

Op-Ed

“Vouchers would Solve Crowding Woes”

by Shirley Svorny

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Faced with rising enrollments, the Los Angeles Unified School District has plans to build more than 80 new schools in the next six years. Seats for 63,000 students are at stake.

It is unlikely that the LAUSD, with its track record of bad decisions and slow action, can pull off the timely construction of 80 schools. The most obvious alternatives, such as shifting to multitrack, year-round schools and adding portables to increasingly crowded schools, are nearly exhausted. The next step is double sessions and Saturday classes.

An alternative, one that can bring greater flexibility and private sector innovation to the process, is to issue vouchers.

Vouchers could be offered to parents of children in overcrowded city schools.

A significant portion of the \$7,000 or so that the district spends per year, per pupil, could be shifted to parents for use at a private school of their choice.

Shifting to vouchers will save the district more than \$40,000 per pupil in land acquisition and facility construction costs. This saving should permit an additional payment of \$2,000 per pupil, per year to private schools - money that could be put toward renting, remodeling or otherwise increasing capacity.

Vouchers can expedite the search for structures to house elementary and secondary students in Los Angeles.

The private sector has already shown that building new schools is not the best or only solution to finding space. Private schools have been innovative in converting residential, retail and office properties to classrooms and administrative offices, adding space at half the cost spent by the public sector.

Drawing the private sector into the search for classroom space will speed the process and make it more likely that children are not shortchanged because of crowding in public school facilities.

Private schools not only add seats but also add quality control. If things don't go well in a private school, parents have options - they can look elsewhere.

Despite efforts to promote school choice in Los Angeles, today's over-enrolled campuses have

few open spaces.

Vouchers offer parents choice, giving parents leverage. They can pull their children from a school if it is not doing a good job. This is a constructive outcome, as it provides incentives for private schools to remove teachers who are not performing.

Parental oversight provides incentives for schools to use voucher funds to offer clean, comfortable and safe school environments.

A further advantage of using vouchers to alleviate crowded schools is that the current space shortage may be temporary. If schools are built now, the district may be stuck with excess capacity 20 years down the road. It wasn't so long ago the district was awash in unused classrooms. After the baby boom, LAUSD-owned campuses sat idle for years.

In contrast, space rented by private schools would be productively re-absorbed in other uses as the need for classrooms declines.

To find seats for 63,000 students in six years, we need to move beyond the existing public school bureaucracy for talent and facilities.

Vouchers would bring in resources from the private sector to solve school siting issues.

The traditional opponents of vouchers - the school district and the teachers' union - won't cozy up to the idea. The district would be reluctant to relinquish control over facility construction and classroom oversight. The teachers union, United Teachers Los Angeles, wouldn't like it either; voucher teachers are outside UTLA's realm of influence.

Yet, despite these parochial concerns, it is an innovative and practical solution for crowded Los Angeles schools.

Shirley Svorny is a professor of economics at California State University, Northridge.