Power to the parents?—
the story
of
education vouchers

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Education vouchers were the enfant terrible of recent school reforms. Yet the idea seemed appealingly innocent: Instead of giving money to public schools and thus requiring either mandatory attendance or additional outlays for private schools, vouchers would directly aid families so that they could enroll their children in schools of their own choice. The idea of vouchers gained the attention of many reformers in the 1960's because it promised to solve so many educational problems. Christopher Jencks and other radical critics thought vouchers would improve ghetto education by offering parents and teachers alternatives to the failing public schools. The country's impatient youth liked the idea because it would enable more people to afford their "free" schools. Some Catholics thought vouchers might boost enrollments in parochial schools, which were sagging under the pressure of rising costs and shifting values. And Milton Friedman, searching everywhere for some vestige of capitalism in mid-century America, discerned a market mechanism in parent choice and promptly pronounced vouchers the only hope for educational efficiency.

The idea was attractive partly because it seemed to address such disparate hopes. But everyone agreed that vouchers would promote "competition," which would loosen up public school systems grown rigid with age, size, and professional power. The fear of losing stu-
students and revenues would move schools to improve curricula and increase responsiveness.

One might think that a notion with such diverse appeal would take the country by storm. Instead, it stirred up a hornets' nest of opposition. Teacher organizations viewed competition among schools as an invitation to union-busting—a fear that Professor Friedman's endorsement did nothing to relieve. Administrators were afraid of losing control over budgets and appointments. Civil libertarians were apprehensive that the flow of public monies to sectarian schools would represent a breach of the constitutional separation between church and state—a concern that was not alleviated by Catholic support for vouchers. Civil-rights advocates were in favor of allowing urban blacks to choose their own schools, but balked at the prospect of granting whites the same freedom of choice—which, they held, would be a disaster for desegregation. Finally, many thought that vouchers would eviscerate one of the nation's few egalitarian institutions by paying for private education at the taxpayers' expense; public schools would then become the alternative of last resort, reserved for those without the wit to go elsewhere.

Whereas most federal educational programs are launched with Congressional hoopla and Presidential panegyrics, vouchers were thus introduced in an angry political atmosphere. The idea excited visions of change in the minds of both radical and conservative theorists, but it produced only nightmares for the moderate masses known despairingly as "liberals" six or eight years ago. Given their fears, the wonder is that the idea of vouchers was not stillborn.

It wasn't, partly because it was conceived in something of a political vacuum. The idea had caught the fancy of the few left-wing bureaucrats still remaining at the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) while the Johnson Administration was coming unstrung over Viet Nam. Partly as a result of their help, Jencks and several of his Cambridge colleagues were awarded a grant to study the feasibility of vouchers. The result was a thick report that—like many studies—solemnly announced that the ideas of its authors were indeed feasible. In fact, there was even a plan describing how vouchers would work (Education Vouchers: A Report on Financing Elementary Education by Grants to Parents, Center for the Study of Public Policy, 1970), which was duly dispatched to Washington.

By that time the Nixon Administration had begun reshaping OEO: Tired old liberal ideas and big give-away programs were out; modest experiments were in. The new OEO staff knew the difference between Milton Friedman and Christopher Jencks, but they
read the report, and after some exploration—and a bit of urging from the authors and their friends in the Administration—decided to give vouchers a try.

Support for vouchers by the Nixon OEO did not exactly assuage the fears and suspicions of liberals, who responded with a barrage of criticism delivered through the mails, the media, lobbyists, and Members of Congress, and in some often nasty confrontations euphemistically known as “briefings.” The new OEO staff were somewhat taken aback by the ferocity of this response, but stuck to their commitment to social-science experiments: All they sought, they said, was a dispassionate test of the idea. They didn’t favor vouchers—just new alternatives. If vouchers were half as bad as everyone said, then they would deservedly sink without a trace; if not, then who knows—perhaps they merited consideration. A curious collection of conservative theorists, radical reformers, Republican politicians, and social experimenters thus managed to persevere under the banner of science. In 1969 a federal effort was launched to test education vouchers. It was a frail craft, but it did float.

Eight years later, it still does. In the meantime a good deal of evidence has been accumulated—some of it from a single school district in Alum Rock, California, which has operated a trial program for several years; some of it concerning the extensive efforts to get other areas to try vouchers. One wonders what might be learned from all this evidence. It would be a mistake to anticipate a definitive verdict, for the experience has been limited. Anyway, no decision could be conclusive about something as interesting and problematic as education vouchers. But the experience so far does illuminate several points of interest. Does the diagnosis of school problems still make sense now that the prescription has been administered and the patient observed? And what has become of federal efforts to improve education by experimenting with political reforms? We will address these questions on the premise that something may be learned—both about “what is wrong with schools” and about federal efforts to “set things right.”

Implementing a test

Education vouchers seemed an appealing way to correct the balance of power in education, to reduce the sway of professionals and increase the influence of parents. It was hoped that if parents could exercise free choice, schools would compete by undertaking new educational ventures, which would presumably succeed only
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if they truly reflected the wishes of the parents. The mere existence of competitors, it was reasoned, would weaken the monopoly in education by encouraging schools to be responsive to the public.

This idea made sense to both radical and conservative reformers because it placed responsibility for school problems squarely on the public education monopoly—a large, clumsy, and perverse creature that had become by 1968 a popular political scapegoat. Professionalized bureaucracies, it was held, had become calcified, unresponsive, insensitive to cultural variations, and capable only of doing the same dreary things, year after year.

This was a trendy diagnosis of school problems, but hardly a promising prognosis for a voucher test. After all, the educational bureaucracy presumably was in charge everywhere, from Albuquerque to Xenia. Why should the established authorities tolerate an idea designed to diminish their power and make their lives much more uncomfortably competitive? The federal sponsors of the voucher test program never had a clear answer to this question, but they began with efforts to organize local parents and citizens. The notion was to pressure the local monopolists from below: It was hoped that if enough grassroots support could be mustered, school boards and professionals would have to cooperate with a test.

