

Californians nix school vouchers

by H. Graham Lowry

A California ballot initiative to establish a school voucher system went down to resounding defeat Nov. 2, and was rejected by nearly 70% of the voters. But the scheme still remains a threat to the public educational system, especially at a time when collapsing budgets are driving the functions of government to the point of disintegration.

Beneath the lure of providing state grants for parents to send their children to the school of their choice, voucher plans in reality are designed to destroy public education. In the case of California's Proposition 174, the plan would have provided parents with a voucher worth \$2,600 per child, to be used for tuition at public, private, or religious schools. Supporters claimed that the measure would improve public schools, by forcing them to compete for students; but even state officials put forth the obvious conclusion that the plan would force further budget cuts in public education.

State Controller Gray Davis announced in late July that Proposition 174 would force public schools to slash annual spending by 10%. When school opened in September, the state's acting school superintendent William Dawson denounced the plan as one that would divert hundreds of millions of dollars away from an already-underfunded educational system. "The school voucher initiative has the potential to tear apart public schools—not only in California, but across the nation," Dawson said. He might have added that the proposed \$2,600 grant amounted to barely more than half the per pupil cost of public schooling in California.

Even President Clinton got into the act during his appearance before the AFL-CIO national convention in San Francisco on Oct. 4. Urging voters to reject the voucher plan, Clinton said he opposed taking \$1.3 billion "right off the top to send a check to people who already have their kids in private schools and who didn't need any government money to do it." The next day, the plan's leading backer, California Gov. Pete Wilson, "reluctantly" announced that he had decided to oppose it, after receiving a report from the state Department of Finance projecting that the scheme would cost at least \$1 billion in start-up costs during the first three years. Ironically, despite Wilson's well-known fondness for austerity, the voucher plan was simply too expensive in the short term to

implement in deficit-wracked California.

Across the country, however, the increasing attention being devoted to voucher plans goes hand-in-hand with budget-cutting schemes. In Michigan, Gov. John Engler signed a bill on Aug. 19 to eliminate the use of local property taxes to fund public schools, beginning with the 1994-95 school year. The state's elementary and secondary schools currently derive two-thirds of their funds, totaling \$6 billion a year, from local property taxes. Engler said he would use the resulting crisis to force a complete restructuring of public education—including a system to "empower our families with choice."

Engler has suggested that he favors uniform vouchers which families could use to send children to any public school in the state. He said nothing of how they would get there, nor of the current inequities in per-pupil spending, which range from \$3,000 a year in the poorest areas to over \$9,000 in the wealthy suburbs of Detroit. In October, the legislature began considering proposals by Engler for a flat grant of \$4,500 per student, to follow each pupil from school to school; for specialized "charter schools" which would accept students from anywhere in the state; and for eliminating all funding for transportation!

In Illinois, Republicans in the state legislature used the funding crisis which delayed the opening of Chicago's public schools to push a \$1,500 voucher plan for public or private schools. Opponents quickly noted that the scheme would siphon funds from schools in poorer districts, especially in urban areas.

'War on public schools'

In Ohio, a Commission on Education Choice created by Gov. George Voinovich has drafted a plan for private school vouchers which the president of the State Board of Education has called "the greatest threat to the public schools we have ever faced." Though it has not yet been submitted to the legislature, State Superintendent Ted Sanders declared Oct. 7, "If this legislation is introduced, it will be interpreted as a declaration of war against Ohio's public schools." The state's 107,000-member American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees branch has already announced its opposition to the plan, charging that it "can only lead to the further crippling of our public education system." Ohio's public schools receive state funding based on the number of students enrolled and average daily attendance.

The overwhelming defeat of the California voucher plan has already spurred some rethinking in other state legislatures. Two days after the vote, a coalition of lawmakers and education groups in Pennsylvania called for the defeat of a pending "school choice" bill there, charging that it "has the same problems" as the California measure. A bill now in committee would give parents up to \$700 for private and parochial school tuitions through eighth grade, and \$1,000 a year for high school.