

RUSH!

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ASSESSING BUSH'S SCHOOL VOUCHER PLAN

The Bush Administration recently unveiled its "GI Bill for Children," an education voucher proposal designed to help low- and middle-income children obtain better educational services at public or private schools. The program would award the parents of these children each year a \$1,000 grant, or voucher, which they could use to afford the same educational choices that more affluent families already enjoy.

The GI Bill is a bold and imaginative proposal to expand education choice in America. Like most bold proposals, however, the plan has the potential to backfire. It easily could lead to onerous federal regulation of private schools and increased federal funding for public schools. These results can only be avoided if George Bush fights harder for the GI Bill than he has fought, so far, for the choice provisions in the *America 2000* initiative, his education reform legislation now being gutted by Congress. In particular, Bush must refuse to sign the *America 2000* legislation if it does not extend choice to private schools. Bush must also make it clear to Congress that he will withdraw support for the new G.I. Bill for Children the instant Congress acts to overregulate or remove the private and parochial schools from the legislation.

Officially entitled "Federal Grants for State and Local 'GI Bills' for Children," the Bush proposal awards \$500 million new federal dollars in fiscal year 1993, and additional amounts in later years, to fund \$1,000 school vouchers for low- and middle-income families in selected communities. The vouchers can be applied towards tuition, transportation, or "supplementary academic services for the child" at the public, private, or parochial school of the family's choice.

The 1944 GI Bill, from which the title of the new legislation is borrowed, awarded college scholarships to World War II veterans, who were permitted to redeem their scholarships at any college or university. The Bush GI bill would give similar scholarships to low- and middle-income school children and permit them to use their voucher at any lawfully operating school of their parents' choice.

Income Requirement. The Department of Education would select state and local governments to sponsor the federal vouchers based on the willingness of the governments to make educational options widely available. Only families with incomes below the national or state median income (whichever is higher) would be eligible for a voucher. The national median income for a family of four in 1989 was roughly \$40,000.

The GI Bill for Children, if enacted in its current form, would increase and improve available educational options for America's children in two ways: first, by giving low- and middle-income children the chance to pick an alternative to the failing public schools they might now attend; and second, by encouraging states and local governments to develop school choice initiatives. The Bush proposal could trigger a sweeping reform of America's schools, driven by parental choice. For dramatic improvement to occur, however, the White House must prevent Congress from restricting the new money only to public schools and from overregulating the private and parochial schools. One clear danger in the GI Bill for Children is that in return for establishing vouchers, it expands federal funding to schools and federal regulation of private education. While education traditionally has been the domain of the state and local governments, federal spending on education has increased 25 percent since FY 1989. During the Bush Administration, the Department of Education's budget has increased 41 percent. The GI Bill for Children adds another \$500 million in spending during FY 1993, "and such sums as may be necessary for each of the fiscal

years 1994 through 2000.” Moreover, the \$500 million is in addition to the \$850 million already voted by the Senate for a multitude of new programs in its version of *America 2000*. If Congress strips out the heart of the GI bill, by denying federal voucher funds to private schools, the legislation could well end up as just additional federal funds for the coffers of the inefficient and ineffective public school bureaucracy.

Danger of Red Tape. The other danger is that even if private schools are included in the final legislation, they could become ensnared in suffocating federal red tape. The Bush proposal seeks to subject private schools to the onerous array of federal civil rights laws. The bill states lists six civil rights statutes and states that “a school or provider of supplementary academic services that receives scholarship funds under this Act shall, as a condition of participation under this Act” comply with the statutes. Recognizing that full compliance with the myriad of regulations governing the statutes essentially would make it impossible for many private schools to participate in the program, the bill goes on to explain that “The Secretary shall promulgate new regulations to implement the provisions of this paragraph, taking into account the purposes of this Act and the nature, variety, and missions of schools and providers that may participate in providing services to children under this Act.”

While it is important to protect the civil rights of students and counter opponents of the bill who will raise civil rights as an issue, compliance with the six civil rights statutes could be used by Congress or a future administration effectively to ban private school participation in the program. Indeed, in the Milwaukee, Wisconsin, parental choice program, launched in 1990, even a simple non-discrimination requirement for schools that, by law, already are forbidden to discriminate, caused many inner-city private schools not to participate in the choice program. The fear of onerous federal regulation could cause many private schools to refuse to participate. Schools would realize that even if the bill passes through Congress intact, and even if the White House drafts reasonable regulations, there is no guarantee that future administrations will not use the regulation clause to increase red tape.

Parental choice is crucial to any improvement in American education. Until parents have the power and right to choose the best school for their child, America’s education system will continue to fail. The GI Bill for Children is a bold and innovative, but risky, vehicle for increasing choice. It can bring real reform only if George Bush gives the legislation his strongest support. In the meantime, Bush must signal Congress that he is determined to promote choice in education and insist that Congress include choice provisions in the *America 2000* legislation, soon to be voted on by the House. Specifically, Bush should:

- ◆ Continue to fight for his *America 2000* choice proposals by strongly backing the choice amendment to H.R. 4323, the Neighborhood Schools Act, offered by Representative Dick Armey, the Texas Republican;
- ◆ Issue a clear message to Congress that he will veto any education bill that does not give parents the right to choose a private school under federal choice legislation;
- ◆ Give much stronger support to choice initiatives and legislation being proposed in the states; and
- ◆ Inform Congress that he will withdraw all support from his own GI Bill, and actively oppose it, if Congress prevents parents from using their vouchers at private schools or votes additional federal rules for private schools.

The GI bill for Children shows that the Bush Administration understands that low-income children deserve—and need—the opportunity to escape a public school system that is failing to teach even basic skills. Bush has provided Congress with an innovative plan that could radically improve American education. Bush now must fight for his proposal and not permit Congress to emasculate it.

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For further information:

Jeanne Allen and Angela Hulsey, *School Choice Programs: What's Happening in the States*,
The Heritage Foundation, March 1992.

Jeanne Allen, “Assessing the Bush Education Proposal,” *Heritage Foundation Issue Bulletin* No. 166, June 28, 1991.