

What Utah's History Teaches Us About Vouchers

PART 6 OF 6

BY SUTHERLAND INSTITUTE

A wonderful story is told of a woman, Frances R. Burke, who gave her life for her faith in the god-forsaken regions of Toquerville, Utah, circa 1881, a desolate locale where "surely neither God, men, nor the devil" would find anyone there. She was inspired to come to Utah as a school teacher in one of the Presbyterian Church's mission schools to help convert the Mormons. She suffered tremendous hardships – physical, economic, and spiritual. But she loved her work. She never faded in her identity. And, in the end, she found herself respected as the giving and loving human being she was.

Upon her death, she was not remembered for any contentions in which she was involved, she was remembered for who she was. She was well-respected not because she defended a system of education or a preference of faith, she was well-respected because she saw her neighbors as herself, a valued human being.

This is no matter of naïve sentimentality. This is the core of what might be missing in today's education debate: recognition of the worth of a human soul.

Utah's education identity has been revealed at several places in the historical record: First, we are all lovers of learning. We value education. Our social presumption is that Utahns will seek knowledge and understanding to make their way constructively through life.

Second, we are no respecter of persons; that is, we want all people to have an opportunity to learn and make something of themselves.

Third, while education means different things to different people individually, we know that a good education must be uplifting and beneficial to the human spirit.

Fourth, we are cooperative, we work together to accomplish things. We know the value of trusting and loving our neighbors, and what happens to our communities when we don't.

Fifth, we yearn to be free. So much of the struggle throughout the history of education in Utah was over real or perceived denials of freedom.

Sixth, we are an efficient people; we are a people of "best practices."

Seventh, we are generous and charitable. We seek earnestly for the welfare of our neighbors, especially as it pertains to the education of their children.

And, eighth, we are a family people. We respect the autonomy of our families. We honor stable families and call upon them to help struggling ones. And we appreciate their value, ones in which children are bright, productive, kind, and charitable.

Bringing us to the present moment in Utah history, no honest person who has studied the historical record prior to statehood could conclude anything other than that our forefathers would have embraced what we now call vouchers. This policy meets all of the reasonable tests of a prior time:

- a community fund to assist families to pay for the services of teachers of their choosing;
- encouragement for families to seek the best education for their children;
- respect of parental authority and the presumption that parents will make

- the best decisions for their children;
- local control in making education decisions;
- competition for teaching services;
- no bureaucratic middle-men to plunder part of the education funds;
- the direct application of pluralism thereby strengthening the community against any single influence or power;
- the opportunity for moral and civic instruction not offered in some stridently secular schools; and, perhaps most of all,
- a true reflection of the diversity of effective educational processes – a sincere acknowledgment that learning is unique to every child and that every child is unique.

A lasting education identity for Utah will push us evermore toward a "seamless" approach to education – an educational environment, sustained by law, economy, and culture, that will allow Utah's families to move freely across the spectrum of educational opportunities that best serves the needs of each one of their children.

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(This excerpt from the Sutherland Institute's *Vouchers, Vows, and Vexations: The Historic Dilemma over Utah's Education Identity* is the sixth of a six-part series on the history of education in Utah. The full essay can be found at www.sutherlandinstitute.org.)