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Private schools

Pro choice

MILWAUKEE

With Republicans resurgent, school vouchers are back

ON THE desk of Zeus Rodriguez, the president of St Anthony School in Milwaukee, a mini Republican primary is underway. A signed photograph of Scott Walker, the governor of Wisconsin, competes for space with snaps of Rand Paul and Jeb Bush—all three of them presidential hopefuls. St Anthony's is popular among conservatives because it has more pupils taking advantage of government-funded vouchers than any other private school in America.

The local neighbourhood was once populated by German and Polish Catholics but is now home to the Hispanic sort. Almost all pupils speak Spanish at home; most are also poor. Yet 95% of the first two classes of high-school students from St Anthony's have graduated and more than 90% have gone on to college. All this, for a cost to taxpayers of just $7,500 per pupil; Milwaukee's public schools, by contrast, spend a whopping $13,000.

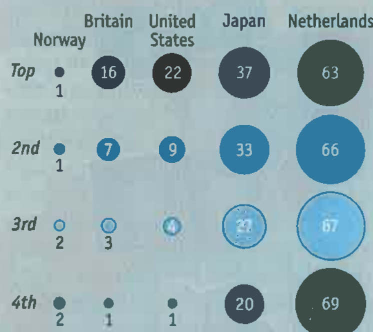
After the Republicans' success in state elections in November, several are pushing to increase the number and scope of school voucher schemes. In a budget unveiled on February 3rd, Governor Walker called for the expansion of Wisconsin's three voucher schemes, though he left the details fuzzy. In each of the 24 states that have vouchers, lawmakers propose to make more children eligible, says Robert Enlow of the Friedman Foundation, which advocates for school choice. Illinois and Nevada, which do not have vouchers, are considering them. George P. Bush (son of Jeb), recently argued for their introduction to Texas, where he is land commissioner.

All told, 10% of American children attend some form of private school. Pupils at such schools are typically well-off, but

Going Dutch

Students who attend private schools

By socio-economic quartile*, % of total



Source: OECD, Public and Private Schools (2012)

*Based on parental education, occupation and possessions

most of the change is taking place lower down, thanks to vouchers aimed at poor kids in awful public schools. If these programmes are expanded, America will look a bit more like Japan or the Netherlands, where private schools serve lots of hard-up families (see chart) and children do better in exams than Americans.

America's current crop of private schools were created in three waves. The first came in the late 19th century amid a panic about Catholic Europeans subverting the country's Protestant identity. James Blaine, a former Speaker of the House of Representatives, proposed an amendment to the federal constitution banning public funding for religious schools. The proposal failed, but many states passed their own version of a Blaine amendment and currently three-quarters of states ban directly spending public money on religious institutions. The ban on publicly-funded Catholic schools spurred the creation of lots of privately-funded ones.

The second wave came after the desegregation of public schools in the South following *Brown v Board of Education*, when recalcitrant whites set up private schools to keep their children apart from black ones. The third wave has been underway since 1990, when Milwaukee's pioneering school-voucher programme began.

No two voucher schemes are the same, which makes comparing them hard. Ohio alone has five, all with different criteria for eligibility. Most began life as schemes to help families in predominantly black neighbourhoods with failing schools find something better, and were then extended to children in foster care and those with special needs. Only now are they being ex- ▸▸

tended to families wealthy enough that they might have sent their children to low-cost private schools anyway.

Some states use tax credits to reimburse parents for private tuition. Others give tax breaks to people who donate to charities which fund scholarships at private schools (which gets around a Blaine amendment). Florida has a scheme like this: though the state has no personal income tax, tax-deductible corporate donations fund 60,000 places for children at private schools.

Despite providing the inspiration for this movement, Milwaukee's experience with school vouchers has been mixed. As well as successes like St Anthony's there have been some horror stories. One new private school was run by a convicted rapist; another by a man who used school money to buy himself a pair of Mercedes-Benzes. The outright frauds have since been weeded out, but there remain a lot of poorly performing private schools, just as there are many bad public ones.

Wisconsin's education department has commissioned evaluations over the past 25 years which, controlling for race, income and sex, found that the test scores of children at private schools are no better than those who stayed in the public school system. This is consistent with the federal government's evaluation of the voucher scheme for poor parents in bad school districts in Washington, DC, which found no statistical difference between children who were given vouchers and those who were not in reading and maths.

