**School Vouchers: The Emerging Track Record**

Proponents[[1]](#footnote-1) of private school tuition vouchers make many claims about their benefits. They claim that competition will spur[[2]](#footnote-2) public school improvement, reduce the cost of education, and that students who get vouchers will show dramatic achievement gains. None of this has happened.

Real evidence of how vouchers work now exists. Private school tuition vouchers began in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, beginning in 1990, and were followed by two other voucher plans in Cleveland, Ohio, and in the state of Florida.

**ACCESS**

Milwaukee

Wisconsin state law sets the cap[[3]](#footnote-3) for voucher participants at 15,000. And yet, only 10,739 students used them in 2001-02, less than ten percent of the Milwaukee public schools enrollment. Some schools have declined to accept any voucher-bearing students; most of the rest have some exclusions or preferences based on ability, gender, religion or race. Enrollment in public schools has increased from 78 percent to 80 percent of the school aged youth, according to a recent report.

Cleveland

Less than 5 percent of Cleveland students used vouchers, about 4, 195 students in 2001-02. About two thirds of the Cleveland students who use vouchers never attended public schools. Vouchers in Cleveland are mostly rebates[[4]](#footnote-4) for families who were already sending their children to private schools.

Florida

In the Florida “statewide” voucher plan, about 47 students participate in two schools in Pensacola in 2001-02. At least 93 percent of the schools in the state announced they would not accept any voucher students.

**STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT**

Milwaukee

In 1990, Dr. John Witte of the University of Wisconsin was hired by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction to conduct an evaluation of all aspects of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program. Witte and his colleagues released annual reports during the first five years, before the legislature discontinued funding for the studies.

Among Witte’s conclusions: Student achievement in the fourth year of the program was not significantly different for voucher students than for other low-income Milwaukee public school students.

Cleveland

The Ohio Department of Education commissioned[[5]](#footnote-5) an evaluation of Cleveland’s voucher program beginning in April 1997. Among the findings of Dr. Kim Metcalf, et al, at Indiana University:

* Voucher students had been achieving at higher levels than their public school peers prior to receiving the vouchers
* After accounting or prior achievement and demographics[[6]](#footnote-6), there were no significant differences in third-grade achievement between voucher students and their public school peers at the end of the first year, but significant and positive effects[[7]](#footnote-7) in language, and, less clearly, in science, at the end of two.
* Students attending the newly established private schools were achieving at significantly lower levels by the end of the second year than either their public school or private school peers.

**ACCOUNTABILITY**

Milwaukee

* Milwaukee voucher schools do not have to administer or report test results.
* About 40 percent of the costs of the Milwaukee vouchers (11.5 million) represent payments to schools above the tuition costs charged other students. For 21 schools, about one third of the total, the state pays between 200 and 400 percent of the tuition and fees charged other students.
* In the 1995-96 school year, four of the 18 voucher schools were shut down because of fraud[[8]](#footnote-8), mismanagement or negligence.
* Nine Milwaukee schools have no accreditation[[9]](#footnote-9), were not seeking accreditation and administered no standardized tests.

Cleveland

* An independent auditor[[10]](#footnote-10) hired by Ohio found almost $2 million in questionable expenses in the Cleveland voucher program in the first year. Of that, $1.4 million was spent for taxis to transport students.
* The Islamic Academy of Arts and Sciences was allowed to operate for two years in a 110- year old building with no fire alarm or sprinkler system. Eight of the 12 instructors did not have teaching licenses, and one had been convicted of first degree murder. In 1999, more than half the students for whom the school received voucher payments did not attend the school or did so for only part of the year.

Florida

At least 93 percent of the private schools in Florida refuse to accept any voucher students.

