



October 2010

FACT-CHECKING SCHOOL CHOICE RESEARCH

The data that most education researchers would rather ignore

There are few issues in education that evoke more interest and emotion than school choice, or vouchers. Some people say they're controversial, but among the families of the nearly 200,000 children who benefit from school choice programs — there's nothing controversial about them at all.

Critics of opportunity scholarships say that they "drain money" from our public schools, that they don't have any impact on student achievement, that they're the product of a vast right-wing conspiracy, and even that they violate our cherished constitutional rights.

Of the many issues in education today, scholarships and vouchers are likely the single most studied and researched reforms.

In reality, the truth is far less dramatic:

- School choice programs — of which there are 20 (scholarship programs and tax credits) in 12 states and Washington, DC — **increase student achievement and graduation rates** while costing only one quarter of the amount of money, per child, than conventional public schools.
- Scholarship programs **stimulate healthy competition** that helps public schools improve; there has never been a single study — ever — demonstrating that scholarships have a negative impact on public schools.
- Choice programs are embraced by a **growing bipartisan coalition**, which includes US Senator Dianne Feinstein, the previous three mayors of the District of Columbia, and state legislators from New Jersey to Louisiana.
- School voucher programs that are designed appropriately **are fully constitutional**.
- The **public overwhelmingly supports vouchers** when the poll questions are phrased fairly and in an unbiased manner.

The following detailed points provide evidence for these higher-level truths.

1. **School choice improves student achievement and graduation rates, despite opponents' claims to the contrary.** While opponents sometimes say that school choice has a negative — or inconsequential — impact on student achievement, data suggests the opposite is true.

- Students in the **Washington, DC's** Opportunity Scholarship Program posted graduation rates that were 18 percent above their public school peers. Additionally, students gained 3.1 months of additional learning in reading.
- Students who participated in the **Milwaukee** Parental Choice Program for four years demonstrated significantly higher learning gains in math (11 percentage points) and reading (6 percentage points) than their peers in conventional public schools. In addition, they graduated at a rate that was 18 percent higher than students in conventional public schools.
- Students who participated in the **Cleveland** Scholarship and Tutoring Program demonstrated a 7- percentage point increase in reading scores and a 15-percentage point increase in math scores over their peers in conventional public schools.
- Low-income students participating in a **Florida** corporate voucher program are keeping pace with — and in many cases outpacing — all students nationwide (not just low-income children), despite the fact that the scholarships are a third of the cost of the per pupil expenditures in conventional schools.

2. **Far from hurting public schools, school choice programs improve public school performance.**

Opponents, having no actual evidence to support their claim, say that the quality of research on the impact of vouchers is of "relatively low quality." In reality, opponents choose to ignore the studies because of their results.

- According to Harvard researcher Caroline Hoxby, the **Milwaukee** Parental Choice Program yields healthy competition that encourages public schools to improve. In 32 Milwaukee schools that faced the most competition — with two-thirds or more students eligible for vouchers — fourth-grade math achievement test scores exhibited what amounted to an annual gain of 6.3 National Percentile Rank (NPR) points over a four-year period. The 66 Milwaukee schools facing less competition (with less than two thirds of voucher eligible students) saw an annual gain of 4.8 points. In contrast, the schools facing no competition saw an annual gain of only 3.5 points.
- Federal Reserve economist Rajashri Chakrabarti found that "unambiguous improvement in public school performance" in **Florida** and **Wisconsin** as a result of school choice programs.
- A scholarship program in **Florida** for students with disabilities led to a statistically significant increase in the math and reading test scores of public schools that were geographically close to voucher schools, according to the Manhattan Institute. The study indicated that "students eligible for vouchers who remained in the public schools made greater academic improvements as their school choices improved."

- **Florida's** A+ school voucher program led to improvements in failing Florida schools. "Schools that received a grade of "F" in Summer 2002 immediately improved," according to a study by Dr. Greg Forster.
- **Ohio's** Educational Choice Scholarship Program (EdChoice) "produced substantial academic improvements in Ohio's most stubbornly underperforming public schools," according to a study by the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice. In addition, "the positive effects were substantial in size."

3. **Some opponents claim that school choice is just a "right wing" Republican issue.** In truth, the first school choice program was developed by a liberal Democrat, and Democrats have carried on the proud tradition of thwarting their party's upper echelons in supporting school choice ever since.

- The first school voucher program in the nation, the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, was championed by **Democratic State Representative** Polly Williams.
- In 2009, a new opportunity scholarship program for low-income children in New Orleans was authored by **two Democratic legislators** and signed by **Republican Governor** Bobby Jindal.
- A new school choice program for children with disabilities in Oklahoma was signed into law by Governor Brad Henry, a **Democrat**.
- The corporate scholarship programs in Rhode Island, Iowa, Pennsylvania, and Florida were passed into law — and/or subsequently protected or expanded — by **bipartisan teams of Democratic legislators**.
- The **majority of the DC City Council** — and all three of the District's former mayors — support the full reauthorization of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program.

4. **Vouchers are fully Constitutional.** One "red herring" argument of opponents is that school choice will automatically lead to the deprivation of civil or constitutional rights, or to "indoctrination." It isn't so.

- The **U.S. Supreme Court** ruled in June 2002, that a school choice program must not have the "purpose" or "effect" of advancing or inhibiting religion. Thus, it ruled that the Cleveland, Ohio program is constitutional because public money can flow to religious schools as a result of a person's independent choice.
- By law, **students in voucher programs are not required to participate in religious services** or classes, even if those classes are offered in a religious school.

5. **The public supports school choice.** Occasionally, opponents like to claim that the general public doesn't want vouchers in their community. But polling shows the opposite.

- According to an August 2005 Friedman Foundation poll, **most Americans (64 percent) support** using tax dollars already allocated to a school district for education to be used to help parents pay for the school of their choice, including private schools.
- About **60 percent of Americans** would be more likely to vote for a candidate who supports school choice, according to the same Friedman poll.
- A Zogby International poll for CER in August 2002 found widespread support for full school choice among **African Americans, with 72 percent in support. Hispanics supported the same measure at 64 percent.**
- The non-partisan Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies finds that **57 percent of African-Americans support** vouchers.

The Center for Education Reform

910 Seventeenth Street, NW • Suite 1100 • Washington, DC 20006

800-521-2118 • 301-986-8088

www.edreform.com