This is not the end of the story for vouchers, however. In both Milwaukee and Washington, voucher schemes get similar results to the public schools but with much less money. Under the DC scheme, each voucher is worth $8,500 a year, compared with $17,500 to educate a child in the public school system. In Milwaukee the difference is smaller but still amounts to several thousand dollars. Another consistent finding from voucher schemes is that parents like being given a choice, which explains why vouchers, once granted, are hard to take away.

Though Milwaukee's experience overall has been mixed it still has lessons for elsewhere. If one includes private schools, charter schools and open enrolment at public schools (which means parents may enroll their children in a school that is not in the neighbourhood where they live), around 40% of parents in Milwaukee exercise some kind of choice over their children's education, an unusually high share. With so much competition, it is hard for any school to grow complacent. There are good public, private and charter schools and bad ones, too. Some private schools do very well with poor black and Hispanic children, others fail them and yet manage to stay in business, which suggests that even with lots of parents choosing there is a need for an authority than can close the bad schools down.

The good schools, however constituted, have good teachers, inspiring principals and respond to their surroundings. Some of these things are easier to achieve in private schools. One such is St Marcus Lutheran, a private school on the other side of town from St Anthony's. Some 90% of the pupils at St Marcus are from black, low-income families. The school opens its gates at 6.30am for early arrivals. If parents can't bring their children to school, the staff will go and pick them up.

Some children come from chaotic homes, so the school stays open until 8.30pm and serves dinner. It has classes on Saturday too. "Some of the kids will only go home to sleep," says Henry Tyson, the school's superintendent. St Marcus tracks all its students for eight years after they leave: 93% graduate from high school. In a state that sends a higher proportion of black men to prison than any other, rates of incarceration for St Marcus's alumni are below the national average for all races.

"No one has yet found the secret button to push that makes all the schools better," says Alan Borsuk of Marquette University, who has been following Milwaukee's experiment since 1990. In their first quarter-century, voucher schemes have faced fierce opposition and coped despite much smaller budgets. For their fans, that is reason enough to pursue the idea further. ■

The economy

At last, a proper recovery

WASHINGTON, DC

All sorts of Americans are feeling more prosperous

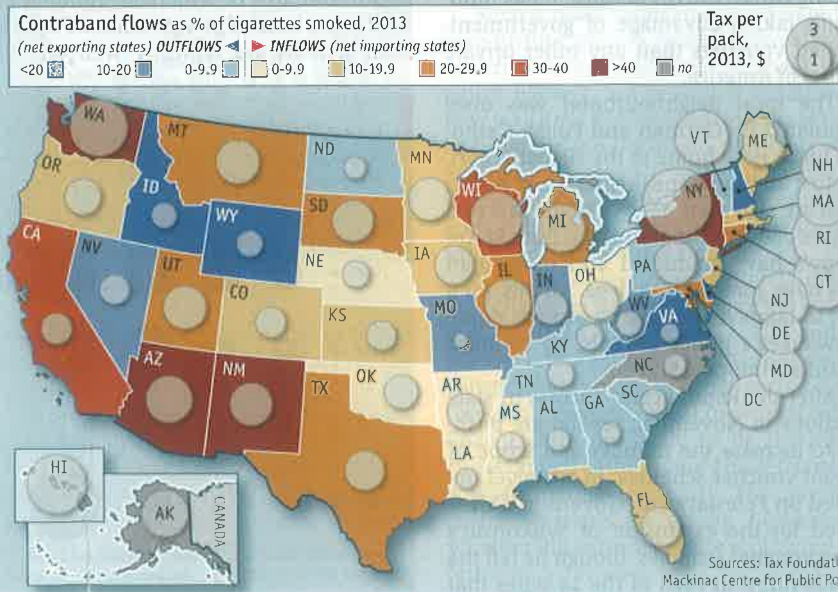
THE American economy has technicall been out of recession for six years. It finally starting to feel like it. Millions new jobs are sprouting. Many who had gi en up looking for work are trying again and succeeding. Wage growth is pickin up. But the economy is far from fu strength: the Federal Reserve may have support it for years to come.

America is thriving for a few reasons. is a relatively self-contained economy: fo eign trade is only equivalent to 30% of GD So America feels other countries' pain onl faintly. While many governments are tigh ening belts, America's is not: for the fir time in five years, public spending as a pr portion of GDP rose in 2014. America shoppers are flush with cheap credit. Low er oil prices also help, since America is sti a net importer of the stuff.

