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Now that the PCE “cookie ad” has attracted so much attention, this op-ed is being re-released in its entirety. (A shorter version of it ran in the Standard Examiner.)

Richard Eyre’s biography has been included for background.

A SIMPLE EQUATION

By Richard Eyre

The first reason why we should support Referendum 1 is that it leads to smaller class sizes and more money per pupil in public school.

We spend more than seven thousand tax dollars per pupil per year in our public school system. Every time a family makes a decision to use a voucher to move a child out of a public school into a private school, the class size goes down and the amount of money for each of the students left goes up. I like to explain it with Oreo cookies:

Say you have 30 little stacks of Oreos--seven cookies in each stack--representing a typical Utah class of 30 students and the \$7,000 we spend on each of them each year. Now, let’s say that the fairly wealthy parents of one of those students decides to take their \$500 voucher (half a cookie, which is the size of the smallest voucher) and send that child to a private school. The class size drops to 29, and the six and a half cookies that the departing student left behind are still in that classroom, and can be spent on more books or materials for the other 29 kids, or on more pay for the teacher. Now let’s say that another family, a poorer one, also decides to use their \$3,000 voucher (three cookies, which is the size of the largest voucher) to send their child to a private school where they think this particular child can get more of what he needs. The public school class size drops again, to 28, and four cookies (\$4000) stays behind in the public school to be spent on improving that public school classroom.

Think about that! Two fewer stacks of cookies -- two fewer kids in the classroom -- leave behind ten and a half extra cookies to put on the 28 stacks that are left. In other words, there would be \$10,500 extra dollars to spend on the 28 kids that stay in that public school.

Now the teachers’ unions (whose job is, don’t forget, to keep the status quo and protect the jobs of even the worst teachers) will try to create confusion about where that left over money will go, but the simple fact is that the public schools will have more money per pupil every time a family uses a voucher and moves a child out.

The second reason is that vouchers will lead to more options, choices, and involvement for parents.

I see myself as an advocate for parents and families. I believe, passionately, that parents are the stewards over their children, and that they know, far better than a bureaucratic school system or a teachers union, what is best for each of their kids. What vouchers do is give parents the decision about where their kids go to school, and the option to try to find the education that each individual child needs. The vast majority of parents will just leave their kids where they are, in the public schools, just like my wife Linda and I did with all of our kids. But when a child needs something that may not be available in the public school, or when a child has a teacher he can't relate to or learn from, vouchers give parents another option!

Wealthy parents already have the private option, but poorer families do not. With a \$3,000 voucher, a lower income parent becomes a *customer*, who can shop around and find what they think is best for their child. The average cost of private schools in Utah, if you take out the two highest cost schools in the state, is \$3,800, so the voucher brings the option within reach. Even thinking about the possibility, and having the option, will make parents more involved. Parents who choose to leave their child in the public school, which most will do, are likely to be more interested and involved in that public school. Vouchers will create more demand for more private school options. Areas where there are no private schools will likely have those options in the future.

The teachers' unions will say most parents don't care, especially poor parents, or won't do anything. I find that offensive. I believe in parents and in how much they care about their kids.

And if they don't do anything or won't get involved, then the union has nothing to fear, so why are they fighting vouchers so ferociously? They are fighting it because they fear competition, innovation, and the kind of creativity that always comes when you give people a market and let them choose. That is why the National Education Association is shoving \$3 million into Utah to try to defeat vouchers.

Good teachers and good parents need to pull together. I believe that the good public school teachers in Utah (which is the vast majority of them) are in favor of vouchers once they really understand them and get away from the propaganda of their union. And parents, when they understand the facts (as the legislature and Governor did when they passed vouchers) are almost always in favor of parental choice in education. If the teachers' union succeeds in covering the facts with smoke screens and fear tactics, vouchers will fail, and Utah will go on, as it has for so many years, as the last-place state in per pupil spending, with the least competition and the largest class sizes.

The voucher alternative is a much brighter scenario. And it's a simple formula: When people understand how vouchers work, they support Referendum 1.

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