Vouchers: A Principal’s Take

As the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) reauthorization train leaves the station in both houses of Congress, the draft bills and proposals may include language that will expand voucher programs and offer Title I “portability.” These are two of the hotter topics among the many sections of ESEA.

Adopted by Congress in 1965, Title I funding is the federal government’s primary mechanism for improving education for disadvantaged children—a fundamental provision of ESEA. Right now, funds are distributed to states, which then allocate those funds to districts to dispense to public schools. Higher poverty districts typically receive more Title I dollars than lower poverty districts. But some lawmakers want ESEA to contain a “portability” provision. This means that Title I funds would follow individual students instead. States would give each district and school the same dollar amount per child, no matter the level of poverty existing in the school. This change has the potential to redirect funding away from schools and districts that need it the most.

Tied to Title I portability are vouchers, or federal subsidies given to parents for tuition at any school, including private or charter schools. Here’s a snapshot of the discussion on Title I portability and vouchers, and my personal, principal’s take on the issue.

Mapping the Discussion
On one hand, portability—according to supporters—clearly ties funding to the individual child in need, and, along with vouchers, gives families greater school choice. The American Enterprise Institute (AEI), a Washington D.C. think tank, advocates for portability and vouchers. AEI writes: “Those dollars, on average $1,300 per student, could be coupled with state and local funds to create a substantial enough sum to cover the cost to educate a child at a quality private school.”

AEI points out that many schools that could participate in voucher programs don’t. Indiana, my home state, has one of the nation’s most extensive voucher programs, but only half of our schools are part of the program. Why? One reason is that if schools can’t access extra funds to support low-income students, they won’t participate. Title I portability could help solve that, according to supporters.

But, what about the districts that would lose Title I funds? High poverty districts could lose funding, while lower poverty districts (and potentially private and charter schools) would gain it. This robs public schools of key support, and “dilutes the ability of these limited federal funds to combat concentrations of poverty,” according to the National Education Association.

Moreover, say opponents, Title I funding isn’t designed to purchase individual services for students. Instead, it gives schools an avenue to provide programs to meet multiple students’ needs—such as employing a Title I reading specialist.

Plus, portability’s detractors say that it’s simply a stepping stone to vouchers. “Those supporting public school portability have made no secret of the fact that their ultimate goal is to allow the money to go to private schools,” writes NAESP in comments to the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions committee this January. Vouchers fail to systemically improve education, say detractors.

The View from the Principal’s Chair
Vouchers (along with its sister issues of school “choice” and “competition”) come up often in my community and my home state, Indiana. We have a voucher system in place, and our state legislature and governor are leading an effort to grow school choice (vouchers) even more. One current proposal would devote at least one-third of the proposed increase in K-12 state education funding to voucher-supported schools. The problem is that these schools only serve about 10 percent of the population.

In the 2014 PDK/Gallup Poll of the Public’s Attitudes Toward the Public Schools, 63 percent of respondents opposed school vouchers. But despite this, my state legislature and Congress seem to be set on nothing less than a major expansion of the voucher movement. Here in Indiana, our charter schools (a product of the school choice movement) are among the lowest performing schools in the state.

Private schools, it turns out, produce similar achievement results as public schools if they elect to participate in our state assessment program. But many choose not to participate: Either they can’t access the desired dollars linked to high-need students, or they do not wish to be tied to the excessive statewide testing program (and so are also not a part of the state accountability programs). That, to me, is problematic.

I say that it is time to put the brakes on any measure that would increase funding for school choice programs—either directly, through voucher programs or indirectly, through Title I portability. We need to level the playing field for all schools with a common assessment, accountability measures, and solid academic standards. Then, perhaps we can let the “competition” begin. From where I sit, I have no doubt that our public schools will continue to be the cream rising to the top.

In the meantime, we should focus on the investments—such as professional development resources for school leaders, early childhood education, and STEM—that truly work.