The labour market was ugly in the yea immediately after the crisis. But now it the star of the catwalk. Between 2011 an 2014 only eight countries saw bigger falls their unemployment rate, according to th

Smuggled smokes

Last summer Eric Garner died after a New York cop put him in a chokehold. His crime was selling "loosies", or untaxed cigarettes. Smuggling is common in New York: 58% of cigarettes smoked in the state are contraband. The reason is that tobacco taxes are high: a pack of 20 costs $13 in New York, compared with $5 in Missouri, the state with the cheapest gaspers. A recent report found that illicit smokes are more than 20% of total consumption in 15 states. There are sound public-health reasons for taxing tobacco but as the map shows, the higher the taxes, the bigger the black market.



Also in this section

48 English-language teachers' woes

Teacher recruitment

High-fliers in the classroom

Programmes that place bright and ambitious graduates in poor schools are spreading around the world—and show what it takes to make a difference

"IT'S not enough to have a dream", reads a banner over the whiteboard in Nancy Sarmiento's Baltimore classroom. Most of her 12-year-old pupils qualify for a free or cheap lunch. About 70% of the school's new arrivals last September had reading and mathematical skills below the minimum expected for their grade. Americans call such schools "disadvantaged". Whatever the label, most countries have schools where most children are from poor families, expectations are low, and teachers are hard to recruit. And in most, the falling prestige of the teaching profession makes matters worse.

But Ms Sarmiento, who graduated from a four-year biology degree course a year early, had to see off fierce competition to win her teaching spot. Teach for America (TFA), the scheme that placed her, accepts just one in six applicants. It looks for a stellar academic record and evidence of traits that distinguish the best teachers in tough schools, including leadership, resilience and motivation to help the poor. Recruits get five weeks' training and pledge to work for two years in a disadvantaged school.

When TFA's founder, Wendy Kopp, came up with the idea while an undergraduate, her adviser told her she was "deranged". She proved him wrong. After two decades of growth, the number of applicants is falling slightly as the graduate jobs market strengthens. But it is still popular: with five weeks remaining till this year's deadline, it has received 36,000 applicants—twice as many as a decade ago. And thanks to its 25-year history and 40,000 alumni, Americans are no longer surprised that bright, ambitious graduates want the most demanding teaching posts.

Now schemes modelled on TFA are spreading around the world. A quarter of European and Latin American countries, as well as Australia, China and India, have something similar. Many of the schemes are new, with just two or three cohorts placed in schools. Teach for Haiti, launched in January, became the 35th. Ambitious youngsters are attracted by the lack of a requirement for a teaching qualification, the chance to make a difference—and the high-energy approach. Lithuania's programme is called "I Choose to Teach!"; Latvia's, "Mission Possible". Many applicants have degrees in mathematics and science, subjects where teachers are scarce. Typically just one in ten is accepted.

Results seem positive, though so far there have been few rigorous evaluations. Pupils of TFA recruits do just as well in reading as those of other teachers; in maths, their test scores are better. Britain's Teach First has been credited with helping to improve standards in London. It now provides nearly a quarter of new teachers in the country's most difficult schools.

Critics, including teachers' unions, fret that a few weeks of training is too little for a novice teacher, no matter how gung-ho. But Teach First's training has been rated "outstanding" in all 44 categories reviewed by Britain's schools inspectorate. Like its counterparts elsewhere, Teach First provides the graduates it places in schools with support. Experienced colleagues help them with lesson planning and mentors visit their classrooms. Most enroll in a teacher-certification course (some countries insist on this), meaning that university tutors are on tap, too. Few new teachers anywhere else get so much hand-holding.

That help is essential. New teachers, whatever their route into the classroom, struggle most in their first two years, even in the easiest schools. Tomas Recart, who co-founded Chile's programme in 2009, learned that the hard way: after three months, a fifth of the first cohort had dropped out. Now 90% return for a second year—a higher share than for all novice teachers, in all types of schools. The early retention rate is similar for TFA itself.

Some countries add weekend gatherings and seminars for participants to swap ideas and commiserate. Recruits may even be "overloaded with support", says Dzameer Dzulkifli, who runs Malaysia's scheme—which could be a waste of more than their time, since such support is expensive in the rural areas where many are based. Indeed, the cost of the TFA model is what may prevent it going mainstream. Australia's programme is best thought of as a demonstration project, says Bill Louden of the University of Western Australia: "excellent and tiny" and showing what can be done with three times the usual spending per trainee.

But such pilot programmes matter because they can drag standards up across the board. Several schemes, including those in Bulgaria, India, Malaysia and Mexico, are doing better than the state at tracking teaching quality and student out- ▸▸