

Vouchers

A Summary of:

“Test Score Effects of School Vouchers in Dayton, Ohio, New York City, and Washington, D.C.: Evidence from Randomized Field Trials” (August 2000)

Prepared for the annual meetings of the American Political Science Association. By William G. Howell, Patrik J. Wolf, Paul E. Peterson and David E. Campbell.

“The Effect of School Vouchers on Student Achievement: A Response to Critics”

Program on Education Policy and Governance, Harvard University. By William G. Howell, Patrik J. Wolf, Paul E. Peterson and David E. Campbell.

Focus

- Early Childhood
- ✓ Primary School
- ✓ Middle School
- ✓ Secondary School
- Postsecondary
- Extended Learning

Overview

Vouchers are tuition subsidies for students in public schools seeking to attend private schools and for students already in private schools. Voucher programs may be publicly or privately funded. The evaluation (and the response to critics) concentrate on three voucher initiatives: the School Choice Scholarships Foundation (SCSF) in New York City, Parents Advancing Choice in Education (PACE) program in Dayton, OH and Washington Scholarship Fund (WSF) program in Washington, DC. With similar designs, these voucher programs were privately funded, focused on students from low-income families (most of whom lived within the central city) and provided partial tuition (\$1400-\$1700 per year) which the family was expected to supplement from other resources.

POPULATION

All three of the voucher programs awarded scholarships by lottery to students from low-income families. The evaluation focused on students entering grades 2 to 5 in New York City and grades 2-8 in Washington, D.C. and Ohio. For all three programs, the ethnic split of the populations generally reflected the demographics of the area's low-income population at large. For example:

- ◆ Of 1,300 students who received vouchers in New York City through SCSF and participated in the second-year evaluation, 42% were African American, 51% Latino and 5% white.
- ◆ Of 515 students who received vouchers in Dayton through PACE and participated in the second-year evaluation, 74% were African American, 24% white, and 2% Latino.
- ◆ Of 1,000 students who received vouchers in Washington, DC through WSF and participated in the second-year evaluation, 95% were African American, 4% Latino and 1% white.

Key Findings

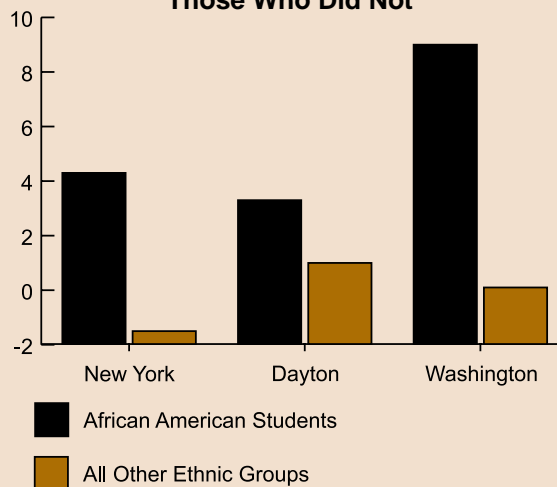
The goal of the evaluation was to measure test-score effects of school vouchers with a focus on differing results among ethnic groups. Results are given in National Percentile Ranking (NPR). When voucher students were compared to a matched group of students who attended public schools, evaluators found that:

- ◆ In the three cities taken together, the average overall test score performance of African American voucher students was, after two years, 6.3 NPR points higher than the performance of the control group (a cut of approximately one third of the test score gap between African Americans and white students nationwide). The difference is significant at the .05 level.
- ◆ In each city, for African American voucher students, the difference in test performance after two years was statistically significant, but results varied in each city. The difference for African American voucher students in New York city was 4.3 NPR points higher, in Ohio the difference was 6.5 NPR points higher and in Washington, D.C., 9.0 NPR points higher.¹
- ◆ When controlling for family background (employment status, welfare recipient, family size, and mother's education), the difference between voucher and non-voucher students in

“The average impact across the three sites may provide a reasonable estimate of the likely initial impact of a school voucher initiative elsewhere.”

—Howell, et al.

Test Score Differences Among African Americans and All Other Ethnic Groups After Two Years, By City, Among Students Who Received Vouchers Compared To Those Who Did Not



Difference in National Percentile Ranking (NPR) Points Among Students Who Received Vouchers

Dayton is not significant, the difference in New York City is significant at the 0.1 level, but that in Washington D.C. is significant at the 0.01 level (“The Effect of School Vouchers”).

