

Policy Brief



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Education Choice Initiatives 173 and 177

The Nov. 5 ballot will contain two initiatives aimed at increasing parental choice in public education: Initiative 173, a voucher proposal championed by Dr. Ron Taber, a candidate for Superintendent of Public Instruction; and Initiative 177, creating a local option for “independent public schools,” or charter schools, proposed by Jim and Fawn Spady.

Supporters of each measure are sharply critical of the “government monopoly” on public education and cite free-market principles to argue that the flow of education funding should follow students to schools of their parents’ choice. Both initiatives face strong opposition from the Washington Education Association, school administrators, the PTA, and others identified with the public schools, as well as a number of civic and business leaders.

The backdrop to this campaign includes the 1993 education reform act passed by the Legislature (ESHB 1209). The law has the support of many of the state’s major businesses and at that time represented the culmination of several years of negotiation and compromise among business and education leaders. The 1993 law emphasizes accountability systems and academic standards, along with reforms to increase the flexibility and independence of local schools. Neither the voucher-redeeming schools or charter schools created by the initiatives would be required to comply with ESHB 1209. As a result, some business critics of public school performance have joined the opposition to the initiatives.

The opposition campaign lumps the initiatives together as variations on a voucher theme. There is a rationale for this. Initiatives 173 and 177 base their challenges to the public school *status quo* on a shared critique: The public school system is unresponsive, delivers an inadequate product and needs to be invigorated by marketplace competition.

At its core, the campaign turns on accountability: To whom should the schools be accountable? How can that accountability be assured?

The initiatives emphasize accountability to parents with little state regulation, relying on marketplace competition to improve quality. But their approaches differ.

Initiative 173

In the preface to his 1995 book, The Case for School Choice, Taber writes, “There is no evidence that the state school monopoly can reform itself ... we must decentralize education, adopt new learning methods and submit education to the competitive forces of the free market and do it before the light goes out on Western Civilization.” He recommends school choice as the first step.

I-173 provides “scholarship vouchers” for students from kindergarten through the 12th grade. The value of the



voucher provided by the state, according to the initiative, "shall not be less than fifty-five percent of the state and local government spending allocated for each annual average full-time equivalent student" In a fiscal note prepared for the legislature by the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), state and local funds per pupil for 1996-97 amounted to \$5,583, making the 55 percent value about \$3,071.

The vouchers could be redeemed at any qualified school, which would accept them as full payment of tuition and fees for basic education for grades K-6, 90 percent of basic education costs for grades 7-9 and at least 80 percent of basic education costs for grades 10-12.

OSPI estimates that I-173 would cost the state about \$800,000 in the 1997-99 biennium and save it \$18,100,000 in the 99-01 biennium. Forecasting the number of parents who will use vouchers is difficult. Calculating the consequences of their decisions, however, is relatively straight forward. The fiscal note states it this way: "A student converting to a voucher-redeeming school from a non-public school will increase cost to the state and local school districts by 55 percent of the local school district state and local revenue per pupil. ... A student transferring from a public school to a voucher-redeeming school would represent a decrease in cost to the state. Local revenue would not fall accordingly since levy issues are for fixed amounts of money."

Under the initiative, enrollment is phased in over 10 years. In the first year, only students enrolled in kindergarten through second grade would be admitted, with an additional grade being added each consecutive year. OSPI estimates that initially about 2 percent of eligible public school students would transfer to voucher-redeeming schools, growing to 4 percent for the 2000-2001 school year, or about 17,468 students. On the other side, just under 14 percent of students now enrolled in private schools are projected to opt for voucher-redeeming schools. About 2,775 students who would not choose to enroll in the public schools would use vouchers in 1997-98, with the number rising to 6,105 by 2000-2001.

The initiative addresses accountability concerns by requiring voucher-redeeming schools to administer and publish the results of traditional academic achievement tests; to undergo and publicize the results of an independent audit; and to employ college-educated teachers (or teachers certified as competent). I-173 also permits conversion of existing public schools to voucher-redeeming charter schools.

Critics charge that the testing requirement fails to assure comparability between schools, that there would be limited public oversight over the expenditure of taxpayer funds, that there are few limitations on who could operate a voucher-redeeming school (which can be opened with just 25 students), and that the schools could discriminate on the basis of gender or religion. (In his book, Taber states, "Gender is deliberately excluded [from the nondiscrimination statement] because many independent schools prefer students of the same gender.")

Schools established under I-173 are exempt from most state regulation, in the same way that private schools are now. The initiative leaves to legislative determination the meaning of the state constitution's requirement that "All schools maintained or supported wholly or in part by the public funds shall be forever free from sectarian control or influence." According to most analysts, this means that vouchers cannot be redeemed at religious schools, but by asking for clarification, the proponents seem to be challenging this interpretation.