But this approach didn't square with the reformers' diagnosis of school problems: Local authorities could be expected to resist such a challenge, and Nixon's OEO was in no position to agitate against them. At that time, OEO was slathering itself in social science; and besides, there was Daniel P. Moynihan, then the President's counsel, who had just published a book about how OEO had made social problems worse by stirring up local communities. So organizing communities to force a voucher test seemed uncomfortable in principle.

Worse yet, it did not work. The insurgent forces were never powerful enough to produce a voucher experiment, and as a result federal reformers began again at the top. Enlisting administrators and board members seemed more appropriate, but it did not help much either. Aside from the fact that educators sympathetic to vouchers were hard to find, turning to them did not solve the political problems, for in almost every case, local administrators lacked the power to mount a test. After all, they had boards, teachers, principals, and parents to worry about, none of whom was ecstatic about vouchers.

So the same difficulty kept turning up in different forms. The federally organized local forces were too weak to succeed without support from within the school power structure, and administrators
within the bureaucracy were impotent because they lacked outside support. The ensuing story illuminates a problem that has plagued so many federal agencies and faddish foundations: how to produce political reform in somebody else's town with only bright ideas, some outside consultants, and a little free cash.

**Groping at the grass roots**

The voucher plan drawn up by Jencks and his associates at the Center for the Study of Public Policy (CSPP) was cautious and carefully hedged. It favored individual choice, but in harmony with several competing values. The plan sought to shield minority and poor students from discrimination, to ensure maximum protection for consumers against the claims or indifference of schools, and to prevent public schools from becoming the alternative of last resort. The resulting idea for a "regulated compensatory voucher" was thus a complex and cumbersome creation—an effort to promote freedom of choice, equality, and due process all at once, while radically revising public schools.

The voucher plan was thus something of a Rube Goldberg contraption. It supplied fiscal incentives for schools to enroll poor children and to prevent economic discrimination. It provided detailed admission policies permitting applicants their choice of schools, schools their choice of applicants, and applicant lotteries—all at once—to protect the families' desires to select schools, the schools' desires to select their students, and the authors' desires to prevent discriminatory admissions. And the scheme included an elaborate plan for an Education Voucher Agency, independent of the participating schools, to administer voucher distribution and accounting, oversee school quality, and provide consumers with information to make informed choices.

CSPP, then, did not propose a simple idea. Milton Friedman had argued for simplicity, favoring a laissez-faire approach on the view that regulation would interfere with operations. But the authors of the CSPP plan demurred: They argued that vouchers could take many forms, but nearly all would be an absolute "disaster" for education. Besides, they were not convinced that operations would ever get underway unless the plan included safeguards to mollify angry opponents. Avoiding trouble, they said, would require dispensing with the simplicities of Friedman's free market, and faithfully following their plan. But as a result, the CSPP voucher project embraced the worst of both worlds. On the one hand, although the
plan strained to protect equality and avoid discrimination, these efforts neither appeased the liberals nor reduced their opposition. On the other hand, making what had been a simple idea infinitely complex impeded easy discussion, quick comprehension, and local adaptation.

OEO hired CSPP to stimulate the local discussion and adoption process, but there were two problems. First, the CSPP staff was a rather implausible group for such work: Its members were bright, but few had been in a school since they were students (several had been schooled at such places as Andover and Choate). They were inclined to believe that the people who ran public schools were either dim or nasty—or both. Second, although CSPP staffers tended to be partisans of "community organization," they rather liked living in Cambridge. This posed a few difficulties when it came to inciting the masses in Peoria.

The situation in Washington did not help. Vouchers were new and controversial, and lacked a real constituency within the government. By contrast, the other big OEO experiment, the negative income tax, had taken years to percolate through the higher civil service in the 1960's; much of the bureaucracy remained intact and supportive after the Republicans took over. In addition, there was Mr. Moynihan, an articulate and powerful negative-income-tax advocate close to a President who wanted to make something like the tax experiment into law. Vouchers, however, had no such support. Moynihan more or less liked the idea, and he liked the people at Cambridge who liked it. But few others in Washington did, and many did not. Vouchers were thus something of a political albatross for OEO.

As a result of all these difficulties, voucher projects did not take fire in local communities. The chief reason was that no stable or cohesive support for the plans ever developed in any of the cities. One possible source of support was the Catholics, but they preferred other approaches to parochial-school aid. Worse yet, most of the other local participants who favored vouchers did not favor Catholics. The CSPP report was uneasy about the Supreme Court decision permitting vouchers in church schools; the CSPP organizing staff was reluctant to see its pet project tainted by parochial affiliation.

Interestingly, the written analyses of the efforts to organize and promote vouchers are not available. OEO and the National Institute of Education (NIE) funded such histories, but so far they remain unavailable to anyone but NIE and the authors. This article is thus based on interviews with participants in many of the prospective sites, on the CSPP and NIE files, and on interviews with NIE, OEO, and CSPP staffers.
tion. So even when Catholics were supportive, they were encouraged to be discreet.

CSPP and OEO expected the poor and minorities to be another natural interest group. Their children, after all, were being so badly served by the schools; surely these parents would welcome alternatives. But the poor were mostly unorganized; any effort to turn them into an active interest group would have required vastly more time, energy, and personnel than CSPP had. Its part-time and episodic contact with local communities meant that CSPP could deal only with organized groups, or coalitions of such groups, or leaders who seemed likely to invent or recruit groups for themselves.

