



BACKGROUND

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A Workable Voucher System for Aboriginal Students

By Rodney A. Clifton

Executive Summary

“...vouchers would give parents more choice in the schools their children attend.”

- The National Panel on First Nation Elementary and Secondary Education has noted that reserve students generally are not doing very well in school.
- In attempting to improve the educational opportunities for these students, a number of policy-makers have suggested that vouchers would give parents more choice in the schools their children attend.
- However, this is difficult, if not impossible, on many aboriginal reserves where there are no alternative schools.
- In this paper, I outline a voucher system that could work for students living on reserves.
- Simply put, this voucher system would require that band councils pay for remedial tutors whenever parent-funded independent tests showed that their children are more than two grades below their actual age-grade level.
- As such, this voucher system would give parents, principals, and teachers incentives to ensure that students progress at an appropriate rate.

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Introduction

"*Nurturing the Learning Spirit of First Nation Students*" (The National Panel on First Nation Elementary and Secondary Education for Students on Reserve, 2012), the recent study of aboriginal education, reports that students on reserves are not doing very well in comparison with other Canadian students. The study panel heard considerable evidence that on-reserve students are often two or more years behind other students. Moreover, there is evidence from Statistics Canada that aboriginal students have substantially lower educational attainment than their non-aboriginal peers even when they attend provincial, off-reserve, schools (see Richards, 2008; 2011, p. 2).

Recently, education critics have pointed out that the poor performances of students can result from, among other things, the way schools are administered and the incentives that are used (Ladd, 1996; Seafidi, 2012). In this respect, James Heckman (1999, p. 100), a University of Chicago economist and a Nobel Laureate, said: "Public schools are local monopolies with few competitors." "The problem in public education is primarily due to muted incentives, not to inadequate resources" (p. 107).

Professor Heckman is not the only person who thinks that monopolistic schools need to change their incentives. In fact, a growing number of researchers believe that students' educational performances can be improved by opening schools to market-style competition (see Chubb & Moe, 1990; Gerson, 2000; Greene, 2001, 2005, 147-156; Holmes, 1998; Raham, 1996; Seafidi, 2012; Viteritti, 1999; Wilkinson, 1994). In this background paper, I outline a voucher system that could open band-controlled schools to competition, which in turn could help to improve the educational accomplishments of aboriginal students.

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Competition and vouchers

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A truism in education, as in life, is that it is better to fix problems sooner rather than later. This means that it is better to address the problems that children have in learning in the early grades rather than in the senior grades when the problems are more serious. This truism was recognized 15 years ago when Bill Clinton, the former President of the United States, said that the Department of Education would ensure that every child would be reading by the end of grade 3. Unfortunately, he did not achieve this worthy goal. Consequently, thousands of students failed to learn the basic curriculum and many parents paid fees for private tutors to do what public schools had already been paid to do (Holmes, 1998, p. 220). To make parents, especially poor parents, pay twice for the same schooling—once in the public system and again in private agencies providing remedial education—is simply unfair.

To end this unfairness, band administrators, federal officials, and parents must initiate a small change in the accountability of schools. The best-known proposal for improving the accountability of schools is the standard voucher system (Greene, 2001, 2005, 147-156; Seafidi, 2012). Vouchers take money from the public purse and give it to parents so that they can purchase education for their children. Along with the transfer of money, access to private schools and private tutors give parents the opportunity to shop around for the best educational programs they can find (see, for example, Greene, 2001, 2005, 147-156; Holmes, 1998; Ladd, 1996; Scafidi, 2012; Viteritti, 1999; Wilkinson, 1994).

In the United States, both conservatives, such as the late Nobel Laureate Milton Friedman (2000), and liberals, such as the former Labor Secretary Robert Reich (2000), have argued that vouchers undoubtedly improve children’s educational performance. Thus, education vouchers transcend partisan and ideological divisions. Unfortunately, Canadian policy-makers are not yet convinced that vouchers will help students to do better in school and they have been unwilling to confront the powerful interest groups that oppose them, namely teachers’ unions, school officials, and professors of education (Holmes, 1998, p. 196). But, if schools are to be reformed, policy-makers need to bring about a better balance of power between parents, on the one hand, and these other interest groups on the other. Vouchers can certainly empower parents.

Problems with standard vouchers

There are, however, at least four serious problems with most voucher systems. First, vouchers do not readily work in rural areas where about 50 per cent of the aboriginal students live (Richards 2011, p. 3). There are, in fact, few voucher systems operating in rural areas because there are few schools, the distance between them is considerable, and competition requires the realistic availability of at least two schools providing similar educational programs from which to choose.