- ◆ In DC, after one year, older African American voucher students trailed their public school peers in overall test performance by 9.0 points. But by the end of two years, this older group of African American students had combined test score performances that were 8.1 percentile points higher than those of a control group.
- ◆ No statistically significant effects, either positive or negative, were observed for voucher students from other ethnic groups.

¹ A study of school vouchers in New York by Mathematica reveals that the majority of the significant gains for African American voucher recipients occur in sixth grade. It is unclear why the impact is so strong for this age group and not others. “School Choice in New York City After Two Years: An Evaluation of the School Choice Scholarship Program” (August 2000) Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. (MPR# 8404-036). By David Myers, Paul Peterson, Daniel Mayor, Julia Chou, and William G. Howell.

Program Components

SCSF: In early 1997 SCSF provided 1,300 scholarships, worth up to \$1,400 annually for three years to children from low-income families currently attending public schools. The scholarship could be applied toward the cost of attending a private school, either religious or secular. To be eligible for a scholarship, children had to be entering grades 1 to 5, live in New York City, attend a public school and come from families with incomes low enough to qualify for the U.S. government's free school lunch program.

PACE: For the 1998-99 school year, PACE offered scholarships for four years to 515 students who were in public schools and 250 students who were already enrolled in private schools. Students who were from low-income families and who were entering grades K-12 qualified. The maximum award was a \$1,200 annual voucher guaranteed for four years.

WSF: After a large infusion of philanthropic funds in October 1997, WSF expanded an existing voucher program to offer more than 1,000 scholarships, with a majority going to students not previously in a private school. To qualify, applicants had to be entering grades K-8 in fall 1998. WSF awarded recipients, from families with incomes at or

below the poverty line, vouchers that equaled 60% of tuition or \$1,700, whichever was less. Recipients from families with incomes above the poverty line received smaller scholarships.

The three voucher programs evaluated shared some key components.

- ◆ All focused on students from low-income families who lived in the central city, and all offered partial tuition scholarships.
- ◆ A lottery system decided the final scholarship recipients after initial eligibility was determined, giving each family an equal chance to be chosen. All three programs had hundreds more families apply for vouchers than could be awarded.
- ◆ Vouchers could be used to attend any private school within the metropolitan area.
- ◆ All three of the voucher programs were privately funded.
- ◆ Most voucher recipients had to supplement the voucher funds with their own money or other scholarships to meet the private school tuition costs.

Contributing Factors

The evaluators acknowledge that they have yet to determine which specific factors could have led to the positive outcome they found for African American students who switched from public to private school. But the evaluators, as well as others researching voucher programs, have theorized that the following factors may have contributed to the achievement gains:

- ◆ Classroom Environment: Parents of voucher recipients believed that classes in private schools had less cheating, fighting, property destruction, racial conflict, truancy and absenteeism.
- ◆ Peer Groups: Evaluators allowed that positive peer influences could have contributed to the increased achievement, but their research did not prove or disprove this hypothesis.

STUDY METHODOLOGY

The evaluator used randomized field trials, using the students who had applied for vouchers but did not win the lottery system as a control group. Vouchers were provided to students who attended both public and private schools, but the evaluation included only those students who were attending public schools. Students entering the lottery had similar academic achievement as tested by the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. Families of voucher students in New York and D.C. had higher incomes than the families of non-voucher students. The opposite was true in Dayton. Differences between voucher and non-voucher groups were mathematically adjusted. Each student was given an NPR score in math and reading that may vary between 0 and 100. Nationwide, median student performance is 50. Results are reported for math, reading and a combined score that is the average of the math and reading scores.

EVALUATION & PROGRAM FUNDING

The evaluation was funded by grants from the following foundations: Achelis Foundation, Bodman Foundation, Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, William Donner Foundation, Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, Milton and Rose D. Friedman Foundation, John M. Olin Foundation, David and Lucile Packard Foundation, Smith-Richardson Foundation, Spencer Foundation and Walton Family Foundation. The voucher programs considered in the evaluation are all privately funded.

GEOGRAPHIC AREAS

SCSF was in New York City, PACE was in Dayton, OH and WSF was in Washington, DC. Voucher programs are in place in other states across the nation as well.

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