

# WILL VOUCHERS WORK FOR LOW-INCOME STUDENTS?

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The contentious debate continues over whether vouchers are the silver bullet that will improve poor children's education.

A recent study concluded that low-income students who used vouchers to attend private schools in Dayton, Ohio, Washington D.C. and New York City, performed better on achievement tests than a comparable group of students who attended public schools in those cities.<sup>1</sup> But the evidence from this study is now contested, and the effects, if any, are limited to only African-American students.

Simple interpretations of these data at the press conference announcing the results were later refuted by the study's own contracted data analysts, who noted that no one understands what happened in this study and thus "we cannot place much policy weight on it."<sup>2</sup> In fact, this study shouldn't even be thought of as a "scientific" study until the raw data can be peer reviewed by other scholars—something this set of Harvard researchers have so far declined to allow.

Finally, the findings, even if true, say nothing about the large achievement gap that still remains between the children of middle- and low-income families of all ethnic and racial groups.

Differences between poor and middle-class students are evident on the first day of school. These achievement differences cannot be the product of failing public schools in which poor students are trapped, or due to the "soft racism of low expectations," which voucher advocates charge. They are the product of many things, including the lower educational attainment of parents in poverty and the restricted access these children have to proper nutrition, health care, day care and educational resources in their pre-school years. We exacerbate those differences when we concentrate these children into deteriorating schools that lack the resources and amenities of their counterparts in wealthier suburban communities.

Even if we assumed from this study that with the aid of vouchers the placement of poor children in private schools did result in positive effects, however, should we then generalize the findings to promote a large-scale voucher program? Will vouchers for millions of American students at a cost of billions of American tax dollars improve our schools? The research informs us that the answer is no.

We have good evidence that the large-scale voucher programs such as were defeated in Michigan and California in November 2000, and such as those that have been suggested in the past by president-elect George W. Bush and by freshman Arizona Republican Congressman Jeff Flake, will not work to the advantage of the vast majority of poor children. The two largest wide-scale voucher experiments have been done in Chile and New Zealand. Evaluations of these programs teach an identical lesson: in neither nation did low-income students end up better off.<sup>3</sup>

The voucher programs reinforced segregation and inequality between poor students and their better-off counterparts. As might be suspected, private schools competing in the free market employed screening procedures that kept out those that were the most challenging to teach—the academically weak, the disabled, and the poor. Exactly as predicted by those who worry about the effects of vouchers, the middle and affluent classes profited from vouchers and the disadvantaged classes suffered. Those who needed education the most benefited the least.

Indeed, when private schools do have beneficial effects it almost always can be attributable to the interest of the parents, smaller school and class sizes, and the powerful peer effect: the positive influence of

achievement-oriented students on the school, after those who choose not to achieve, or who cannot achieve, have been dumped from the school. Well-funded public schools in economically advantaged suburbs have many of these same characteristics. But the schools where poor people send their children do not.

Vouchers cannot possibly solve that problem because there will never be enough room, or enough desire, to accommodate all the poor students in the few excellent private schools we have. Inevitably, most of the students who choose to leave public schools will end up in second- and third-rate private schools. So vouchers for low-income students cannot be expected to have much effect on their overall achievement. What can confidently be predicted is that vouchers will segregate poor students from middle-class and more affluent students, as occurred in Chile and New Zealand.

When a local police force turns out to be corrupt, brutal, and unresponsive to civilian complaints, and the crime rate appears intractable, no one seriously suggests granting vouchers to private citizens to purchase private protection. No one complains about a police "monopoly." Instead, political leaders recognize the role of the police to serve the common good. They recommend police department reforms and invest resources to help make communities safer.

So it is with public schools. We should fix them where they do not work. But we won't be able to do that with a system known to have failed elsewhere.

We all know that quality public education is unequally distributed in the United States. Vouchers cannot solve that problem, however. Instead, they simply use public money to subsidize private schools, which are often supported by families who don't want their children to mix with those who differ from them. It is ironic that some minority and poor parents in inner cities have turned to vouchers as a desperate last alternative to their chronically disappointing public schools.

A great deal of segregation takes place in this country already through our choice of housing. Vouchers add another means to segregate our citizens, this time using public money.

Those who offer vouchers as the silver bullet solution to the low academic achievement of poor students ignore the complexity of what contributes to student achievement. They also turn their backs on our goal to build a more democratic society.

Instead of subsidizing private schools in a way likely to further fragment society, the world's richest nation might consider investing in ways to improve low-income communities -- through job-training, public transportation to connect the unemployed with jobs in the suburbs, quality day care for working families, after-school and Saturday programs to offer remedial education, and support for community youth groups to teach adolescents pro-social behavior, to name just a few.

The real answer to improving the quality of urban schools is to improve the quality of life for those who live in our urban neighborhoods. That's a task that vouchers won't accomplish, and one that, if undertaken, would make vouchers unnecessary.

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1. Howell, W., Wolf, P., and Peterson, P., "Test Score Effects of School Vouchers in Dayton, Ohio, New York City, and Washington D.C.: Evidence from Randomized Field Trials." Program on Education Policy and Governance, Harvard University. August 2000. Available at: <http://hdc-www.harvard.edu/pepg/>
  2. Zernike, Kate. "New Doubt Cast Is Cast on Study that Backs Voucher Efforts." New York Times, September 15, 2000, p. A21.
  3. McEwan, P., and Carnoy, M., "The Effectiveness and Efficiency of Private Schools in Chile's Voucher System," *Education Evaluation and Policy Analysis* (22), 2000 pp. 213-240.

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Fiske, E., and Ladd, H., *When Schools Compete: A Cautionary Tale*. Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2000.