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John Young WACO TRIBUNE-HERALD

Why politicians tiptoe around voucher issue

The organization Children First America recently released a poll that showed a resounding majority in Texas supported school vouchers.

That's odd. I haven't detected a popular stampede. And I listen for hoofbeats.

I have no reason to challenge the pedigree of the pollsters. I do question their nomenclature.



They asked whether respondents favored state-funded "education scholarships"

that low-income students could use in private or church schools. An eye-popping 65 percent said yes.

Why would I be skeptical? For one, because I did my own poll — of candidates for state office two years ago. I asked each of them point blank: Do you support school vouchers? In every case, they either dodged the issue, saying it was unlikely to come up that session, or they said no.

The reason why several of them dodged the issue is that school vouchers are not as popular as proponents assert, though "education scholarships" may sound like strawberry frappe.

If vouchers were so popular, politicians would catch on quickly. If they were so popular, chairman Kent Grusendorf wouldn't have convened the House Public Education Committee behind closed doors to discuss a voucher bill in the 78th Legislature.

If they were so popular, Gov. Rick Perry would be honest and advertise vouchers as among his top education priorities. Instead, running for governor in 2002, he steadfastly downplayed the issue.

Here's the reason to be so sneaky: A lot of people, including President Bush, support the idea. But though support for vouchers is broad, it is only microns thin, barely fog on the mirror. Meanwhile opposition from people who have sweat equity in public schools, like the PTA, is as deep as it is wide.

When Texans consider the fine print, enthusiasm wanes for vouchers. That's because "education scholarships" they're not, not if Texans want accountability for tax dollars

spent.

The last time Texas lawmakers came close to passing a voucher bill, it fell apart on issues such as whether schools accepting vouchers should have to administer state tests or abide by non-discrimination laws in admissions.

A lot of private schools want nothing to do with either. Baylor University associate economics professor John Pisciotta, who a few years ago worked with the conservative Texas Public Policy Foundation to build the case for school vouchers, admits now to being "seriously conflicted."

Particularly he is concerned that vouchers would "bring the Trojan Horse of high-stakes testing into private schools that accept vouchers." Additionally, he said, "as a loyal Catholic, in the long run, I doubt that government authorities will permit the Catholic faith and Catholic values to be taught in a robust way in schools accepting vouchers."

His concerns have been echoed across the state by private schools as they consider vouchers.

Voucher proponents portray themselves as champions of the underclass against a failing school system. But even when voucher movement leader James Leininger's CEO Foundation dangled "Horizon Scholarships" in poverty-stricken Edgewood ISD, though it has had takers — 1,906 last year out of 13,000 students — the San Antonio Express-News reported "an unusually high attrition rate" — 38 percent of students leaving the program after the first year.

For the vast majority, even in Edgewood ISD, public schools remain the "school of choice." So much for the "burning building" analogy to proclaim vouchers as a manifest means of rescue.

This brings us back to nomenclature. If vouchers are a gallant deed rather than a means to undermine public schools, why can't proponents use the word? Because they know that vouchers, unlike "scholarships" are fraught with dilemmas: about fiscal and academic accountability, church-state separation, equal opportunity vs. discrimination (the latter being the essence of a private school). Vouchers are a government program, with procedures required to make sure that money doesn't go down the drain.

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That's why when supporters of public schools rise in outrage over spending public dollars on private schools, support for vouchers turns to vapor.

Young is editorial page editor of the Waco Tribune-Herald. Contact him at jyoung@wacotrib.com.

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