

Policy Analysis

No. 383

October 26, 2000

More Than Grades How Choice Boosts Parental Involvement and Benefits Children

by Philip Vassallo

Executive Summary

Research shows that parental involvement in a child's education is a strong predictor of student achievement: typically, the more involved the parent, the better off the child. Yet the current structure of the kindergarten through 12th-grade education system tends to marginalize parents. In most areas, government assigns children to particular schools, and school boards and bureaucrats control textbooks, curriculum, and other central aspects of a child's education.

Studies from school choice experiments suggest that school choice can be a powerful engine for parental involvement—choice by its nature engenders a higher level of parental participation than does the current system. Although a universal, customer-driven system has not been tried, sufficient research exists to prove that modified forms of choice—such as charter schools, vouchers, and private scholarship programs—increase parental involvement.

Although most studies of school choice experiments have focused on academic gains to children

in choice programs, this study examines the many other benefits that choice programs bring to students. For example, parents of children in school choice programs (1) are more involved with their children's academic programs; (2) participate more in school activities; (3) believe that their chosen school offers a greater measure of safety, discipline, and instructional quality than did their previous school; (4) are more satisfied with their children's education in a choice program; and (5) are likely to reenroll their children in the choice program.

The ultimate key to school reform is the parent. Once parents assume the responsibility of advocating for and supporting their children's education, they will become partners with educators to create the schools their children need. State legislators should seek policies that return control of education to parents through mechanisms like tax cuts and universal tuition tax credits. The adoption of such measures promises to increase parental involvement and bring other important benefits to children.

Integration Where it Counts:
A Study of Racial Integration in Public and Private School Lunchrooms
by
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August 20, 1998

Presented at the American Political Science Association
Meeting in Boston, September, 1998

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Abstract

The belief that public schools produce better integration than private schools is deeply held by many people, but it is unfortunately supported by little empirical evidence. In this paper we take a systematic look at integration in a random sample of public and private schools in two cities. Unlike previous studies of integration in schools, our data are drawn from a setting in which racial mixing has greater meaning: the lunchroom. We also develop new measures of integration that allow for easier, more meaningful comparisons between different school systems. Our analyses suggest that private schools tend to offer a more racially integrated environment than do public schools. The primary explanation for private schools' success at integration is that private school attendance is not as closely attached to where one lives as attendance at public schools. Public schools tend to replicate and reinforce racial segregation in housing. Because private schools do not require that their students live in particular neighborhoods, they can more easily overcome segregation in housing to provide integration in school. The strong religious mission and higher social class found in most private schools are also factors that contribute to better racial integration.

Since Horace Mann's description of the "common school," one of the stated goals of American education has been to bring students of different backgrounds together in schools. The belief that government-operated schools would mix students better than private schools was one of the primary justifications for the development and growth of a universal system of public schools. As Secretary of Education Riley recently argued, "The 'common school' -- the concept upon which our public school system was built -- teaches children important lessons about both the commonality and diversity of American culture. These lessons are conveyed not only through what is taught in the classroom, but by the very experience of attending school with a diverse mix of students. The common school has made quality public education and hard work the open door to American success and good citizenship and the American way to achievement and freedom." (Riley, 1997, p. 1) While public control and government-operation of schools has been thought to be essential for producing integrated education, privately-run schools, based on the voluntariness of individuals, have generally been held as not conducive to integration.

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San Antonio has proven that school vouchers work well; Edgewood experiment a clear success in all ways

By GREG FORSTER and JAY P. GREENE Dec. 25, 2006, 6:35PM

As the Texas Legislature gears up for another debate over school vouchers in the coming session, naturally Texans are looking for evidence on whether vouchers work. They should look at the long-running voucher program in San Antonio. As with programs across the country, the evidence shows that vouchers work.

While Texas doesn't have a government-sponsored school choice program, San Antonio has had a voucher program funded with private contributions since 1998. It allows students in public schools in the Edgewood school district to attend private schools they otherwise couldn't afford.

Many people think that voucher programs will hurt public schools, draining them of the talent and resources they need to succeed. Others suggest that vouchers will improve public schools by exposing them to greater competition. Because most students will remain in public schools even with a voucher program, the most important empirical issue about vouchers is determining how they will affect achievement in public schools.

We conducted an analysis to determine whether Edgewood's public schools have been improving or declining since the creation of the voucher program. We compared the year-to-year changes in Edgewood's performance with those of other Texas school districts, controlling for factors such as race and income.

We found that Edgewood started producing outstanding academic improvements after the voucher program was created. What had long been an extremely troubled school district began to outperform 85 percent of Texas school districts given their demographic characteristics.

That may come as a surprise, but it shouldn't. Nationwide, there is a large body of research finding that public schools exposed to vouchers make superior test score gains, including four independent studies in Florida, two in Milwaukee, and one each in Maine and Vermont.

On top of all this, we are not aware of any empirical studies in the United States that have found that public schools get worse because of school vouchers. That's an impressive track record.

The evidence that vouchers work for the students who use them is even stronger. There have been eight studies of vouchers that used "random assignment," the scientific gold standard, to compare

very similar treatment and control groups. **Seven of the eight studies found that voucher students outperformed students who applied for vouchers but did not receive them. The eighth also found higher test scores for voucher students, but the result failed to achieve statistical significance.**

Other questions have been raised about vouchers, such as whether they will provide adequate services to disabled students, whether they exacerbate racial segregation and whether they will undermine the teaching of civic values. In all three cases, the evidence shows that vouchers produce better results than public schools.

We conducted an empirical analysis of a voucher program for disabled students in Florida. We found that disabled students using vouchers to attend private schools received better services than they had received in their public schools. They were also bullied and assaulted much less often by their peers — a major problem for disabled students.

There have been seven studies of racial segregation in voucher programs in Milwaukee, Cleveland, and Washington, D.C., that use valid empirical methods. All seven find that the private schools participating in these programs were less racially segregated than the public schools in those cities.

Public schools assign students to schools by neighborhood, ensuring that residential segregation will be reproduced in schools; vouchers break down neighborhood barriers.

And what about the teaching of civic values? Pat Wolf of the University of Arkansas collected the results of all empirical studies that measured the civic values of public and private school students — whether they tolerated the rights of those they disliked, whether they voted, whether they volunteered, and so on. Across the board, the available studies overwhelmingly found that private school students had stronger civic values than public school students.

San Antonio students get a better education because of vouchers — including not only the students who can choose the school that works best for them thanks to vouchers, but also the students who remain in public schools and benefit from vouchers' competitive effects.

Now the only question is whether the rest of Texas wants to reap the same benefits as San Antonio.

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