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Howard Fuller and the Campaign for Vouchers

The recent study entitled "Lies and Distortions: The Campaign Against School Vouchers" (Howard Fuller of Marquette University and Kaleem. Claire of the Black Alliance for Educational Options, April 2001) is a curious document. It contends that the principal obstacle to private school tuition vouchers is a deliberate misinformation campaign by voucher opponents. And yet, the study fails to stand by same standards of truth and accuracy it purports to uphold.

"We conclude that a major reason for the containment of school choice to middle and upper income parents is the sustained campaign of lies and distortions described in this report," the study states. Of course, many voucher opponents would argue that it is the truth, not lies, that prompt most Americans to oppose private school tuition vouchers.

Fuller and Claire do not attempt to dispute essential facts about vouchers, including:

- Vouchers cost more than the present system.
- Private schools are not held to the same standards as public schools.
- Most voucher-bearing students are not able to get into the schools of their choice.
- Vouchers have been defeated - overwhelmingly - in seven out of seven ballot measures.

Instead, they quibble over a host of details, in many cases arguing against their own case. What Fuller and Claire call the "Big Lies" are:

- Voucher programs cream the best students.
- Voucher programs do not serve students with special learning needs.
- Vouchers will destroy public education.
- Vouchers do not improve the academic achievement of voucher students.

It is not worthwhile to go through a recitation of the "he said, she said" points in dispute. But it is interesting that the study's case against the "Big Lies" is filled with the same kind of omissions, innuendo, and hyperbole of which they say voucher opponents are guilty.

For example, the study argues that vouchers are not exclusive since participation is by lottery and participating schools are required to accept voucher-bearing students. Among its omissions is the fact that many schools choose not to participate in the first place. In Florida, for example, 93 percent of the private schools would not take voucher students. When he was superintendent of the Houston schools, U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige proposed private school tuition voucher, and no private school agreed to participate. In the same way, some schools in Milwaukee and Cleveland declined to take voucher students — or dismissed them after they were accepted.

Yes, some specialized public school programs have entry requirements, but that does not alter the fact that most private schools have more stringent entry requirements than most public schools.

Yes, some students with disabilities attend private school, but that does not alter the reality that all public school districts are required to serve students with disabilities, and private schools are not held to the same mandate.

Yes, some students who used vouchers or scholarships to go to private schools did better on standardized tests than other students who tried to get vouchers and either did not get the voucher or did not get into the school of their choice. But there remains no consistent evidence of the contentions that a) vouchers students do better than public school students, or b) offering vouchers is the only — or best — way to bring about public school change.

In the interest of balance, perhaps Fuller and Claire could do a companion study examining the evidence behind widely claimed contentions of voucher supporters, such as:

- A public education system that serves 46 million students is "failing."
- 14,500 independent school districts represent a "monopoly."
- Private school vouchers are "the next civil rights issue."
- The only way to bring about change in public education is by replacing political systems with market forces.

In the meantime, readers of the latest entry in the voucher wars should read this report critically.