Dear Francesca,

In one of your recent letters you referred to high-stakes testing as “a kind of shaming ritual,” which you said you were convinced is not intended to improve the public schools but is being used, instead, as a dramatic way by which “to expose them to sustained humiliation” and to cast doubt, in this manner, on the whole idea of public education as a proper instrument by which to serve the public’s need.
I agree with you on this. I don’t think it’s a coincidence that standardized examinations of a highly punitive and judgmental character have often been promoted most aggressively by those who also favor market competition in the educational arena, with the ultimate objective of establishing a universal voucher system in this nation.

Vouchers, in my own belief, represent the single worst, most dangerous idea to enter education discourse in my lifetime. The strongest advocates for this idea are very clear in stating their contempt for public education, which they term a “Soviet” or “socialistic” system and which they are eager to replace by a system in which public dollars would not go to schools themselves but would be assigned instead to individuals who would then be free to spend them either at a public school or at a private institution.

Voucher advocates, for now, place most of their emphasis on children living in the neighborhoods of greatest poverty where the failure levels in the public schools are very high, since they know that their appeal would be rejected by most parents in suburban areas where schools are adequately funded and where kids, in general, do reasonably well. Having narrowed their appeal to those whose children undergo the classic consequences of unequal segregated education—an injustice that proponents of a voucher system have, historically, done nothing to oppose—they then present a number of enticements to these parents, which portray a private market system as an avenue of exit from the failings of what they refer to as “a state monopoly.”

One of the most compelling ways some voucher advocates advance their argument is by giving parents in poor neighborhoods the incorrect impression that a voucher will enable them to send their children to the kinds of private schools attended by the children of the affluent—“wealthy people have these choices … why, then, shouldn’t you enjoy them too?”—even though they know that this enticing invitation is outrageously misleading. Vouchers equivalent to present levels of per-pupil spending in our urban schools would pay, at most, one-quarter or one-third of the tuition at the private schools attended by the privileged.

Another unconvincing argument made commonly by advocates for private markets—at least when they’re speaking to poor people—is that schools receiving vouchers would be open in admissions policies to children of all economic levels and all levels of ability and would not favor children of the so-called “savy” parents in a given neighborhood. This is a necessary claim for them to make in order to defuse the common charge that schools receiving vouchers will skim off the more successful children of more highly motivated parents, leaving the public schools with children who have greater problems and with parents who have fewer means to advocate on their behalf. The likelihood of selectivity in the admissions processes for private schools receiving vouchers is, for this reason, fervently denied.

But, as you and I know very well, even in the public system as it stands and even in schools in which there is no clear-cut selectivity, self-selectivity manages to do the job of guaranteeing that the children of the more effective parents are more likely to get into better schools than other children living in their neighborhood. In almost every case in which there are a limited number of high-rated public schools, it is the more aggressive and more knowledgeable parents who learn first about these schools and navigate the application process most successfully. By and large, these are the same parents who know how to get their children into Head Start programs in those neighborhoods where Head Start openings are very few, who are themselves among the better educated, or the better organized, among the parents of a poor community and are also the most likely to be welcomed, even courted, by a principal who struggles to attract the families that can bring a school stability and volunteer participation.

Even without a voucher system in existence in most states, the semi- private charter schools that exist in many cities typically claim that poverty levels for their students are no different from those of the students who attend the ordinary public schools in the same neighborhoods. They also insist that their admissions processes are nonselective, and they point, for instance, to a lottery approach that’s often used to narrow down a large number of applicants. But when I asked the principal of one such school in the South Bronx how parents even knew enough to get into the lottery to start with, how they’d heard about the school and knew its application deadlines and the like, he said most of the parents “heard of us by word of mouth” or “read about us in newspaper stories.” (There had been some favorable stories on the school in question in The New York Times, which could not fail to skew the field of applicants, since most people in the area were not readers of The Times, which is not widely sold in the South Bronx.)