* The state assigns public schools a letter grade, A through F, based on students’ test scores on the state standardized tests, but private school students are not required to take the tests.
* AJC Management schools have received $5 million in voucher money under the “McKay scholarships for students with disabilities.” Most of the schools in the system are located in churches and pay their teachers less than $10.50 an hour. In their first seven months of operation, the AJC schools have faced allegations[[11]](#footnote-11) of abusing students physically, or providing students with no textbooks, or failing to provide required therapy and counseling, or falsifying applications for state money.

**The Voucher Wars**

By Dorman E. Cordell for *National Center for Policy Analysis*

Tax-funded vouchers are allowing some inner-city children in two large cities to escape failing public schools.

* + In Milwaukee, about 1,500 children from low-income families get about $4,700 each to attend private secular[[12]](#footnote-12) schools.
  + In Cleveland, about 1,300 children receive vouchers of up to $2,500 each to attend both secular and religious private schools.

Milwaukee’s Pioneering[[13]](#footnote-13) Program. In 1990 the Wisconsin Legislature approved a state-funded voucher program for Milwaukee. One of its chief supporters was State Rep. Annette Polly Williams, a black democrat and former welfare mother, who contended[[14]](#footnote-14) that poor minority parents should have the same opportunity as more affluent[[15]](#footnote-15) parents to enroll their children in better schools. The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program was limited to 1 percent of the public school enrollment until 1994 and 1.5 percent thereafter.

The Cleveland Program. The Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring program went into effect in the 1996-97 school year, covering grades K-3 the first year and K-4 the second.

Public School Failure. In Milwaukee, public schools serving the urban poor have long been under fire for their performance. At the time the first voucher law was passed, an estimated one-third of the school district’s employees were sending their own children to private schools. With a racial makeup that is 70 percent minority, the district has tried—especially since the first voucher law was passed—to make improvement. Still, fewer than half its high school freshmen graduate.

Do vouchers help children get a better education? When Paul Peterson of Harvard and Jay Green of the University of Houston compared Milwaukee public school and voucher students with similar backgrounds, they found:

* Voucher students had reading score 3 percentile points higher and math scores 5 percentile points higher, on the average, in their third years.
* They had reading scores 5 percentile points higher and math scores 12 percentile points higher, on the average, in their fourth years.

In another study, Cecilia Rouse of Princeton University found that math scores of voucher students increased 1.5 percent to 2 percent each year over what they would have attained[[16]](#footnote-16) in public schools.

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| Graphic Organizer for “Pro” vs. “Con” in School Voucher Debate | | | |
| Pro school vouchers | | Anti School Vouchers | |
| Reasons | Facts, Evidence or Example | Reasons | Facts, Evidence or Example |
| Inner city children are not being educated by “failing” public schools |  | Private schools don’t really do a better job of educating students |  |
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1. Proponent—a person is for or pro (the opposite of an opponent who is con, or against\_ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Spur—to push forward or speed up [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Sets the cap—sets a certain number that is the limit for how many people can apply or attend [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Rebate—a rebate is when you get some money back for something you’ve already paid for [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Commissioned—when you commission a report or a work of art, you ask someone to produce it in exchange for payment [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Demographics—the demographics of a certain group of people include the ages, genders, income levels, and cultural or ethnic background of that group [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Significant and positive effects—this means that the educational gains (the learning, as measured by tests) were better than the learning for the public school group. Significant means that the effects were statistically significant—they measured up to a certain standard of being meaningful and not just random [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Fraud means cheating—pretending to provide a service that you really don’t provide [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Accreditation—a state-issued license to a teacher or school that says the state judges them to be officially qualified to provide a good education [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Auditor—a person who goes through the accounts of a person or organization to make sure there is no “shady business” [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Allegations—accusations that have not been proven [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Secular means non-religious. A Catholic school would not be a secular school. Public schools are secular. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Pioneering—introducing new and better methods or ideas for the first time, as in *pioneering cancer research.* [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Contend—to argue for a certain viewpoint; to claim that something is true [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Affluent—wealthy as opposed to poor [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Attain—to succeed in reaching a certain level or in getting something after a long time [↑](#footnote-ref-16)