

## **Public Schools Accountability Act of 1999: Californians Have Achieved the Goals of School Vouchers**

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We contend that Californians have found a way to demand accountability in their schools, while eliminating the radical consequences school vouchers could have on their public school system (McEwan, 2000). Senator Alpert's Public Schools Accountability Act of 1999 – Intermediate Intervention/Under-performing Schools Program (II/USP) takes out the “do or die” stealth market competition feared by opponents of vouchers, and allows time for our public schools to improve their “product of instruction” and meet community demands. The final caveat that propels Senator Alpert's initiative to succeed is that it includes a “last ditch effort” for parents whose children remain in a failing school. Should a local school not rise to the level of improvement planned by the community, parents hold the final right and option to place their child in a school environment that proves to be successful. II/USP seems to successfully combine necessary oversight, accountability and increased funding to improve our schools, while offering parents the comfort of knowing the best education ultimately is available to all students.

Anecdotal information have critics arguing that public schools have little incentive to improve while districts have an existing monopoly over the education of our children. By making it easier for parents to choose an alternative for their child's schooling, a free market is created in which healthy competition forces schools to either improve, and meet the market demands, or be washed up, and essentially put out of business (Greene, 2001). Although basic economic logic supports the idea that fierce competition will automatically force schools to improve their “product of instruction” and better serve their customers, school choice has been consistently stopped by political cries that this effort is unconstitutional and will destroy free public education entirely.

Americans can, following California legislation (SB 1552, 2000), improve education and force accountability while not abandoning our schools, educators and student achievement and require (through market demands) strong accountability measures in our schools. Politicians have struggled to achieve these goals while still calming the concerns of opponents of vouchers.

The California Public Schools Accountability Act of 1999, provides 430 selected schools in California with an opportunity to participate in planning and implementation activities for improved student achievement. This program focuses on the development of an action plan to improve academic performance of pupils enrolled in a school. Achievement would be based on test data, graduation and attendance rates. Schools are ranked by an Academic Performance index (API) that will eventually consist of several indicators designed to measure the overall performance of these 430 schools in our state. California schools with an API index score in the lower 50th percentile are invited to participate in the Immediate Intervention/Underperforming Schools Program (SB 1552, 2000). The basic goal of this program is to raise student test scores and overall achievement in California's “lower performing schools” – thus matching the goals of the more controversial school choice movement. The success of this initiative is found in its ability to match the goals of the voucher movement, without abandoning our public schools entirely.

A comparative analysis between II/USP and the goals proposed by vouchers is presented below:

II/USP Accountability efforts match state accountability efforts of the voucher Movement.

II/USP develops an Action Plan designed to specifically create the conditions for change, develops a vision for school improvement, collects data to clarify needs, develops measurable goals, and improves the ability of school site community members and personnel (SB 1552, 2000)

II/USP, as do vouchers, allows the community and parents to voice their education demands and choices

The Strategic Action Plan implemented in these low performing schools is to be developed by a governing board made up of a diverse group of school-site and community members. The majority of the board must be community members, not

school-site personnel (California Department of Education, 2001). This is an important element to consider, as it forces direct community involvement in the development and implementation of the Action Plan.

Competition Incentive exists in II/USP and voucher schools

Each school whose Action Plan has been approved by the California Department of Education, the school will then receive a \$50,000 planning grant to cover the costs of planning and implementation. The grant is then supported by an additional, per student allowance of up to \$200.00. These extra funds help to solidify the commitment of the community and staff to improve their local school and help it meet performance standards (California Department of Education, 2001)

Final Parental School Choice: The Action Plan offers parents the final say if the Strategic Action Plan does not work.

Schools that do not show improvement after two years may be taken over by the Superintendent of Public instruction, which then may designate new management (SB 1552, 2000).

If a school fails to meet the annual growth target rate developed by the Strategic Action Plan the school may no longer be eligible to receive funding, staff may be relocated, and the school may be closed (SB 1552, 2000).

If the school is closed, revision of attendance options for pupils will be considered (SB 1552, 2000). Students will be allowed to attend any public school in which space is available. This last option in a sense creates a modified voucher system in California- wherein parents have the ultimate right to choose another more successful public school outside their immediate district, leaving no parent forced to send their child to a continuously failing school.

The relative newness of the Immediate Intervention/Under-performing Schools Program makes it difficult to analyze its success or failure rate at this time. There is no doubt however, that the aim of II/USP is most certainly a step in the right direction. This program could provide parental and community involvement, choice, and a voice in public education forcing public schools to drop failing, bureaucratic methods of instruction and improve their product to better serve all clients, their students, successfully.

## References

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