

THE ALLIANCE TO RECLAIM OUR SCHOOLS

VOUCHERS

What the Research Says

President Trump and his Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos have made no secret of their plans to upend public education as we know it. They are strong supporters of using public dollars to allow students to attend private or religious schools. The president's budget proposal, released (in part) on March 16, affirms this agenda by proposing \$1.4 billion in new "school choice" programs and funding.

Much is already known and understood about charter schools: their uneven impact on student academic outcomes, their negative impact on traditional public school districts, and the alarming examples of fraud, waste and abuse, lack of transparency and public accountability.

Most communities have less experience with vouchers – programs that directly transfer public funds, or that offer tax credits (thus reducing general revenues in cities or states) to families to pay tuition at a private or religious school.

According to the Education Commission of the States, there are currently 25 separate voucher programs, operating in 14 different states plus the District of Columbia.¹ What does the research say about the academic and other impacts of these programs? This informational sheet reviews the findings of several recent studies on voucher programs. Links to the research reports are included at the end.

VOUCHERS DO NOT IMPROVE ACADEMIC OUTCOMES

- *"None of the independent studies performed of the most lauded and longstanding voucher programs extant in the U.S. – Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Cleveland, Ohio, and Washington D.C. – found any statistical evidence that children who utilized vouchers performed better than children who did not and remained in public schools."*²

In **Washington, DC**, an evaluation of the "Opportunity Scholarship Program" (OSP), the city's Congressionally-imposed public voucher program found "no conclusive evidence that the OSP affected student achievement."³

In **Milwaukee**, an ongoing longitudinal study of the city's first-in-the-nation voucher program found mixed results in its 2010-2011 evaluation, noting that 4th grade voucher students on average scoring well below the average reading, math and science scores of peers in Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS). 8th grade voucher students performed slightly better than MPS students in reading and science, while still below MPS students in math.⁴

In **Ohio**, the findings were more troubling. Students who used vouchers to attend private schools fared *worse*, academically, compared to their peers attending public schools. These impacts, evaluators found, appeared to persist over time.⁵

In **Louisiana**, a voucher program was begun as a pilot in 2008, and expanded statewide in 2012. About 7,500 students are participating in the program. A study by the Education Research Alliance for New Orleans (ERANO)⁶ looked at the

The "failure of extant voucher programs to lead to enhanced student achievement has prompted a shift in the rhetoric of school choice advocates..." Many proponents now argue that "vouchers are worthwhile because parental choice is an important, fundamental right in and of itself."

This assertion "is a questionable basis for taking public taxpayer dollars that are supposed to be used to provide the best education possible to children, and instead diverting those tax dollars to programs that have little to no correlation with enhanced student achievement."

Center on Tax and Budget Accountability
2015

results of the program two years after it was taken statewide. They found that the voucher program had a *negative* impact on participating students' academic achievement in the first two years of its operation. Specifically, the ERANO found that a voucher user who was performing at roughly the 50th percentile at baseline, fell 24 percentile points below their control group in math after one year, and 9 percentile points below in reading.⁷

WHOSE CHOICE? PRIVATE SCHOOLS CHOOSE THEIR STUDENTS—NOT THE OTHER WAY AROUND

- *Ohio's voucher program requires the child to gain admission to the private school before applying for a voucher. In other words, the schools are able to set their own criteria for admission.*⁸
- *"...the participants in [Ohio's program] are somewhat higher achieving and somewhat less economically disadvantaged" than students who were eligible to use the vouchers, but chose not to.*

Most voucher programs allow participating private schools to maintain existing enrollment requirements, including academic assessments, grade-point averages (to stay enrolled), parent or student essays, etc. In addition, where vouchers do not cover the full cost of enrollment, the family must be able to make up the difference out of pocket, as well as pay for additional program fees, which many private schools charge.

VOUCHER PROGRAMS (LIKE CHARTER SCHOOLS), SIPHON FUNDING AWAY FROM TRADITIONAL PUBLIC SCHOOLS

- *"...rather than improve student performance and the overall public education system in Indiana, the Indiana Choice Legislation may actually impede student achievement specifically and harm the education system generally."*⁹

While supporters of vouchers (and charters) argue that competition between schools will "lift all boats," causing traditional public schools to improve, the reality is that when funding is drained from public districts, their ability to provide adequate educational resources to the majority of students who remain in public schools, is undermined.

The **Indiana** Department of Education spent \$115 million on its voucher program in the 2014-2015 school year. That expenditure represents a direct loss to available revenues for the state's public education system. An evaluation of the state's multiple voucher programs confirmed that diverting taxpayer dollars away from the state's public education system, in to lower-performing private religious schools, was likely to lower student achievement in the state over time.

In **Ohio**, the maximum voucher amount is \$4,650 for K-8 students and \$6,000 for high school students. The state deducts the voucher amount from the state aid received by the student's home public school district.

¹ [50-State Comparison: Vouchers](#). Education Commission of the States

² ["Analysis of Indiana School Choice Scholarship Program"](#). Center for Tax and Budget Accountability, April 2015.

³ ["Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program"](#). National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, U.S. Department of Education, June, 2010.

⁴ Jacob, Anna M., Wolf, Patrick J., ["Milwaukee Longitudinal School Choice Evaluation: Annual School Testing Summary Report 2010-2011"](#). School Choice Demonstration Project. February, 2012.

⁵ Figlio, David, Karbownik, Krzysztof, ["Evaluation of Ohio's EdChoice Scholarship Program: Selection, Competition, and Performance Effects"](#). The Thomas B. Fordham Institute, July, 2016.

⁶ "How Has the Louisiana Scholarship Program Affected Students? A Comprehensive Summary of Effects After Two Years," Education Research Alliance for New Orleans, February, 2016.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid. 3

⁹ Ibid. 1