Blacks were organized, but their ideas about school reform had been shaped by decades of civil-rights struggle over education. In seeking to desegregate schools they had learned to distrust any scheme that either placed the burden on minority choice or allowed whites not to choose minority schools. So when a group of white academics proclaimed vouchers to be a new solution to black school problems, established black organizations were either hesitant or hostile. Local organizing on behalf of vouchers quickly became entangled with local political conflicts over race and education. In Seattle and Rochester, for example, integrationists saw vouchers as a way out for whites; consequently they opposed a test, which they regarded as either a racist trick or sabotage. CSPP pleaded that its plan would protect integration, but local civilrights advocates—given their experience with “freedom of choice” and their knowledge that vouchers were sponsored by the same Nixon Administration that opposed busing and favored neighborhood schools—were either hostile or skeptical. Worse yet, although the pledges of CSPP failed to placate the integrationists, they were sure to offend potential voucher supporters who opposed integration. Either way, the organizers lost.

Another reason for the lack of local enthusiasm was the fragmentation of political power in the cities. The voucher-project staff labored under a delusion widespread among recent school reformers: that political power in urban education is centralized and monolithic, and that organized grassroots power is needed to overcome resistance. But although there was often little change in city schools, this resulted more often from decentralized and fragmented local power structures. The voucher field staff found the power of urban superintendents seriously hampered by politically divided...
boards, by the autonomy of principals and district administrators, by the power of organized interests inside and outside the schools, and by bureaucracies with powers and minds of their own. While it was possible to keep school systems running through complicated treaties among these groups, it was difficult to change the rules in any important way without throwing the agreements into doubt—and the parties into a mild panic.

Vouchers, of course, were not just any change: They would have required the renegotiation of all treaties binding a city school system together. The idea thus raised anxieties all around; when vouchers appeared in cities like Seattle, San Francisco, and Rochester, many principals were opposed, teacher organizations were skeptical or hostile, most central administrators were dubious or completely negative, and school boards were divided. The problem was less monolithic resistance than decentralized uneasiness.

Working from within

Since there was little indigenous support for education vouchers, OEO and CSPP were gradually moved to try a different tack—organizing a test by gaining the support of local boards and superintendents. Several sites with interested administrators or board members were duly found. These school districts were much smaller and, for the most part, much more homogeneous than the cities in which earlier work had been done.

But support from the top, even in such relatively manageable places, was no more effective politically than pressure from below had been elsewhere. Once again, a major problem was the fragmentation of political power. The superintendent in East Hartford, Connecticut, for example, was personally quite committed to vouchers, but many teachers and principals were opposed. Given the explosiveness of the voucher idea, the superintendent then grew cautious. The chairman of the New Hampshire state board of education, a devotee of Friedman's economics, was also a strong supporter of vouchers. With a clear majority of the board, he got a state planning grant for a "free market" voucher test from an unwilling OEO (the Nixon White House helped), but then had problems lining up local districts. Only after securing extra federal money and promising local districts the chance either to influence decisions or to bail out, did he manage to persuade five districts in the southern part of the state to allow preliminary planning. As time went on, of course, even these districts became aware of the prac-
tical implications of vouchers; finally, they dug in their heels, and would not buy a test.

The other major reason that efforts to work down from the top failed was that state and local leaders were committed to vouchers because they liked the idea—not because there were real local problems that vouchers might solve. It was easy to favor competition and choice, and to oppose the bureaucracy, but in practice choice and competition turned out to have hard and nasty meanings: Parents could choose some local schools and not others; some schools would be forced either to expand to meet demand, or to turn away interested parents; other local schools could shrink or close, costing the jobs of teachers and principals. All this meant there would be some very angry teachers and principals—and that meant trouble.

None of these possibilities was entirely clear at the outset. But as planning progressed, local administrators gradually realized that they were being asked to sacrifice a fairly comfortable situation in favor of a much more prickly and unsettled one. In New Hampshire, the local administrators responded by trying to remove the sting from vouchers by redefining the plan, removing most of the choice and competition with an engaging Yankee directness. The superintendent in East Hartford also tried this, and avoided decisions whenever possible. In both cases, local administrators grew ever more unwilling to meet the bare minimums of a local voucher test: They became increasingly allergic to encouraging choice, supporting new alternatives, allowing unchosen schools to fail, or permitting a strong and independent voucher agency. Equivocation and compromise took over. The more local leaders learned about this dream of reform, the more nightmarish it seemed.

As a consequence, efforts to secure test sites were often make-shift operations. Almost nothing ever happened on time; almost nothing was done well. Indeed, it often seemed that almost nothing would have happened at all had not CSPP and NIE kept up a constant stream of bureaucratic and technical support. CSPP wrote the local proposals to get the NIE money. In both New Hampshire and East Hartford, CSPP helped to draw up schedules and then harassed the locals into heeding them. CSPP designed training programs for teachers, put together community information campaigns, wrote letters for the administrators, and in many other ways did the work for the locals. Without such "technical assistance" the local efforts would have fizzled out early on. As things turned out, all that help only postponed the inevitable. By 1976 all the potential test sites had failed.
Working from within thus proved as unsuccessful as groping at the grass roots. Insiders and intellectuals saw vouchers as a solution to vague and abstract problems, such as monopoly power in education—not as the solution to the day-to-day problems of running a school system. But contrary to the received doctrine of contemporary school reformers, local communities were not primarily concerned with power, choice, and participation. As a result, they did not work themselves into a sweat of enthusiasm for vouchers, and there was thus no real pressure for change—even when the opportunity fell into their laps.

The Alum Rock experience

But in Alum Rock, California, by contrast, administrators at least fancied there were real local problems that vouchers would help to solve, which helped generate political and administrative support for a test. The schools in Alum Rock were in poor financial shape in 1971, and Superintendent William Jefferds thought they had other shortcomings as well. They had long been run tightly from the top; there had been little flexibility within the system for some time; and the same old jobs were being done in the same old way. Jefferds felt that the system was in danger of stagnating and that education for the numerous black and Chicano students needed to be improved.

