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School Vouchers

Most school voucher programs have been in place for a short time, and the specifics of the programs vary considerably from place to place. This makes it difficult to assess the effects of vouchers on important outcomes such as student learning, enrollment patterns, and education costs. According to the Center for Education Policy, “The jury is still out on whether vouchers are an effective policy for improving education. . . . [Research] studies have reached different conclusions, with some finding achievement gains for voucher students and others finding no improvement” (Kober, 2000, p. 7). Due in part to these ambiguous data and conclusions, debates about school vouchers are often strongly shaped by policy commitments and ideologies.

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INTRODUCTION

Publicly funded voucher programs are systems of financing public education in which governments provide tuition certificates to parents or to schools on behalf of parents. These certificates can be used to pay tuition at any participating private school. Six states and Washington, D.C. currently have laws allowing for publicly funded vouchers, either statewide or in certain cities. Washington, D.C. and four states (Colorado, Florida, Ohio, and Wisconsin) have programs that target students in low-performing schools and students from low-income families. Two states (Maine and Vermont) have longstanding programs that offer vouchers to students who live in communities where there is no age-appropriate public school. Privately funded voucher programs exist in Dayton, Ohio; New York City; Washington, D.C.; and several other areas. A few private foundations also provide voucher-like scholarships to students nationwide.

Locations, targeted students, and participation in current public voucher programs

<i>Location</i>	<i>Target schools & students</i>	<i>Number of students allowed by law to participate</i>	<i>Number of students who participated in 2002–03</i>
Colorado	Low-income students in low-performing schools	1% of school enrollment in 2004–05, increasing incrementally to 6% in 2007–08	*
Florida	Students in low-performing public schools	Students from 10 public schools in 2002–03	1,477
Cleveland, Ohio	Low-income students in Cleveland public schools	22,215	4,948
Milwaukee, Wisconsin	Low-income students in Milwaukee public schools	15,000	11,624
Washington, D.C.	Low-income students and students in low-performing public schools	*	*

**Colorado's law was passed in 2003, and the federal law governing D.C. vouchers was passed in 2004; no data on the number of participants are available.*

The No Child Left Behind Act mandates some public school choice under certain conditions, but it does not specifically address vouchers. If a Title I school does not make “adequate yearly progress” (AYP) for two consecutive years, parents have the option to send their children to another, higher-performing public school in the district. If a Title I school does not make AYP for three consecutive years, low-income parents can obtain supplemental educational services for their children. (The Delaware Department of Education applies similar requirements, on a different timetable, to non-Title I schools.) Supplemental services can be provided by approved private organizations, but they must occur outside the regular school day, not in place of it. In light of the limited choice provisions under NCLB, vouchers might be seen as a means to make more educational choices available to more students.

Common Arguments in Favor of Voucher Programs

- Because parents, rather than bureaucrats, choose the schools that they believe are best for their children, schools will be more responsive to the needs of children and their parents.
- Voucher programs promote equity by expanding the option to leave troubled schools, which has always been available to wealthier families, to children from lower-income families.
- Choice and competition encourage innovation and foster educational practices that increase student achievement.
- Vouchers encourage more efficient educational organizations because money flows directly from consumers to schools, rather than through top-heavy state and district bureaucracies.
- Voucher programs encourage increased parental involvement.

Common Arguments Against Voucher Programs

- Voucher programs will weaken public schools and threaten the longstanding goal to offer all children equal access to high-quality public schools.
- Voucher programs will increase segregation because white and more highly educated families participate at higher rates.
- There is no consistent evidence that voucher programs lead to increased student achievement.
- Private schools that receive public funds may be held to lesser standards of academic accountability and fiscal oversight than public schools.
- Giving public money to religious schools violates the separation between church and state.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Voucher Programs and Student Achievement

Researchers and analysts with disparate policy perspectives have published vastly different conclusions about the impact of voucher programs. Assessing these divergent claims is made more difficult by design limitations in existing studies of voucher programs. In particular, it is usually not possible to assign comparable groups of students to public schools and to private voucher schools. The lack of comparable test groups limits the ability of a research study to account for the many factors that influence student learning and to focus on the impact of participation in a voucher program.

Despite these challenges, circumstances sometimes allow for useful comparisons of student performance in public schools and in private voucher schools. For example, so many students applied to participate in privately funded voucher programs in New York City; Dayton, Ohio; and Washington, D.C. that selection was determined by lottery. Howell et al. (2002) took advantage of the random lotteries to design a randomized field trial. Their study found that after two years, African-American students who received a voucher gained an average of 6.3 National Percentile Ranking (NPR) points in their total achievement score on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, compared to students who lost the lottery and remained in public schools. No other racial or ethnic groups in any of the cities achieved statistically significant achievement gains. (The average NPR score for African-American students in the three cities prior to their enrollment in the voucher programs was 16.3. All NPR scores are out of 100.)

The gains achieved by African-American students were not consistent, however, as Carnoy (2001) points out in his analysis of data from the privately funded voucher program in Dayton, Ohio. He notes that voucher students who entered in the second, fourth, and sixth grades in the first year of the program did perform better than comparable students not in the voucher program. Conversely, voucher students in kindergarten and first, third, and fifth grades performed worse than students in the non-voucher comparison group. Similarly, Myers et al. (2000) report that after three years in the New York City voucher program, African-American students gained an average of 4.5 NPR points on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. Unfortunately, this result excludes students who left the program and sheds no light on why they left. The impact of vouchers on student performance cannot be adequately assessed without accounting for students who leave the programs.

