Education - School Vouchers

No reputable study has demonstrated that school vouchers improve student performance. Instead, they rob public schools of needed funding, and only a small percentage of students participate.

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Summary

- **The U.S. Supreme Court's 2002 decision upholding the constitutionality of school vouchers has re-ignited voucher battles in the state legislatures.**
- **School vouchers are public subsidies that help parents pay tuition at a private or religious school, or even for home schooling in some proposals.**
- **No credible study has demonstrated that vouchers improve student performance.**
- **Vouchers do not provide "school choice," because private school admissions offices retain the choice of which students to admit or reject.**
- **Vouchers do not pay the full cost of many private schools.**
- **Private schools that accept vouchers are not held to the same standards of accountability as public schools.**
- **Americans want public money to be used for public schools instead of for private school vouchers.**
- **Despite the U.S. Supreme Court Ruling, school vouchers continue to violate most state constitutions.**

The U.S. Supreme Court's 2002 decision upholding the constitutionality of school vouchers has re-ignited voucher battles in the state legislatures.

In 2003, legislation to create or expand vouchers was defeated in 12 states (AR, CA, CT, FL, LA, MN, MS, OH, OK, TX, VA and WI). Colorado adopted a voucher program that targets 11 school districts and could cover about 20,000 students by 2007. However, public school advocates have filed suit to block the program, pointing out that the Colorado Constitution explicitly prohibits the use of public funds for religious schools.

School vouchers are public subsidies that help parents pay tuition at a private or religious school, or even for home schooling in some proposals.

So far, taxpayer-funded voucher programs are operating only in Milwaukee, Cleveland, and Florida. Vouchers range in value, but are consistently much less than tuition at elite private schools (which may cost $10,000-20,000 a year).

■ In Cleveland, over 5,000 students use vouchers, each worth no more than $2,250. Only one in five of those students attended a Cleveland public school the year before receiving a voucher. The cost to the state of Ohio was more than $10 million in 2001-02. These funds were diverted from a portion of the state budget dedicated to disadvantaged public school students.

■ In Milwaukee, where the program has been operating since 1999, more than 11,000 low-income students use vouchers worth $5,783 to attend about 100 private schools, most of which are religious. The program diverted approximately $60 million from public schools in 2001-02.

■ Florida has two voucher programs. The so-called "A+" program targets schools that have been graded "F" by the state for two years within any four-year period. Approximately 600 students are enrolled in this program, at an annual cost to the state of $2.1 million. The McKay program offers vouchers to students with disabilities who are dissatisfied with their public schools. The value of the voucher is based on the child's disability, but averages more than $5,000. With almost 9,000 students, this program costs the state more than $50 million annually.

No credible study has demonstrated that vouchers improve student performance.

The official study of Cleveland's voucher program found no achievement gains for voucher students compared to students in the public schools in the first year of the program. In the second year, voucher students scored slightly better than public school students in science and language, but not in math, reading or social studies. The most recent results do not reveal any significant impact on student achievement; in fact, voucher students performed slightly worse in math, reading and

overall achievement.[1] Likewise, Milwaukee's official evaluation found that voucher students did not outperform public school students.[2] A controversial study of privately-funded vouchers in New York City, Washington, DC, and Dayton, Ohio claimed a 6.3 percent gain in test scores by African-American students,[3] but one of the companies hired to gather the research publicly rebutted that conclusion. Reanalysis of the data confirmed that the claims are insupportable, and that vouchers had no statistically significant impact on student achievement.

Vouchers do not provide "school choice," because private school admissions offices retain the choice of which students to admit or reject.

Students are often unable or ineligible to attend many private schools that accept vouchers because of long waiting lists and restrictive admissions standards based on academic performance, religion, sex, disability and other factors.

Vouchers do not pay the full cost of many private schools.

Vouchers will not cover the full cost of the more expensive and elite private schools, which decline to participate in programs that require them to accept the voucher as complete tuition payment. Moreover, the cost of private education is much more than tuition. Parents must also pay for transportation, uniforms, books and other expenses. Many, if not most, low- and middle-income parents are unable to afford these costs, so their kids cannot attend private school.

Private schools that accept vouchers are not held to the same standards of accountability as public schools.