The superintendent of this small school district thus wanted a voucher test because he wanted to decentralize the Alum Rock schools and because he needed money. But if decentralizing the schools struck top administrators as the right course, no one knew how to pay for it. At the same time, OEO was fresh from several stunning defeats in other cities, and feared that without a working demonstration the whole voucher project might soon sink. At first, Alum Rock excited no one: It was a smallish district near San Jose composed largely of minority and poor families, with little promise of diversity in its schools or interest in its community. But in the early discussions, Jefferds quickly learned that OEO and CSPP

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This section of the article is based on several sources: the published reports of the Rand Corporation (the evaluator of the Alum Rock effort); interviews with staff at NIE and Alum Rock; and interviews with Rand researchers. The Rand publications most useful are E. Levinson, with S. Abramowitz, W. Furry, and D. Joseph, “The Politics and Implementation of the Alum Rock Multiple Option System: The Second Year, 1973-74,” Analysis of the Education Voucher Demonstration, A Working Note (May 1975); Stephen S. Weiner and Konrad Kellen, “The Politics and Administration of the Voucher Demonstration in Alum Rock: the First Year, 1972-73,” Analysis of the Education Voucher Demonstration, A Working Note (August 1974); Daniel Weiler, A Public School Voucher Demonstration: The First Year at Alum Rock (June 1974).
needed him more than he needed them, and OEO and CSPP found an avid enthusiast for parental involvement and innovation at the school level.

The ensuing negotiations were not easy. One reason was that some Washington and Cambridge staffers still felt that Alum Rock was a silly place to try anything. Another was that Jefferds nearly lost to the local opponents of vouchers on one occasion, and barely avoided defeat by postponing everything for several months. A third reason was the failure of the California legislature to pass quickly a bill permitting public monies to flow to private schools, something everyone regarded as necessary for a voucher demonstration.

The most important problem in the negotiations, however, involved differences between the priorities of OEO and Alum Rock. OEO wanted a test of consumer sovereignty, while Alum Rock wanted OEO support for its decentralization plan: OEO had the money, and Alum Rock provided a potential test site. OEO didn’t like the idea of such an “impure” test, but OEO had to take what it could get. Jefferd’s superior bargaining position became obvious when he got OEO to produce some money for his decentralization program even before Alum Rock agreed to the voucher test. As is so often the case with professional reforms, the only way to get anything done is to let the locals do what they like—as long as they say they are doing what the reformers like. The reformers are really at the mercy of those they are reforming.

Cooking up the voucher test thus began with one small and dusty California school district, poor and discontented. To this were added two rather different recipes for political reform, a dollop of federal dollars, and intermittent doses of outside advice. With such ingredients and so many contending cooks, it is no surprise that the result was eventually something of a stew. But if Alum Rock did not test a single clear plan, its experience does throw some light on how vouchers worked in practice—if not how they might have worked in principle.

What happened when Alum Rock tried to reform its schools? Did more diverse educational offerings result? Did schools become much more responsive to parents? Did the power of professionals wane while that of parents waxed? Were families more satisfied? Was schooling improved?

The central theme in our answer to these questions is that the Alum Rock voucher test confounded almost all expectations—from the cautious hopes of Christopher Jencks to the dire warnings of
Albert Shanker. There was indeed more consumer choice, but not consumer sovereignty. Parents had more freedom to choose among more varied educational offerings, but as far as anyone can tell, they gained little power. Only the school-level professionals gained in that respect. Not only did teachers and principals inherit power from the central office as a result of decentralization, but they also acquired influence from the greater flexibility, uncertainty, and fiscal leeway that followed from parent choice.

Limiting choice and restricting competition

One point of the reforms in Alum Rock was to offer families more options for their children and to give professionals more latitude in defining school programs. But these choices created uncertainty, and unsettled parents and professionals. In a meeting to discuss proposals called by the district in the spring of 1971, parent representatives worried that children might not be able to attend their neighborhood schools. They sought and obtained a "squatters' rights" agreement whereby children already enrolled could attend neighborhood schools if they liked. Parent representatives also saw to it that every voucher school would offer at least two alternative programs, to prevent children from being forced out of a local school by distaste for the program offered. (OEO sought a compromise after the first year of the demonstration, guaranteeing everyone his first-choice school for the following September—if he signed up before May.) Thus rather than seizing the initiative to expand choice or to enhance power, parents tried to make sure that neighborhood attendance was secure and that neighborhood schools would not be overly innovative.

It was expected that once parents were given the wherewithal to choose among schools, educators would vie to expand their enrollments and incomes. School professionals, however, were concerned with protecting their jobs. It was thus agreed that teachers who left a voucher school for reasons associated with the demonstration would be given priority in assignments to other schools, or that OEO would cover their salaries while they were assigned to headquarters. No one was to be put out on the street by consumer preferences.

This eased things for teachers who did not succeed, and at the outset no one worried about those who did. As it turned out, however, even success was no bed of roses. Teachers in schools that recruited more students were not rewarded with higher salaries:
Although their school would receive more in tuitions, the money was to be spent for more teachers or materials. As a result, competitive success only produced more of the problems teachers struggled with every day: more children, more planning, more meetings, more colleagues, more noise at recess, more disruptions at lunchtime, and so on. Success brought more bother than benefit.

This nicely illuminated the great discrepancy between the ways teachers and voucher advocates thought of school problems. Teachers wanted better working conditions: room to breathe, to prepare, to teach, perhaps even to invent. Voucher advocates wanted better market conditions: to improve educational performance by turning up the competitive heat. Although teachers were hungry for more of the things professionals habitually crave—autonomy, more resources, and less pressure—reformers thought they already had a surfeit.

