

Vouchers: A New Entitlement for the Elite

10-28-2024 at the Clinton Community Center (101 Hicks St. Clinton TN)

Marsha Livingston, a teacher in Anderson County schools for 33 years before she retired, spoke about vouchers for private school education. Livingston taught French and math, first at Clinton Junior High School and then Anderson County High School.

Marsha discussed the 2019 voucher legislation that was initially limited to 5,000 students in the first year, and expanded thereafter. The initial program included stipulations that included the same testing applied to public schools. The results of that testing showed poorer results in the private schools than in the public schools.



The 2024 “education freedom scholarship,” which is the Governor’s proposal, included no financial accountability and no testing requirements for the private schools. This “scholarship” is \$7500 per student, and can be used for homeschooling, private school, or an ad hoc religious “school” set up in someone’s basement. The TN Senate version of the bill includes some testing and financial accountability provisions, and adds some provisions for public schools. There are three versions of currently in the pipeline – the Governor’s, the Senate’s, and the House’s. In Anderson County, and in Oak Ridge, the school boards have passed resolutions to oppose vouchers. When vouchers were on the ballot they were defeated.

Marsha went through the history of school vouchers – a 30 year old phenomenon in America. In 1980, David Koch (one of the infamous Koch brothers and son of the founder of the John Birch Society) ran for President as a Libertarian. In that campaign he pushed repealing every major reform of the 20th century and foreshadowed today’s Project 2025, including the desire to control academia. Marsha recommends the book “Dark Money” by Jane Mayer to learn more about the Koch brothers and this time in history.

The 1983 report, “Nation at Risk,” reported that public schools were failing and blamed schools for all the woes of America. In 2018, in an NPR interview, commissioners working on the 1983 report disclosed that the data had been intentionally skewed to fit with Ronald Reagan’s wishes and world view, and that reports countering the “Nation at Risk” were intentionally not published.

Marsha also recommended “The Privateers” by Josh Cowen to learn more about the history of tax-funded voucher programs. And “School House Burning” by Derek Black that analyzes the assault on public education.