Second, the powerful interest groups, teachers' unions and school administrators, generally oppose competition and vouchers because they weaken their control and threaten their job security (Kennedy, 2001, p. 451; Wilkinson, 1994, p. 56). These people often claim that competition and vouchers will destroy the existing schools. Even if this perception is wrong, threatening teachers and principals is not a good way to obtain their cooperation in educating young, vulnerable, children.

Third, in the existing systems, parents use vouchers to pay for their children's education at the beginning of the academic year and then trust that the schools will deliver the type of education parents have chosen. After giving their vouchers to a school, parents cannot easily change their minds and enroll their children in other schools. This condition, however, is not true for other goods and services where return-and-refund policies are common.

Finally, over the last thirty years or so education officials have provided less regulatory control over education[al] programs and the performances of students (Kennedy, 2001, p. 453; Wilkinson, 1994, pp. 31-40). It is not obvious that these officials will tighten their regulatory authority, making standards clearly evident to both students and parents, even if parents use vouchers to pay for their children's education. Because there are a variety of courses with varying content, some parents will have their children enroll in schools with high academic standards, while others will have their children attend schools that deliver the intellectual equivalent of "junk food" (Tyack, 1999, p. 64).

An effective voucher system must help correct these serious problems. Specifically, the voucher system must allow teachers and principals in the existing schools to improve the academic achievement of students without being unduly threatened; it must allow parents to obtain upgrading at any time during the academic year from grade 3 to grade 12; and finally, the system must ensure that parents use the vouchers to purchase academically credible programs.

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An alternative to standard vouchers

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The weaknesses of most voucher systems and the requirements of the proposed system suggest that band councils must introduce incentives and competition into band-controlled schools. The first requirement is that remedial education, at independent agencies, will be provided to all normally-endowed students who have been assessed as being below their age-grade standard—say, two grades below grade level.

Two important issues, “normally-endowed children” and “remedial programs,” need to be explained. Horn and Tynan (2001, p. 48) show that approximately 1 per cent of school children have serious intellectual disabilities. These children need to be identified as early as possible, provided with special programs, and where necessary, with special classrooms and/or schools with specially trained teachers. Of course, the voucher system proposed here will not apply to students with serious intellectual disabilities, but other strategies should be used to ensure that they progress at appropriate rates.

The second requirement for the voucher system is that the remedial programs will focus on only literacy and numeracy, the basic skills necessary for sustaining progress in all the other subjects in school and for participation in a knowledge economy. In rural areas, people with bachelor degrees in education and with other relevant qualifications could provide private tutoring in reading, writing, and mathematics to the students who are below the age-grade standard. As well, private schools, such as Sylvan Learning or Kumon Learning Centers, could provide tutoring services.

A third requirement is that the cost of the upgrading programs (tutoring) will be paid for by band councils and not by parents. Why should band councils support private tutors (and/or schools) with public money? Because those agencies are the only ones that can, at any time during the academic year, provide the education programs necessary to hold the existing schools accountable for the academic achievement of students. In addition, many of the agencies guarantee that they will bring the great majority of students up to grade level in literacy and numeracy within a relatively short period of time, something that most existing schools do not now guarantee even with substantially more time and resources. After students have attended the tutoring program and have improved to the appropriate grade level, they will resume full-time attendance in the band-controlled schools.

As expected, band councils will dislike paying private tutors for remedial lessons because it will drain their discretionary funds. The likelihood of

such a response by the councils will, by itself, increase accountability. As a result, school administrators and teachers will try to ensure that as few students as possible spend as little time as possible in private and costly remedial programs.

Also, band councils, school administrators, and teachers will realize that remedial vouchers cannot be issued to students in Kindergarten, Grade 1, or Grade 2, because those students cannot be two years below grade level. Thus, school officials will have at least 2,000 hours to assess the students, determine their academic competencies, and bring them up to the established levels of proficiency. If the children's educational deficiencies cannot be remediated during that time, the teachers and administrators, in cooperation with the parents, will need to devise suitable alternative programs.

Under this voucher system, not only will schools be more accountable, but parents will be more accountable, too. Thus, the fourth requirement is that parents will pay for the testing and retesting of their children, which will be conducted by psychologists or other assessment specialists who are external to both the established schools and the private tutoring agencies; such testing will determine the grade level at which the students are functioning, as well as their expected progress. This requirement will indicate, at least minimally, the commitment that parents have to improving the educational performances of their children, and it will reduce the possibility of conflicts of interest. The cost of the testing, however, could be a tax credit allocated to anybody who actually pays the bill (private benefactors, churches, foundations, etc.).

Will this voucher system work?

