



## **JCRC Policy Statement on Educational Vouchers**

February 10, 1998

*Approved by the Metropolitan JCRC*

**The JCRC opposes school voucher proposals and other methods of funding private school education with public funds.**

- **The JCRC supports a free, high quality public education system and opposes vouchers and other methods that would erode financial support of public schools or weaken the wall of separation between church and state**

Public schools are an essential part of the American social and political democratic infrastructure. A strong public education system is essential for citizens to learn common societal values and respect for those who come from different backgrounds in our pluralistic society.

Only public schools can be accountable to the American public for offering a curriculum that teaches the common civic values so important to maintaining our democratic, pluralistic society.

Approximately 80% of Jewish children in California attend public schools. It is important for the Jewish community to maintain a strong coalitional relationship with public schools to ensure continued responsiveness to the needs of the Jewish community on a range of issues from curriculum content to sensitivity on matters of religious observance and school prayer.

- **To the extent that some public schools are not providing an adequate education, this problem should be addressed through a variety of initiatives within the public system, not by offering vouchers to low income or low achieving children. These initiatives include: adequate funding; establishment and implementation of academic standards; improved instructional methods; reduced class size in all grades; school reorganization for consistently low performing schools; establishing**

**charter schools and theme schools; ensuring choice and competition among public schools; and mentor teachers.**

Although some public schools may not be providing their students with the skills they need, many other schools have improved recently. Smaller class size in elementary schools grades K–3, additional state funding, the success of local tax initiatives to fund schools, adoption of demonstrably effective programs, improved test scores in some schools—all are evidence of the public's will to take actions which will improve educational outcomes for California students.

Voucher proposals that target low income or low achieving children allow a “foot in the door” which could lead to subsidized private school education with public funds for all students seeking to attend private schools.

There are not sufficient vacancies in California's private, secular schools to accommodate many low-income children. The cost of developing new schools with private funds is prohibitive.

Most private, secular schools are so expensive that a public voucher could not cover tuition.

- **The wall of separation of church and state, one of the pillars in the protection of minority rights in America, would be violated if publicly funded vouchers are used to subsidize religious education.**

While the question of where the line should be drawn with respect to what constitutes government endorsement of religion is continuously reassessed, including by members of the Jewish community, governmental actions which have the effect of favoring one religion over another or fragmenting society along religious lines are dangerous to the long-term interests of religious minorities.

Jewish Day Schools are an important means of strengthening Jewish identity in America and the JCRC supports increased communal efforts to make such an education affordable for all who seek to provide their children with a Jewish Day School education.

The JCRC believes that vouchers, while increasing the financial resources for Jewish Day Schools, nevertheless would be detrimental because

- a. it would place one long-term interest for American Jews, a strong Jewish education, against another, a strong public education system that effectively teaches common civic values to an increasingly diverse American society; and
  - b. it would inevitably lead to substantially greater government interference in parochial schools which could impede instruction in matters of religious faith.
- **The Jewish community should take certain actions to support its commitment to both Jewish day school education and public education.**

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The Jewish community should demonstrate its commitment to public education by becoming involved in helping public schools improve.

## Note

During its 6-month re-examination of its position on vouchers, JCRC considered two additional alternative positions. The first alternative opposes comprehensive school voucher proposal and other methods of funding private religious school education with public funds, but did not oppose small-scale, limited experiments in the use of school vouchers for the lowest income or lowest performing students if vouchers were not used in religious schools. The second alternative called for eliminating JCRC's opposition to publicly funded voucher proposal.

The minority opinion, in both the JCRC Task Force and JCRC Board deliberations, was almost exclusively in support of the first alternative. The position espoused was that public schools have failed in certain circumstances—particularly in urban areas with a substantial poor population. Students with the lowest performance ratings run a high risk of dropping out. Since some public schools have not been able to do the job of providing an adequate education, and since there is an urgent need to address this crisis, the time has come to try experiments similar to those enacted recently in Milwaukee and Cleveland, by permitting the lowest performing students to receive vouchers to attend private, non-parochial schools. It was also argued that such a policy would neither violate the principle of separation of church and state, since only non-religious schools could redeem vouchers, nor harm the public school system.

