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NEXT: SCHOOL VOUCHERS

One of the prime and painful public affairs issues for the Jewish community in the coming year will be the biggest drive yet, on national and state levels, for school vouchers.

The basic school-voucher idea is that the government will give its tax-money to the parents, instead of to the school. The parents will then be free to use the money, in the form of a voucher, at the school of their choice.

The school-voucher idea is a seductive one that emerged a few years back. It has had only sketchy success so far in the legislatures, for several reasons. The ruling was made that such funds cannot be given to private religious schools, so those supporters dropped out. The proposals were amended to enforce integration, and that lost some other supporters. But most of all, the fears prevailed that such a measure would finally dismantle the public school system.

However, the idea of dismantling the public school system now seems to dismay fewer and fewer people. There is increasing criticism of the public school product, bureaucracy, costs. Why do we need it? Why shouldn't we explore alternatives?

As for the Jewish community, we presumably do not have the same stake in the public schools that our immigrant ancestors and their children had. Mary Antiñ, a Jewish girl who came to this country at the turn of the century, wrote:

"Education was free. That subject my father had written about repeatedly, as comprising his chief hope for his children, the essence of American opportunity, the treasure that no thief could touch, not even misfortune or poverty ... On our second day, I was thrilled with the realization of what this freedom of education meant. A little girl from the alley came and offered to conduct us to school. No applications made, no

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questions asked, no examinations, rulings, exclusions, no machinations, no fees.

The doors stood open for every one of us, the smallest child could show us the way."

The schools were not just free, they were common schools. They were, in fact, a massive affirmative action program for equal opportunity. The doors that stood open for Mary Antin were the doors to American life, and through them our ancestors entered. But, today, what is our "special stake" in the common public schools?

A glance at the Soviet school system might provide us with one answer. A recent study by Daniel Fish shows that there has been a gradual elimination of all reference to Jewish history. The words "Israel" and "Judea" have disappeared from the ancient history text of 13-year-old Soviet students. The Holocaust is not treated in their modern history courses. For most of history, Jews have been made a "non-people." So, for example, there is no way the Soviet child can relate Jews, or the interest of Soviet Jews, to Israel when this is read in the standard Soviet secondary class textbook:

"The State of Israel was established in May, 1948 as part of the territory of Palestine. This bourgeois state is governed by representatives of the nationalist parties who express the interests of the monopolistic Jewish bourgeoisie and are closely connected with rightist circles in the USA and other imperialistic powers."

The anti-Israel and anti-semitic propoganda is not as insidious as the planned ignorance of history which leaves Soviet students without the means of evaluating the propoganda. What can we expect of them in the next generation?

The common public school system in America provides us with an opportunity to demand common curricula standards, as background for the next American generation. There is a

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movement across the country now to refurbish the general standards of social science and history, which began to sag so badly in the 1960s. In addition, we have been able to revive, in the textbooks and classrooms, proper references to the ancient and modern history of the Jewish people, including the Holocaust, and its relationship to Israel.

What, now, if there sprang up dozens of different school systems, by way of the vouchers? Could the curricular standards of the larger tax-paying citizenry be effectively imposed or monitored? It is not too soon to start considering the hidden hazards of the school voucher schemes -- and, at the least, the rigorous conditions which must accompany them.