



**USA > Justice**  
from the February 19, 2002 edition



**SCHOOL HALLS:** Students mingle at Cleveland's St. Vitus, a parochial school where 3 out of 4 students have publicly subsidized vouchers. The Supreme Court will consider the constitutionality of the Cleveland voucher program today.  
STEPHEN R. CUTRI/SPECIAL TO THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR

## Key case in future of school choice

**Cleveland - the Supreme Court's focus tomorrow - shows how vouchers can transform parochial and public schools.**

By [Gail Russell Chaddock](#) | *Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor*

**CLEVELAND, OHIO** - Even if it means working a third job, Anisa Brown-Whitby isn't about to let her son, Brandon, set foot in a Cleveland public school - no matter what the US Supreme Court decides on the school voucher case it is hearing tomorrow. "I know adults who graduated from Cleveland public schools who can't spell 'seven,' " she says. "That's not going to happen to Brandon."


If the court rules that Cleveland's pilot voucher program is unconstitutional, Brandon loses the \$2,250 "scholarship" (or voucher) that is covering most of his tuition at Saint Vitus, a parochial school that fills 3 of 4 seats with voucher students.

A favorable ruling by the high court would encourage voucher initiatives across the country. Critics say it could also undermine public school systems at a time when other education reforms are just beginning to take hold in many cities, especially in

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Cleveland.

This troubled school system in the nation's heartland offers one of the clearest looks yet at how a voucher system impacts education in a major American city.

For years, voucher critics have argued that allowing students to use taxpayers' dollars to attend any school they wanted would end up hollowing out public schools. As the best students fled to private schools, the most troubled would stay in public schools.

Supporters of vouchers envisioned something nearly as utopian as the critics were apocalyptic: They saw choice acting as a goad to public schools to improve their academic standards.

As the Cleveland experiment shows, neither extreme has really come about. Moreover, some unintended consequences have surfaced, principally the overwhelming use of vouchers at private religious schools instead of at secular private schools or other public schools. This has helped sharpen the church-state debate that underlies the case the high court will hear tomorrow.

Cleveland's voucher system arose after years of education decline, fueled in part by litigation over desegregation. Forced busing prompted white flight, then the exit of many middle-class black families from inner-city neighborhoods. Meanwhile, the public schools only seemed to get worse.

Achievement in Cleveland public schools sank so low that the courts ordered a state takeover in 1995. As part of their overhaul, the Ohio legislature enacted the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program to give poor families the option of sending children to other schools.

While the program was designed to allow students to attend alternative public schools as well as private and religious schools, public schools in districts just outside the city refused to accept voucher students. The voucher money, up to \$2,500, wasn't enough to sustain new private schools. As a result, more than 99 percent of Cleveland's voucher students attend religious schools, according to a study by Policy Matters Ohio, a public policy research institute.

"What these numbers show is that there is not really a nonreligious option in the program," says Amy Hanauer, executive director of Policy Matters Ohio - a point that could prove decisive in the legal case, experts say.

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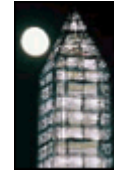
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## Impact on a parochial school

Parents of voucher students at Saint Vitus, many of whom are nonCatholic, don't seem to mind. "People are not shopping for Catholicism," says Fannie Lewis, a Cleveland city councilwoman and strong supporter of vouchers. "They are looking where they can send their child that is safe and where there is a smaller classroom and they can get the attention they need for their child."

Back in the 1970s, African-American students didn't attend Saint Vitus, which was started in 1902 by the largest Slovenian parish in the country. Even crossing over Superior Avenue to this East Cleveland neighborhood was often an invitation for a fight.

But most of the Slovenian community left the neighborhood in the 1970s and '80s, and for a time it looked like the parish school would have to be closed. It was saved by proceed from Friday night Bingo and from vouchers. Of 200 children in this K-8 school, 175 are on vouchers.

Classrooms are tidy and energetic. Students wear uniforms, and quiet to a whisper when told to be quiet. Third graders pump their hands in the air for a chance to answer questions.

Nor does Saint Vitus disguise its religious character. Here, children no longer attend daily mass, but they do pray three times a day. Religious symbols and posters adorn every classroom, such as "Jesus is my Best Friend" and "The Kingdom of Heaven belongs to kids."

"We are what we are, and we don't apologize for that," says Jeanette Polomsky, who was appointed the first lay principal of Saint Vitus in 1990. The school was once staffed by nuns from the Sisters of Notre Dame. Sister Sandy, who runs the computer lab, is the only teaching nun left.

Parents say that what draws them to the school is the safe environment, where every child is known. And children or parents that don't obey the rules are invited to leave. "Since vouchers, there's an attitude developing that you have a right to be here. I tell parents, 'your right is down the street at a local public school; this is a privilege, folks,' " says Mrs. Polomsky.

While national surveys signal that most parents in Cleveland, and in voucher programs in Milwaukee and Florida, are satisfied with their choice, there is less evidence that voucher students are doing better than they would in public schools. Recent studies on student achievement, including in Cleveland, have been inconclusive.

But public-school advocates say that what isn't in question is that voucher programs are draining resources from the schools most children attend. "Like almost every citizen, I absolutely believe in choice," says Barbara Byrd-Bennett, the CEO of Cleveland public schools. "However when that choice has a negative and unfair

impact on a school system, you need to step back and take a look."

Since the voucher program began in 1996, the school district has lost some \$45.9 million, including the cost of transporting students who attend private schools, she says. She blames the sad shape of the public-school system on the distraction of having to meet some 700 court mandates on desegregation.

"We were moving kids around like widgets, and being in court takes a lot of time," she says.

Since taking over Cleveland Public Schools in 1998, she has lengthened the school day, reduced class size, focused on literacy, established standards of accountability, and launched a summer school. Recently, Cleveland started requiring athletes to maintain a 2.5 grade point average - the highest in the state.

Funding for public schools increased 20 percent during her tenure. Per pupil expenditure jumped from \$7,970 to \$8,814.

Still, in last year's statewide proficiency tests, Cleveland public schools failed all but three of the state's 27 performance goals - ranking at the bottom of the state.

"Cleveland has improved on several of these indicators - more than many suburban districts," says Steven Puckett, assistant superintendent at the Ohio Department of Education. "But if your expectation is that all schools will be at the same level in three or four or five years, that's not going to happen."

## **A public school that works**

Among Cleveland public schools, Forest Hills Parkway Elementary is a success. While there are pitbulls and broken glass in the neighborhood, the atmosphere inside is safe and orderly. No horseplay in the corridors and neat homework on the walls.

Student achievement on proficiency tests are significantly above district averages: More than half of the school's fourth graders are proficient in reading, compared with 1 in 3 in the rest of the district.

Many parents had the option of using a voucher, but declined. "When we found out what kind of school this was, we didn't even want it," says Steve Croom, an audio engineer and father of Nyssa and Jaelle, who both attend Forest Hills Parkway.

But he adds that his youngest brother attends another Cleveland public school and never brings work home, because there aren't enough books to go around. "If my daughters were in that school, I would want a voucher," he says.

"I have not had anyone leave for a voucher," says Principal Linda Hardwick, who has been credited with turning the school around. Several students turned up after being expelled from voucher

schools for bad behavior. "They're doing much better here," she adds.



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