It is hard to imagine more of a mismatch. Had anyone noticed it, he might have suspected that competition would fail, or would have crazy consequences. But the reformers scored low on both sociology and school experience. The real surprise is that they scored so high on economic mythology. It is quite a testament to the continuing power of capitalism in American culture that liberal reformers not only failed to notice the obvious in education, but so thoroughly ignored the evidence concerning the effects of economic competition that littered the social landscape.

In any event, Alum Rock professionals were under no such illusions. Before the demonstration was half over they changed the market aspects of the voucher scheme to suit their purposes. The first step was to restrict demand by making it impossible for schools to expand indefinitely to meet enrollment pressures. After a year's trial with such expansion, teachers and administrators insisted that each school be given enrollment limits. From that point on, schools only needed to maintain enrollments at capacity levels, which assured the usual income without producing more than the usual strain. And since such limits meant that the less appealing schools would get the overflow from the more appealing schools, the chances for "success"—measured by enrollment—increased vastly all around.

However, the mere fact that public schools agreed to ease competition among themselves did not mean that nonpublic schools could not seek a share of the market. OEO had expected nonpublic school participation, but at first the California legislature would not permit it. OEO and Alum Rock therefore agreed to begin the
demonstration as a "public-school-only" effort. Initial work focused on creating diversity within the public sector by encouraging differentiation and competition among "mini-schools" within existing buildings.

In the fall of 1973, the legislature finally enabled nonpublic schools to enter the demonstration. But partly because of the efforts of such public-spirited groups as the California Teachers Association, the legislation was quite restrictive. It permitted public monies to flow only to schools under the "exclusive control" of the local authorities, and it provided that the local certified employee councils (the professionals' bargaining agent) could formally review all policies in each voucher demonstration. In addition, it required that all participating schools be subject to district rules concerning teacher certification, curriculum standards, and student discipline, as well as other general rules and regulations.

Since Alum Rock was a poor district, it had no established private schools, and there were thus no disappointed private educational entrepreneurs. But a few months before the enabling legislation was passed, a group of four young teachers interested in "free schools" set out to organize an alternative school within the demonstration. The prospective school (called "Gro-Kids") got a small planning grant in the spring of 1973, and operated an after-school program the following fall.

The omens were not auspicious for Gro-Kids, however; the district leadership was ambivalent, and the teachers' organization was hostile. As a result, the certified employee council took the view that private schools could enter only if they met most of the operating standards of the public schools. This meant that Gro-Kids would be obliged to hire certified teachers and provide roughly the same staff/student ratios, salaries, and fringe benefits.

These conditions meant that private voucher schools in Alum Rock could differ from public voucher schools only in the ways public schools differ from one another. This left room for important differences, but they would be pedagogical and philosophical. The voucher idea had once again been radically revised. Although the organizers of Gro-Kids persisted and the school board voted to admit the new school in the winter of 1974, momentum had been lost. When parent choices for the following school year were made, no one selected Gro-Kids. It promptly vanished.

Alum Rock professionals thus sharply reduced the scope of economic competition, making life hard for private schools, eliminating school expansion, and protecting individual teachers from com-
petitive failure. The voucher plan was drastically modified because schools are presently governed more by political than market forces; in Alum Rock, economic competition had no effective advocates. Such competition might have had a chance if it offered something to at least some of the participants, but it didn’t.

Protecting roles and power

The failure to promote economic competition among Alum Rock schools still left plenty of room for other kinds of competition. But there was less than might have been expected, largely because of the effects of the district decentralization program. Some time before the voucher demonstration, decentralization had begun in six schools whose principals had expressed a desire for more authority. Superintendent Jefferds had procured OEO funds to prepare the six principals for more power through team-building and sensitivity training. The principals went into the training with a common interest in more authority, but they came out of it with a strong sense of group identity and an even stronger desire to get more power from the central office.

It was in precisely these six schools that the voucher experiment began. Conflicts between the goals of vouchers and decentralization—between parent power and principal power—developed almost instantly. The principals were extremely sensitive to anything that might tend to divide them, and competition among schools was exactly such a policy. They could accept programmatic differences, but they resisted such competitive devices as advertising, comparative evaluations, and the like, which would draw attention to the differences and encourage parents to act on them. Thus, the commitment by the district to increase the power of the principals through decentralization was in conflict with the commitment by OEO to encourage parent power by extending choice.

The Sequoia Institute was one focus of this conflict. Sequoia was directed by a former CSPP staffer, and the rest of its top staff were either Chicano or black. It was a bastard child of the Education Voucher Agency proposed by CSPP, an independent non-profit organization under contract to the school district, which Jefferds and OEO agreed would help set voucher policy and manage certain aspects of the demonstration. From Jefferds’ point of view, Sequoia would legally be part of the district and under his control, even though it was an autonomous organization. But OEO
hoped it would be more independent, effectively acting as an advocate for vouchers and parents: to provide parents with counseling and information, to speak for parents at all levels of the demonstration, to evaluate the performance of schools and students and disseminate the information so that parents could make informed choices, and to help monitor the project and insure that vouchers were not abused or misused.

Sequoia and the principals were incompatible from the start. The principals began by opposing the mere existence of the institute on the grounds that any addition to the bureaucracy would erode decentralization. They also objected to its view of parent advocacy and evaluation, and vigorously resisted publishing comparative information that might encourage competition among schools.

When Sequoia tried to press ahead with evaluations in the first year, the principals blocked the effort. During the second year, the Sequoia staff counterattacked and won permission to proceed, but by then it was so late that the information could only be used in the third year. And even then the principals made sure that parents were only provided information on the mini-schools attended by their own children. Information on other mini-schools—necessary to make comparisons—would have to be requested by each parent.