A few simple changes in educational procedures could have a number of desirable consequences. Parents will no longer need to accept the advice of teachers who say that they should not worry because their children are "progressing satisfactorily at their own pace." Moreover, when parents receive information about the difficulties schools are having in ensuring that students are keeping up in literacy and numeracy, the more reticent parents may be motivated to check their children's literacy and numeracy, and if necessary to obtain the resources to bring them up to grade level. Obviously, an increasing number of dissatisfied parents would put substantial pressure on band officials, school administrators, and teachers to ensure that all students progress at acceptable rates.

In turn, school administrators will be more careful in hiring and retaining teachers. Likewise, administrators will have a disincentive to shuffle

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incompetent teachers from school to school in the so-called “turkey trot.” If educational administrators hire or retain teachers who do not help students progress at satisfactory rates, and if a large number of students are assessed as being below standard, then they will need to justify why they are spending a considerable amount of money reeducating students. The outflow of money will have a negative effect on the reputation of the band administrators and the school officials.

As well, school administrators will have strong incentives to ensure that the best teachers teach the most difficult students. No longer will excellent teachers be able to bargain with administrators to obtain the best classes of students, leaving the most difficult students to inexperienced teachers. In addition, principals will have good reasons to see that students are evaluated regularly to ensure that all teachers are making certain that students are progressing at acceptable rates. If some students are close to the border-line, good principals and teachers will begin remedial work immediately so that the students improve their performances.

Both teachers and principals will also have incentives to maintain, if not increase, the amount of time students spend on literacy and numeracy. Moreover, few teachers and principals will tolerate incorrigible students who continually waste their own and other students’ instructional time. In turn, most parents and band council members will support teachers and principals who keep order in their classrooms and who focus more time on improving the students’ literacy and numeracy.

Finally, this voucher system will require faculties of education to ensure that all graduates can teach and evaluate basic literacy and numeracy at various grade levels. Faculties that do not educate their student teachers adequately in this regard will soon hear from those who fail to obtain teaching positions. In addition, faculties will hear from school officials who inadvertently hire less-than-competent graduates.

Conclusion

All told, there is little evidence that monopolistic schools necessarily do a good job of educating students efficiently and effectively (see Chubb & Moe, 1990; Gerson, 2000; Greene, 2001; 2005, 147-156; Heckman, 1999; Holmes, 1998; Raham, 1996; Scafidi 2012; Viteritti, 1999; Wilkinson, 1994). The voucher system proposed here will provide incentives for improving students' performances without unduly threatening teachers and principals or destroying existing schools. In addition, those with vested interests in protecting the status quo—teachers' unions, principals, and faculties of education—will become more accountable for what they do because of the increased responsibilities and resources given to parents.

The greater accountability will come from three factors. First, the objectives of education will be stated clearly in terms of grade level standards in literacy and numeracy, the core skills that are required by students to make timely academic progress and ultimately to function in a knowledge economy. Second, the evaluations of students, initiated by parents, will be independent of both the teachers and the principals in the existing schools and the tutors in the private educational agencies that parents contract to improve their children's educational achievement. Finally, financial resources from band councils, and not from parents, will be directed to private tutors who help students progress up to grade level as quickly as possible. If the children are not progressing satisfactorily, then parents can use public resources to help bring them up to grade level. In this way, parents will be empowered to hold schools accountable for educating their children properly.

Though the voucher system outlined here is a proposal, it builds on the considerable empirical evidence from many existing voucher systems (see Greene, 2001, 2005, 147-156; Heckman, 1999; Scafidi, 2012; Viteritti, 1999). Obviously, this system needs to be tested carefully. If it works as expected, then "success for all learners by grade 3," as Bill Clinton envisaged, will become more than another trite educational slogan. It will become an educational innovation that gives parents, particularly aboriginal parents, the resources necessary to ensure that their children are successful in school.

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FURTHER READING

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Rodney A. Clifton**

is a Senior Scholar at the University of Manitoba and a Senior Fellow at the Frontier Centre for Public Policy (www.fcpp.org). He received his B.Ed

and M.Ed. from the University of Alberta, his Ph.D. from the University of Toronto, and his Fil.Dr. from the University of Stockholm. He has written for numerous newspapers and journals, including the *Canadian Journal of Education*, *Policy Options*, *Sociology of Education*, the *National Post*, and the *Winnipeg Free Press*. His most recent book, *What's Wrong With Our Schools and How We Can Fix Them*, was published in 2010 and was co-written with Michael Zwaagstra and John Long.



MB: 203-2727 Portage Avenue,
Winnipeg, Manitoba Canada R3J 0R2
Tel: 204-957-1567

SK: 2353 McIntyre Street,
Regina, Saskatchewan Canada S4P 2S3
Tel: 306-352-2915

AB: Ste. 1280-300, 5th Avenue SW
Calgary, Alberta Canada T2P 3C4
Tel: 403-995-9916

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