

Case 62

School Choice: Vouchers in Milwaukee

Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, 1986

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Background. School vouchers emerged as a conservative public policy issue when Milton and Rose Friedman, both prominent and influential free-market economists, proposed vouchers as a way to promote school choice and educational competition. Independently, many individuals in African American communities have promoted vouchers as a means to attain greater local control over public schools.⁹²⁸ Public school system advocates largely oppose vouchers, fearing the public school system would lose funding to private schools. Other opponents believe vouchers supporting private parochial schools constitute a breach of the separation between church and state.

The Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation emerged into the national spotlight as a financial supporter of conservative causes in 1985 when the sale of the Allen-Bradley Company, the firm Lynde founded and his younger brother Harry joined three years later, lifted the foundation's assets from \$14 million to \$290 million. Lynde died before the foundation could be created, but Harry provided the Foundation with direction, instilling a commitment to conservative and anti-communist causes. Upon the Foundation's tremendous increase in capital, the board recruited Michael Joyce from the conservative Olin Foundation to serve as president.⁹²⁹ Joyce brought with him the approaches employed at the Olin Foundation as well as interests in conservative causes.

Strategy. Desiring to promote vouchers as a policy position consistent with its ideology, the Bradley Foundation first began funding research and stimulating intellectual interest in school vouchers before promoting more direct advocacy of school voucher policies and, eventually, offering direct support for voucher programs. In 1986, the Foundation initiated its school choice funding campaign with a grant of \$75,000 to support the research and writing of John Chubb and Terry Moe's *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools*, a book supporting with empirical data the school choice ideas proposed by the Friedmans.⁹³⁰ In 1990, at the time of the book's publication, the Foundation gave another \$300,000 to help promote the book.⁹³¹

In the late 1980s, the Foundation also helped to found the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute, a state-oriented conservative policy think tank. WPRI published a number of studies outlining educational problems in Milwaukee and throughout Wisconsin. Chubb and Moe participated in some of these Bradley-supported studies.

In response to a small pilot school choice program for Milwaukee, the State Superintendent of Public Instruction joined a teachers' union lawsuit challenging school choice as unconstitutional. The Bradley Foundation, in turn, provided \$500,000 in grants to the Landmark Legal Foundation to support school choice in the courts.⁹³²

In 1992, Bradley granted \$1.5 million to Partners Advancing Values in Education (PAVE) to run a privately-funded voucher program, helping to pay for the education of low-income children at the private schools of their choice, including religious schools. Local businesses gave an additional \$2.5 million to the program.⁹³³

When the Wisconsin Supreme Court issued an injunction preventing a publicly-funded voucher program from proceeding, the Bradley Foundation responded to PAVE's appeal to fund the program temporarily with private dollars in what the *New York Times* called "the most dramatic show of support," giving \$800,000 in a direct grant and \$200,000 in a matching grant for the operation of the school.⁹³⁴ Over two years, 1995 and 1996, PAVE raised roughly half of its funds for the program from the Bradley Foundation.⁹³⁵

In support of the voucher cause in the Wisconsin judicial system, the Bradley Foundation

provided the financial support to enable Governor Tommy Thompson to hire Kenneth Starr, then of Kirkland & Ellis law firm, to represent the state in the litigation. The state attorney general had opposed school choice in his campaign and was therefore unlikely to defend the state's voucher policy. Bradley granted \$350,000 to help pay for Starr's legal work.⁹³⁶

Following the Wisconsin Supreme Court's approval of the voucher legislation, the Joyce Foundation made a grant of \$246,000 to the Public Policy Forum in Wisconsin to evaluate the results of its voucher program in hopes of promoting the program in other communities.⁹³⁷

In 2001, with many of Milwaukee's private schools operating at capacity, Bradley gave a \$20 million grant to PAVE to help the city's best private schools expand their capacity. Bradley also funds studies of Milwaukee's students to support the potential of more wide-scale voucher programs.⁹³⁸

Impact. Almost three years after the PAVE program began, the legislature in Wisconsin passed a voucher program for as many as 7,000 students, allowing them to use the vouchers at private religious or secular schools. When the state supreme court prevented the public voucher program from proceeding, David McKinley, leader of PAVE, helped to raise enough money to fund the program for 4,650 students who had anticipated receiving state aid.⁹³⁹

After years of stalling in the state judicial system, the Wisconsin Supreme Court sustained the voucher legislation in 1998. In 2002, the U.S. Supreme Court sustained public voucher programs supporting student education at private, even religious, schools.⁹⁴⁰ In assessing these victories for the voucher movement, one commentator called the financial support of the Bradley Foundation "crucial to the voucher coalition" in Milwaukee.⁹⁴¹

Notes

928. John J. Miller, *Strategic Investment in Ideas: How Two Foundations Reshaped America* (Washington: The Philanthropy Roundtable, 2003), 41.
929. *Ibid.*, 34–35.
930. John Chubb and Terry Moe, *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools*. (Washington: Brookings Institution, 1990).
931. Miller, *Strategic Investment in Ideas*, 41.
932. *Ibid.*, 44.
933. *Ibid.*, 44–45.
934. Peter Applebome, "Milwaukee Forces Debate on Vouchers," *New York Times*, 9/1/95, A12.
935. Frederick M. Hess, "Hints of the Pick-Axe: Competition and Public Schooling in Milwaukee," chapter in *Charters, Vouchers, and Public Education*, Paul E. Peterson and David E. Campbell, eds. (Washington: Brookings Institution, 2001), 175.
936. Miller, *Strategic Investment in Ideas*, 46.
937. "Evaluating School Reform," *Works in Progress: Newsletter of the Joyce Foundation*, January 1999.
938. Miller, *Strategic Investment in Ideas*, 47.
939. *Ibid.*, 44–45.
940. *Ibid.*, 40.
941. Frederick M. Hess, "Hints of the Pick-Axe," 168.