A similar struggle took place over the effort by Sequoia to provide counselors to help parents make choices and deal with school staff. The principals argued that if parents wanted information or help they should come to the schools' professional staff members, not some outside group. For the first year the Sequoia counselors thus lived in limbo; then they were assigned to individual schools, as principals had demanded. Their advocacy role was redefined by changing the job description, the place of work, and the chain of command.

In fact, this was the pattern throughout the history of Sequoia: New roles were redefined and transformed into old ones. Sequoia's assistant director for evaluation became the district's director of evaluation; Sequoia's director became a district administrator; the parent counselors became school registrars (some said clerks); and Sequoia became part of the district administration. In each case, the role that had initially been conceived as a reform was progressively redefined until it was hardly distinguishable from long-established and accepted practice. Not surprisingly, Sequoia did not work as OEO hoped. The reform that Alum Rock adminis-
trators wanted proved more durable than the reform they were paid to adopt.

Parent power

A similar story can be told about parent power. Parent advocacy groups were established for each mini-school and an overall Education Voucher Advisory Committee (EVAC) was created at the district level. These groups were purely advisory, having neither resources nor any formal role in decision-making. By contrast, EVAC had not only legitimacy but visibility, its own budget, defined powers, and potential for affecting the conduct of the experiment. Still, its parent members were neither aggressive nor particularly effective. They took an active role only on matters that directly and obviously affected them, such as neighborhood attendance, and even then they were far from consistent. The parent members generally tended to be absent, poorly informed, and deferential to the professionals holding EVAC seats. Parents simply did not take advantage of the opportunities for gaining power. Like the district professionals, they accepted existing roles.

This might be explained by the fact that parents were at a real disadvantage in EVAC; expecting them to act effectively in such circumstances may be foolish. Evidence of how parents used the voucher scheme to become more powerful might better be found in areas more familiar to them—choosing schools, discovering the available options, negotiating transfers, and the like. There is, for example, the encouraging fact that all parents in the voucher demonstration made choices. But the trouble is that the project was organized to force choices upon everyone: Even parents whose children remained in a neighborhood school had to choose a mini-school within it.

Something can be learned, though, from the proportions of parents who chose schools outside their neighborhoods. In the first year, a negligible fraction did so, but this probably can be ascribed to the late start of the demonstration. During the second year, about 10 per cent chose non-neighborhood schools, and after that the proportion rose again to about 18 per cent—a distinct increase in parent initiative, but involving only a modest number of parents.

The choices parents made within schools are also quite illuminating. One might expect that high transfer rates among mini-schools signalled parent initiative or discontent, or both. The transfer rate within schools, for example, rose by about 11 per
cent between 1973 and 1974—not astronomical, but clear evidence that a modest proportion of parents did exercise choice. Likewise, a fair proportion of parents chose innovative mini-school programs. At first, most chose traditional programs; among those who selected the more modish programs, higher-income families were considerably over-represented. The proportion of children in traditional programs did decrease by about 18 per cent, however, between 1972 and 1975.

A similar pattern characterized parents' knowledge about schools. During the first year a modest fraction did not even know which mini-school their children were enrolled in, and many more who did knew nothing else about it. In the course of the demonstration parents learned more about their children's programs, but their knowledge about the system remained fairly shallow. Most parents learned about schools from official communications, a small fraction gained information on their own, and almost all reported satisfaction with what they knew. With a few exceptions, parents involved in the Alum Rock demonstration were content to learn just as most parents do—by being told by professionals.

This is reasonably typical of American education. A small proportion of parents are active, but most are not. The voucher demonstration appreciably increased parent choice among educational alternatives, but most parents failed to become more autonomous, powerful, or involved. The existing roles may not have been entirely satisfactory, but they seem to have been sufficient to forestall much of a search for alternatives.

Programs and pedagogy

It would be a great mistake, however, to imagine that nothing happened in the voucher schools. This would make sense only if one believed that schools suffer the blahs because they are not sufficiently accountable. The absence of increased accountability did not imply stagnation; considerable change seemed to take place in many Alum Rock voucher schools.

The most obvious change was more diversity. Where before a uniform curriculum had lain over all the schools, there were now Spanish-English bilingual programs, an arts-and-crafts mini-school, several "open classroom" mini-schools, and a number of innovative approaches to reading. Some of these programs retained the regular grade-level organization of elementary schools, but others were more flexible. While some schools made few curriculum changes,
others made modest revisions and still others made more serious departures. Three years after the demonstration began, voucher classrooms were certainly more different than they initially had been.

Probably the most striking change in the voucher schools was the increase in the independence of the teachers. The curriculum had previously been set by the central-office staff, but with vouchers decisions were primarily made by teachers, who even had the resources (thanks to the extra funds provided by compensatory vouchers) to support their choices. Administrators were no longer quite as important; teachers had more freedom to arrange their working conditions than before; more flexibility in grouping students was possible; and teachers could create smaller working groups for themselves. The program was thus easier to revise and adapt as teachers went along.

Innovation at the school level was thereby supported and encouraged by decentralization, the mini-schools, and the compensatory-voucher monies—not by competition. If one were to speculate about innovation based on the Alum Rock experience, one would have to say that social and economic encouragement were more important than competition or political power.

But the voucher demonstration was not exactly easy for Alum Rock professionals. For one thing, it was temporary. Everyone knew things would revert to the old system in a few years, which did nothing to ease the problems of change. For another, the demonstration meant much more work: Administrative and fiscal procedures were redesigned, new budgeting systems were created, and mini-schools curriculums were established, placing greater burdens on teachers and principals. Many teachers reported they had never worked so hard and had not expected that the demonstration would require so much effort. Especially in the early stages, there was an avalanche of meetings, and many teachers felt overwhelmed and exhausted.

