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WSJ.com

OPINION | MAY 5, 2011

## If Supermarkets Were Like Public Schools

*What if groceries were paid for by taxes, and you were assigned a store based on where you live?*

By DONALD J. BOUDREAUX

Teachers unions and their political allies argue that market forces can't supply quality education. According to them, only our existing system—politicized and monopolistic—will do the trick. Yet Americans would find that approach ludicrous if applied to other vital goods or services.

Suppose that groceries were supplied in the same way as K-12 education. Residents of each county would pay taxes on their properties. Nearly half of those tax revenues would then be spent by government officials to build and operate supermarkets. Each family would be assigned to a particular supermarket according to its home address. And each family would get its weekly allotment of groceries—"for free"—from its neighborhood public supermarket.

No family would be permitted to get groceries from a public supermarket outside of its district. Fortunately, though, thanks to a Supreme Court decision, families would be free to shop at private supermarkets that charge directly for the groceries they offer. Private-supermarket families, however, would receive no reductions in their property taxes.

Of course, the quality of public supermarkets would play a major role in families' choices about where to live. Real-estate agents and chambers of commerce in prosperous neighborhoods would brag about the high quality of public supermarkets to which families in their cities and towns are assigned.

Being largely protected from consumer choice, almost all public supermarkets would be worse than private ones. In poor counties the quality of public supermarkets would be downright abysmal. Poor people—entitled in principle to excellent supermarkets—would in fact suffer unusually poor supermarket quality.



Associated Press

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How could it be otherwise? Public supermarkets would have captive customers and revenues supplied not by customers but by the government. Of course they wouldn't organize themselves efficiently to meet customers' demands.

Responding to these failures, thoughtful souls would call for "supermarket choice" fueled by vouchers or tax credits. Those calls would be vigorously opposed by public-supermarket administrators and workers.

Opponents of supermarket choice would accuse its proponents of demonizing supermarket workers (who, after all, have no control over their customers' poor eating habits at home). Advocates of choice would also be accused of trying to deny ordinary families the food needed for survival. Such choice, it would be alleged, would drain precious resources from public supermarkets whose poor performance testifies to their overwhelming

need for more public funds.

As for the handful of radicals who call for total separation of supermarket and state—well, they would be criticized by almost everyone as antisocial devils indifferent to the starvation that would haunt the land if the provision of groceries were governed exclusively by private market forces.

In the face of calls for supermarket choice, supermarket-workers unions would use their significant resources for lobbying—in favor of public-supermarkets' monopoly power and against any suggestion that market forces are appropriate for delivering something as essential as groceries. Some indignant public-supermarket defenders would even rail against the insensitivity of referring to grocery shoppers as "customers," on the grounds that the relationship between the public servants who supply life-giving groceries and the citizens who need those groceries is not so crass as to be discussed in terms of commerce.

Recognizing that the erosion of their monopoly would stop the gravy train that pays their members handsome salaries without requiring them to satisfy paying customers, unions would ensure that any grass-roots effort to introduce supermarket choice meets fierce political opposition.

In reality, of course, groceries and many other staples of daily life are distributed with extraordinary effectiveness by competitive markets responding to consumer choice. The same could be true of education—the unions' self-serving protestations notwithstanding.

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