I also noticed, when I visited the school, that I’d never been in any school in the South Bronx before that day in which so many kids were wearing new prescription glasses and had new attractive backpacks and appeared, in other ways, so well prepared for school—an exceptionality I’ve noticed in some of the other charter schools I’ve visited in other cities.

Reverend Martha Overall, the pastor of St. Ann’s Church, who runs an afterschool program in the neighbor-
hood in which my book *Amazing Grace* takes place, and where Pineapple and a number of her schoolmates used to spend a great deal of their time, has often made the observation that a seemingly transparent word like “poverty” can mask important differences in state of mind and frame of reference of specific parents in a poor community.

Even among parents who are very poor, as she has pointed out, there are distinctions of “connectedness,” of “knowledgeability,” of “elbow-pushing skills,” that would never show up in the poverty statistics. Many of the parents of the children that she serves, she says, have never heard of any of the charter schools that episodically become the favorites of the press. If she mentions one of these schools, they give her “the same look they’d give me if I spoke of Andover or Groton.”

Advocates for vouchers, nonetheless, tend to insist that any difficulties represented by self-selectivity will cease to be real problems once the market mechanism of a voucher system and the “rational decision-making” they believe this will inevitably entail go into full effect. There is an element of almost blind faith in this supposition about rational decision-making that appears to brook no troubling intrusions from the real world in which children such as Pineapple and Ariel and Reginald, and their parents actually dwell. One gets the sense that any evidence of uninformed and therefore damaging decision-making or, in the case of parents overwhelmed by problems in their private lives, the virtual absence of decision-making, is rejected by the privatizing advocates because it’s incompatible with their beliefs or policy objectives or, one has to fear, forensic purposes.

One of the most influential voucher advocates, John Chubb, now a top executive at one of the private education corporations, goes so far as to take upon himself the mantle of defender of the poor against those who, like Reverend Overall, are in the

... Some voucher advocates advance their argument by giving parents in poor neighborhoods the incorrect impression that a voucher will enable them to send their children to the kinds of private schools attended by the children of the affluent ...”
trenches of the daily struggle on behalf of inner-city children and don’t need to score points with their parents by romanticizing what they undergo. “It is really hard for me to believe,” said Mr. Chubb in an interview he gave The New York Times, that if vouchers were available to parents of poor children, “those people couldn’t decide on what they prefer.” And he went still further in arguing that people who do not agree with him are being condescending to the poor by saying that poor parents are “too stupid” (Mr. Chubb’s sarcastic words) to pick the schools they want their children to attend.

Mr. Chubb, like many voucher advocates, is an adept debater. But it’s also possible he has no firsthand knowledge of how hard it is for many of the parents he refers to as “those people” to find out about such matters as a lottery for a specific private school or charter school, to make an appointment for an interview and receive a call-back from the school when an appointment is confirmed (large numbers of families I know in the South Bronx don’t have working telephones), to get to the place they’re supposed to go on the appointed day, and then to make a well-informed decision on the merits of the pedagogy that the school promotes.

Then, too, advocates for vouchers do not hesitate to contradict the claims they make in speaking to one audience when speaking to another. One of the disadvantages of public schools, says Mr. Chubb in a more candid statement than the one he made in speaking to The Times, is that they “must take whoever walks in the door” and “do not have the luxury of being able to select” their students. Under a voucher system, by comparison, “a constellation of ... different schools serving different kinds of children differently would probably emerge.” And in a book advancing private education markets, he makes the additional argument that schools “must be free to admit as many or as few students as they want, based on whatever criteria they think relevant—intelligence, interest, motivation, behavior, special needs ...”

The exercise of school choice, then, under a market system would belong only in small part to the parents of the poor. The ultimate choices would be made by those who own or operate a school. This is a rather different notion of school choice than the one most voucher advocates advance in seeking popular support, but it is only one of several contradictions in the arguments they make, depending on which portion of the population they are speaking to.

Jonathan Kozol, the award-winning author of Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America and Savage Inequalities, has been working with children in inner-city schools for more than 40 years. This article is excerpted with permission from his new book, Letters to a Young Teacher (Crown Publishers 2007). All rights reserved.