Thus although the working conditions of the teachers improved in some respects, in others they declined. There was more work and more worry, but no less teaching, nor more hours in the day. And while there was more money to spend on materials and resources, teachers were not paid much more for their extra duties. They received some compensation for in-service training, but it amounted to a very modest annual salary increase over the course of the demonstration. If this was an incentive, it certainly was not awfully enticing. Indeed, the whole demonstration was a ter-
rible tease: It offered some opportunities and encouragements to teachers, but made only marginal allowances for the personal and professional sacrifices involved.

It was no surprise, then, that as the demonstration progressed energy flagged. Teachers had less time for meetings, less patience for the demands of innovation, less desire for the rigors of collaboration, and more appreciation of the lives they could once again lead separately and individually behind classroom doors. Because the voucher demonstration offered some encouragements for innovation, and because many professionals desired change, things began with energy, hasty improvisation, and excitement. But because the scheme had not been designed with much appreciation of the classroom experience of teachers—because it assumed that teachers should be reshaped by a stiff dose of competition—there were only partial and sometimes accidental incentives for professionals. As the demonstration moves toward a close, many innovations have begun to slip away.

Confusing symptoms with causes

One lesson of the voucher saga seems to be that if parent choice and educational alternatives make sense for public schools, it is not for the reasons contemplated by the reformers. The assumption underlying the original scheme was that schools were bad because parents were powerless, and that parents were powerless because they had been excluded by professionals anxious to protect themselves from popular control. If parents had more power—which in this case was to be gained by control of school funding—it was expected that professionals would then be accountable and that schools would thereby be better places for children. But when some barriers to parental involvement were removed, power distributions did not change appreciably.

One explanation for this may be that the existing power imbalance between parents and professionals is great enough to require even more support for parents before they can participate effectively. If this is correct, it raises questions about participatory reforms that assume that parents have been excluded and that given the opportunity to use power, they will. When they failed to, as in the case of EVAC, some observers argued that even more training, support, and professional advocacy were needed. But this argument redefines citizen participation: It no longer involves releasing the political energies of excluded citizens by providing
greater access to power; it now consists of paying professionals to train, speak for, and support citizens. This view seems both plausible and puzzling. One is not sure whether to agree because implementation was only partial, to wonder why a larger dose would do more when a partial dose failed to help much at all, or to marvel at the need for even more professional help in the effort to overcome professional power.

The chief defect of this analysis is a confusion of symptoms and causes. There are real political imbalances in the governance of American schools, which contribute to the poor performance of political reforms to increase participation. But the real imbalance is not political in origin. It results more from a social division of labor that encourages the specialization of work, the professionalization of roles, and the partitioning of authority. In advanced industrial societies this solidifies professional power in education, as well as discouraging active parental involvement. Parents used to have more to do with education simply because there often was not much formal schooling available. It was not uncommon in the 18th and early 19th centuries for children to get much of their education from a parent—or from a job, in church, in an apprenticeship, or in other informal settings.

With the rise of schooling, education increasingly became the province of trained specialists. Professionals gain economic returns, social satisfaction, personal status, individual identity, and group power from their roles. And parents, most of whom have occupations providing similar rewards, have seen their educational role narrowed and redefined. It still involves early childhood education and help with homework in the elementary grades, but increasingly centers on insuring that children receive the right professional attention.

The growth of this division of labor had political consequences. In the early and middle 19th century, when public schools began, teachers had little status and less power: They were at the mercies of their communities. But the growth of a complex industrial division of labor weakened the bonds connecting work, family, school, and community, and eroded the forces that kept teachers in a subordinate and dependent position. Gradually, teaching—like many other occupations—has gained social definition, autonomy, and political power; community power over schools has correspondingly attenuated.

Since the imbalance in school power does not have political roots, political remedies may be marginal. Vouchers turned out so
peculiarly in Alum Rock because the scheme fundamentally misconstrued the reason that power is so lopsidedly distributed in public education. As one might expect from such a misdiagnosis, the effects of the reform were perverse: Professionals gained power from an experiment in which they were supposed to lose it. Vouchers opened the door for power shifts, but they did not affect the ways in which work, authority, and child-rearing are apportioned in society. Because social realities were undisturbed by merely loosening up the political structure, the changes only enhanced the power of those who had it already.

Given this analysis, it is not surprising that all these changes occurred with little political conflict between parents and professionals. Predictably, most of the conflict was between professionals who advocated greater parent power and professionals who did not. That, after all, is what one would expect in an "expert society." The struggles were enough to make for several lively years in this small California city, but not enough to work basic changes in the distribution of political power.

More than meets the eye

At the same time, Alum Rock parents were more satisfied with their schools. This would seem perverse if one subscribed to the theory of parent power associated with vouchers: Why should parents' satisfaction increase if their power didn't? The answer, we think, is that vouchers in Alum Rock did offer benefits many parents desired, benefits that are consistent with the existing social division of labor. One of these was a somewhat greater range of educational alternatives. Some parents have strong views on the relative importance of language and culture, or on the balance among discipline, fundamentals, and individual discovery, or on the comparative significance of algebra and art. Although the mini-schools seemed to vary little in basic instructional patterns—most teachers spent about the same proportion of their time on reading and math—they did seem to offer diverse programs, thus more nearly corresponding with varieties of educational opinion. It is hardly surprising that parents with views hitherto unrepresented in the curriculum appreciated the new alternatives. Their appreciation may have followed from the substance of the new programs—or simply from being offered a choice. But whatever the reason, the opportunity to choose seems to have been welcomed.

Another benefit of the Alum Rock demonstration was that these
alternatives were offered by professionals. Parents had the freedom to choose from a fairly conventional range of educational possibilities, but teachers defined, devised, and implemented them. The demonstration also tended to make professionals more visible and accessible to the parents. Most important, it did all this within the limits of established roles.

This helps to explain why parents in Alum Rock were more satisfied without being more powerful: They had more alternatives and more freedom to choose, but these were provided by professionals in authoritative and familiar ways—without much work for parents.