Voucher proposals rarely demand accountability for the quality of education students receive, and, according to a U.S. Department of Education report, many private schools would not participate in a voucher program if it required them to make changes in admissions, student testing, curriculum, or religious training.[4] The federal No Child Left Behind law does not apply to private schools.

Americans want public money to be used for public schools instead of for private school vouchers.

The 2003 Phi Delta Kappa / Gallup poll found that the number of Americans who support the diversion of public funds for private school tuition fell to 38 percent.[5] A meta-analysis of polling data confirmed that vouchers are the least popular of all proposals to improve education, garnering less than half as much support as tutoring and remedial support for students or professional development for teachers.[6] In the most important gauge of public opinion, voters have consistently rejected school voucher initiatives. In 2000, California and Michigan voters turned back voucher proposals by two-to-one margins. Since 1972, all eight attempts to create state voucher programs by referendum have failed.

Despite the U.S. Supreme Court ruling, school vouchers continue to violate most state constitutions.

Nearly every state constitution (all but LA, ME and NC) contains a provision that limits state support of religious institutions. Thirty-six state constitutions include language that expressly forbids the transfer of money to religious schools. So the constitutionality of vouchers remains in serious question.

This policy brief relies in large part on information from the National Education Association.

Endnotes

[1] Kim Metcalf et al., "Evaluation of the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program, Summary Report 1998-2001," Indiana University, 2003.

[2] John Witte et al., "Fifth Year Report: Milwaukee Parental Choice Program," University of Wisconsin, 1995.

[3] Howell, Wolf, Peterson, and Campbell, "Test-score effects of school vouchers in Dayton, Ohio; New York City; and Washington, D.C.: Evidence from randomized field trials," September 2000.

[4] Muraskin et al., "Barriers, Benefits, and Costs of Using Private Schools to Alleviate Overcrowding in Public Schools: Preliminary Report," 1997.

[5] http://www.pdkintl.org/kappan/k0309pol.pdf.

[6] Meg Bostrom, "Fulfilling the Promise of No Child Left Behind: A MetaAnalysis of Attitudes Toward Public Education," Public Knowledge LLC, April 2003.

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Balanced Student Assessment Act

The Balanced Student Assessment Act is intended to be offered in the context of a debate over school vouchers, either as a freestanding bill or as an amendment to a voucher bill.

SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE

This Act shall be called the "Balanced Student Assessment Act."

SECTION 2. FINDINGS AND PURPOSE

(A) FINDINGS—The legislature finds that:

1. The federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 requires public schools to perform annual assessments of their students' academic achievement.

2. Under the No Child Left Behind Act, these assessments are "the primary means of determining the yearly performance of the State and of each local educational agency and school in the State in enabling all children to meet the State's challenging student academic achievement standards."

3. Private schools that accept state funding should be measured by the same "challenging student academic achievement standards" as the public schools.

(B) PURPOSE—This law is enacted to require private schools that accept public funding to participate in the same annual assessments of their students' academic achievement as are required of public schools, in order to provide standards, accountability and balance in evaluating the relative merit of state funding for private schools.

SECTION 3. BALANCED STUDENT ASSESSMENTS

After section XXX, the following new section XXX shall be inserted:

(A) DEFINITIONS—In this section:

1. "Private school" means a primary or secondary school [accredited by the state] that is not part of a city or county public school system.

2. "Secretary" means the Secretary of the Department of [Education], or the Secretary's designee(s).

(B) ASSESSMENTS REQUIRED—In order to be eligible to receive any state funds pursuant to [list appropriate sections], a private school must:

1. Assess the academic achievement of all its students, using the same assessments required of public schools in the same district pursuant to section 1111(b)(3)(A) of the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (Public Law 107-110).

2. Provide the results of those assessments to the Secretary [of Education].

3. Disclose any identifiable personal information about the assessments only to the parents of the students to whom the information relates.

(C) ANNUAL EVALUATION

Based on the assessments of academic achievement, the Secretary shall conduct an annual school-by-school evaluation of student achievement for private schools which receive any state funds pursuant to this section, including a comparison of the achievement of the private school's students to demographically similar public school students.

SECTION 4. EFFECTIVE DATE

This Act shall take effect on July 1, 2004.