Some analysts are concerned by the use of standardized tests of basic competency to measure the impact of voucher programs on student learning. Critics argue that schools should teach, and students should learn, much more than these tests are designed to assess. Existing studies of voucher programs are weakened by reliance on tests that narrowly construe learning outcomes and by the failure to incorporate a more diverse mix of learning assessments.

Parents and Students Who Participate in Voucher Programs

A study by WestEd, a nonpartisan research and service agency, found that voucher students in Cleveland, Milwaukee, and New York City were more likely than non-voucher students to live in single-parent families (Adelsheimer, 1999). In Milwaukee and Cleveland, voucher families tended to have fewer children than families that did not participate in the voucher programs.

In New York City, Spanish was spoken in the homes of almost 50% of *eligible* families, but in only 20% of the families who *applied* for vouchers. Forty-three percent of New York City parents who were awarded vouchers, but chose not to participate, said they could not afford tuition and other fees (e.g., books, uniforms) that exceeded the amount of the voucher.

In all three cities, the mothers of voucher applicants tended to have higher education levels than mothers of eligible children who did not apply. This suggests that family characteristics, such as the mother's level of education, may influence whether eligible children are able to access a voucher program.

Vouchers and Segregation

Proponents argue that vouchers offer poor and minority students the same opportunity to choose a school that many middle class and white students already enjoy. For example, Greene (2002) argues that private school enrollment patterns are typically less constrained by a child's place of residence than public school enrollment. Voucher programs that allow private school choice should, therefore, reduce segregation based on residential patterns. Greene found that 61% of public school students in the Cleveland metropolitan area attended schools that were racially segregated, while 50% of students in private schools attended schools that were racially segregated. (Greene defined a school as segregated if 90% or more of its students shared the same racial background.)

People for the American Way (PFAW, 2004) counters that Greene's study is flawed, since it includes students from the Cleveland metropolitan area, rather than only students from the city of Cleveland, where the voucher program is in place. According to PFAW statistics, Cleveland public school students are about four times more likely to attend integrated schools than voucher students from Cleveland. Van Lier & Scott (2001) argue that residential areas in Cleveland with the highest concentrations of black children have fewer voucher schools within a one-mile radius, compared to areas that have more white or Latino children. For families that rely on public transportation, geographic patterns like this could affect access to voucher schools.

Competition, Innovation, and Efficiency

In 1955, economist Milton Friedman advanced an early proposal for educational vouchers. He argued that while there are legitimate reasons for government to ensure that children receive an education, there is no need for schools to be run by the government. Instead, government should pay for schooling and ensure that education markets are free and open. In this spirit, Levin (2002) maintains that school choice will foster the “discipline of market competition” and force public schools to compete and improve. Chubb and Moe (1990) further contend that school choice will make possible the kinds of institutional and structural changes that are required for sustained school reform. Walberg and Bast (2003) echo some of Friedman’s ideas to argue that a fundamental right of parents is the opportunity to guide their children’s education as they see fit.

Others caution that fiscal improprieties or outright fraud can occur when public monies enter privatized education markets that lack adequate public oversight. For example, officials from a private voucher school in Milwaukee acknowledged that they “improperly cashed” more than \$300,000 in checks from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, accepting money for students who did not attend. The *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* found that the school’s principal used voucher payment money to purchase two Mercedes-Benz cars (Carr, 2004). In Florida, the state Chief Financial Officer criticized the state Department of Education for failing to properly regulate its voucher program. In one instance, a home-school consultant charged the parents of children with disabilities unauthorized commissions for books and therapy (Date, 2003).

Cost Savings

Some proponents maintain that voucher programs will save money, since the voucher amount paid in public funds is typically less than the total of local, state, and federal funding per student. Miles and Rothstein (1995) challenge this claim based on their analysis of public school spending. While typical voucher costs may amount to only 58% of average per pupil funding in public schools, additional, often mandated, services (such as special education) are likely to remain the responsibility of public schools and to require continued funding.

Church and State Issues

In *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*, 2002, the United States Supreme Court upheld, in a 5–4 vote, the constitutionality of the Cleveland school voucher program. Writing for the majority, Chief Justice Rehnquist described the Cleveland voucher program as one of “true private choice in which government aid reaches religious schools only as a result of the genuine and independent choices of private individuals” (Opinion ¶ 14). He noted that vouchers are available to all families who qualify based on income guidelines, regardless of their religious beliefs. Public schools, private nonreligious schools, and private religious schools can participate in the program. The majority held that the Cleveland program is driven by the choices of private individuals and cannot be interpreted as the government establishing any religion or religious belief.

In his dissent, Justice Stevens argued that because private religious schools in general, and Catholic parochial schools in particular, are by far the most common types of nonpublic schools, laws that allow public voucher funds to go to nonpublic schools effectively constitute an establishment of religion. Justice Stevens wrote, “whenever we remove a brick from the wall that was designed to separate religion and government, we increase the risk of religious strife and weaken the foundation of our democracy” (Dissent ¶ 5).

POLICY QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

- Should eligibility for a voucher program be means-tested or open to all families on the same basis?
- On what basis should private voucher schools accept and reject voucher students who apply for admission?
- How would a voucher program impact racial and economic segregation in Delaware schools?
- How might a voucher program in Delaware be used to address racial and economic achievement gaps?
- How would private voucher schools be held accountable for teacher quality and student performance? Would Delaware students who attend private schools using public vouchers take the Delaware Student Testing Program (DSTP) assessments? Would private voucher schools be held to the same expectations for student performance as public schools?

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