This points to a second lesson of the demonstration: It was hard to mount a voucher test because almost everyone ignored the considerable possibilities offered teachers. Instead, vouchers were advertised as a sort of radical social surgery to improve things for students and parents at the expense of the professionals. This approach to change was certain to flop unless a substantial proportion of teachers found vouchers attractive. But the project was promoted in such a way as to suggest that vouchers would punish professionals into better performance. So it is not surprising that OEO found few volunteers for a demonstration, or that professionals in Alum Rock responded with such caution. One political consequence of the social division of labor in advanced industrial societies is that the reform of social services is unlikely to succeed unless many professionals find it attractive. Because vouchers presented a rather threatening prospect, they had few takers.

The third lesson of the Alum Rock venture is that, ironically, there is more in the idea of choice for parents and professionals than the advertising suggested. Many teachers are strongly attracted by the prospect of choosing the sort of classroom they would work in, of shaping the curriculum they would use, and of working with students who find their style attractive. There is some evidence that when teachers exercise such choices—when they are able to create alternatives within the public schools—both parents and professionals are pleased with the results. Such efforts are underway in some cities (among them, Minneapolis and Cincinnati) and the reports seem encouraging. These professionally defined alternatives embody most of the main currents of thought about schooling and offer many of the specializations families desire—science, the arts, culture and language, and so on. If the voucher reform had been conceived and promoted differently, it might have met with somewhat greater enthusiasm among professionals.
Evaluating the scheme

This hardly exhausts the lessons of the voucher story, nor does it finish the tale itself. One fascinating item concerns the effort to evaluate vouchers effectively. A major justification for the federal program in the first place was the search for scientific results to support policy decisions about whether vouchers should be expanded or discarded. Large sums of money were spent in search of the answer, but the evaluation itself seems to have played no role in decisions about the future of vouchers. Experience provided more decisive and timely evidence. But the final evaluation does offer rich testimony concerning the difficulties involved in such scientific endeavors, and it might reveal something about their potential usefulness.

Similarly, there is still a question about the impact of the voucher program beyond Alum Rock. OEO and NIE tried to organize demonstrations in school districts all over the country; although all but one of these failed, promoting vouchers may have stimulated other efforts to increase choice and diversity. The prospect of government support for private schools may have stimulated attempts to promote diversity within the public schools, to show that alternatives were possible without resorting to nonpublic education. And all the publicity from Washington during the last five or six years may well have helped to legitimize diversity and choice, and create a climate of opinion in which they are more possible. It would be ironic if the primary impact of federal efforts to promote vouchers was indirect, but it would not be the first time in the history of social reform that unintended results were so significant.

Nor has this article fully probed some of the more programmatic issues raised by the voucher saga—for example, the federal role in school reform. There is certainly a need for reflection concerning how federal agencies might deal with reforms like vouchers that have more appeal than support. And what of the broader implications for participatory reforms? If, as we have argued, the sorts of participation most parents desire are different than those advocated by reformers, one wonders whether there are better ways to redress the imbalance of political power in education.

These and other questions are important, but must wait for a more detailed treatment of this fascinating episode in school reform. For now, it is enough to note that this scheme to promote parent power produced mixed results, and that several views are plausible. As an effort to reform the nation's schools, the voucher
demonstration left much to be desired; it was an administrator's innovation, not a popular movement. Its only resources were its appeal and the ingenuity and money its advocates could produce. These were enough to keep the advocates busy, but not enough to foment a social experiment. Vouchers were intended to overturn the political power structure in local schools and put parents in the driver's seat, but the absence of popular support meant that there was really hope for success only when the opposition—the educational establishment—also liked the idea. There was only one actual test, and even there local forces tended to overwhelm federal priorities. The moral, we suppose, is that bright ideas, advice, and federal funds are no substitute for political power. Reforms spun from such political gossamer have similarly fragile prospects.

But vouchers can also be viewed as an attempt to change the balance of power within schools, and in this regard we think they produced both more and less than expected. As nearly as can be discerned, parents in Alum Rock have little more power now than before the test. The promise of parent choice and power rather unsettled teachers and principals, who promptly took steps to protect their interests. The ensuing story was enough to bring tears of joy to the eyes of the most hardened political observers: Professionals in Alum Rock emerged with undiminished and probably increased power—all this resulting from an innovation designed to boost the political fortunes of parents at the expense of professionals. The voucher idea was simply based on a serious overestimate of popular discontent and the demand for change in education. The moral is that reforms designed to "loosen up" school systems often succeed—but with perverse political effects. This is partly because the intended victims of reforms begin with much more organization and power than the intended beneficiaries; few of the beneficiaries have the time, energy, or resources to seize the opportunities presented by the reformers. The victims naturally use their superior power and organization not just to neutralize change but also to turn it to their own advantage. Similarly, the efforts of the Ford Foundation to loosen up the schools in New York through community control enhanced the political fortunes of the United Federation of Teachers. It often helps to loosen things up, but in the ensuing looseness, those with power get more.

From the perspective of promoting diversity, the story is less gloomy: The voucher demonstration in Alum Rock increased pro-
fessionals' ability to choose and design their work settings, and made it possible for parents to select among alternatives. If choice and diversity are good, then schools in Alum Rock were better places.

Finally, the Alum Rock demonstration has provided an opportunity to learn a good deal about the possibilities for alternative programs, as well as helpful evidence concerning the likely roles of parents and professionals. Some of these lessons may be indirect and perverse, but they are instructive nonetheless. The experience with vouchers points to some ways in which diversity in education can be further explored and encouraged, even though it suggests other ways that seem barren. If the voucher plan is narrowly assessed in terms of its assumptions about political participation and school reform, it must be judged something less than a resounding success. But viewed as an exploration of educational alternatives, it may prove a source of suggestive ideas and lessons.