, private schools do not have to honor freedom of speech rights, nor provide due process for expulsions or firings. In 1995, a federal judge in Milwaukee threw out a free-speech case in which an African-American student was expelled from a private school for giving a presentation on Black separatism, in which she mentioned that she believed the school had racist policies. The judge stated that it "is an elementary principle of constitutional law that the protections afforded by the Bill of Rights do not apply to private actors." He went on to say that rights that would be protected at a public school did not have to be honored at a private institution.

The future of public education under expanded, universal vouchers is bleak. Milwaukee, New Orleans, and other cities abound with

horror stories in which poor voucher students are placed in deplorable private school settings: schools set up in storefronts with cramped classrooms, high school graduates (paid poverty wages) teaching classes, and schools with no curriculum, where back door alleys are used as playgrounds, the lights are kept off to save money, and where few to no books or other learning materials or supplies are available for students. There are instances of convicted felons serving as principals of voucher schools, and cases of fraud and embezzlement of funds are rampant.

For teachers, privatization through vouchers and charter schools will mean depressed wages, lack of due process and other job protections, no health or pension benefits, and a further erosion of democratic rights already under attack in the public sector.

Indiana's expansive voucher and charter school laws are part of the ruling elite's plan to privatize education and other social services in order to profit off of public tax dollars, while further impoverishing the working class. In Wisconsin, Governor Walker is seeking to make vouchers universal, so that even the wealthy will be eligible for tuition scholarships. In Washington, DC, the nation's only federally-sponsored voucher program, which was supposed to be phased out in 2008, was instead expanded, increasing the federal deficit by \$300 million dollars, demonstrating the utter hypocrisy of the claim that spending cuts are necessary to bring down the deficit.

Cities and states throughout the country, under both Democratic and Republican party governors and mayors, are slashing millions and even billions in funding for public schools, forcing school closures and the firing of hundreds of thousands of teachers nation-wide. The Obama administration has pushed heavily for the expansion of charter schools, allocating limited federal aid to those states that pass the most aggressive charter and anti-teacher measures.

The very existence of public education as an institution is in question, with the entire direction of US policy moving toward a system run by for-profit private institutions, in which a quality education is available only for the wealthy.

The fight to protect public education requires the fight for socialism. The profit motive is incompatible with guaranteeing all people a high-quality education free of charge.



To contact the WWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wws.org/contact