

What Does Recent Evidence Reveal about Student Performance in Private Schools?

Public School Students Perform As Well as Private School Students

A study released by the US Department of Education on July 14, 2006 compared student performance in private and public schools and found that children in public schools performed as well or better in reading and mathematics as similar students in private schools. The study, using 4th and 8th grade NAEP scores in reading and math, accounts for student background characteristics, thus eliminating the wealth advantage of private school students and providing an apples-to-apples comparison. The study is good news for public schools, whose students do as well as private schools' when background factors are taken into account. And it's bad news for those who want to use tax dollars to send more and more kids to private schools via tuition tax credits and vouchers. Money would be better spent on proven reforms in the public schools attended by 90% of children.

Comparing Private Schools and Public Schools Using Hierarchical Linear Modeling. 2006

National Center for Education Statistics, US Department of Education
<http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/studies/2006461.pdf>

Public School Students Outscore Private School, Charter School Students in Math Report Challenges Conventional Wisdom

A University of Illinois study comparing student achievement in traditional public, private, and charter schools on the 2003 National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) mathematics exam found that once researchers controlled for student background characteristics, public school students scored better than their peers in private schools. The study, by a husband and wife team, went beyond the usual raw scores which show higher student achievement by private school students. Researchers were able to take into account differences between the students such as economic background, ethnicity, race and proficiency in English. They also found that Lutheran schools were the highest performing private schools while Conservative Christian schools were growing fastest but performing most poorly. Public school students in fourth grade performed better than fourth graders in charter schools, but not eighth graders. This report flies in the face of conventional wisdom, and provides solid evidence countering the flimsy pronouncements of school voucher supporters who claim that vouchers will result in improved student achievement.

Charter, Private, Public Schools and Academic Achievement: New Evidence from NAEP Mathematics Data. 2006.

Author: Chris Lubienski and Sarah Theule Lubienski
http://ncspe.org/publications_files/OP111.pdf

Students in Cleveland Voucher Program Don't Outscore Peers in Public Schools, Research Shows No Advantage for Black Students Receiving Vouchers

In an analysis examining "the academic achievement effects of the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program (CSTP), within the context of existing research on education vouchers," the author finds that "voucher programs show very modest gains in achievement for recipients." Looking specifically at the Cleveland voucher program, this study concludes that there are "no academic advantages for voucher users; in fact, users appear to perform slightly worse in math". In addition, this report finds that African American students in the Cleveland voucher program do no better than similar students who stay in the Cleveland Public Schools, contradicting claims that voucher programs help black students, while not improving student achievement for white or Hispanic participants.

The Evidence on Education Vouchers: An Application to the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program. 2006.

Author: Clive Belfield

http://ncspe.org/publications_files/OP112.pdf

Steve Blow: **Seeing vouchers for what they are**

05:27 AM CDT on Wednesday, October 4, 2006

To be honest, I'm not all that enthused about writing this column. Seems we've trod this ground before.

But when the opposition is so relentless and the stakes are so high, it's foolish to let tedium distract.

So let's take a moment to counter the \$400,000 advertising campaign now aimed at you – the one touting "school choice." And, of course, that's code for "private school vouchers."

Once again, this is the high-dollar handiwork of San Antonio vouchers proponent – no, that's too mild – let's say "vouchers zealot" James Leininger.

This fellow just won't take "no" for an answer. Over and over, the Texas Legislature has rejected his voucher schemes – taking the wiser course of raising standards for public schools, not draining funds from them.

In the last legislative elections, you recall, Dr. Leininger tried an end run by pouring campaign money toward the defeat of five key voucher opponents.

His \$2.5 million investment succeeded in ousting two of them.

The strategy this time is a little class warfare. In radio ads and on billboards, he's trying to stir up the wrath of poor folks.

I spotted one of the billboards on the edge of downtown yesterday. It shows a nice, upstanding black family and says: "All families deserve a choice, Not just the rich. Give parents a choice, Give children a chance."

That's the wedge Dr. Leininger and his Texans For School Choice hope to use in getting a voucher pilot project approved when the Legislature convenes in January. The plan would take money from public schools and give it to low-income families for private-school tuition.

But let's look at three significant issues overlooked by this latest campaign:

No. 1. Parents already have a choice. Every school district of any size offers a variety of options – magnet schools, specialty career or arts schools, talented-and-gifted schools, etc. Add to that the 313 charter public schools across the state, which offer free, open enrollment to students, no matter where they live.

And on top of all that, by law, no student is trapped in a low-performing school. Districts are required to offer transfers from any school that failed to meet federal academic standards for two years.

No. 2. Parents have choices, but few exercise them. So why gamble on vouchers? Where is this competitive pressure that is supposed to create great schools?

Nationally, only 1 to 2 percent of eligible students transfer from low-performing schools. It was 1.1 percent last year in Dallas and less than 1 percent in Fort Worth.

The excellent, rigorous KIPP TRUTH Academy – a free charter school in South Dallas – began the school year with empty seats. Not enough parents applied to even fill the school.

No. 3. There is no magic to private schools. Voucher proponents love to deride "government schools" as hopeless and inept. They love to portray private schools as wholesome, sure-fire successes.

The truth is that, overall, there's very little difference. A huge federal study released this summer found that students of like economic backgrounds perform almost identically whether in public or private schools.

And those charter schools? They were supposed to be the magic solution, allowing private operation of tax-funded schools.

Results have been lackluster across the state. A few, like the KIPP schools, have been great. Most have been so-so. And far too many have been "academically unacceptable" – 13 percent of them last year, compared to just 4 percent of traditional public schools.

Listen, there is always room for improvement in our public schools. And we shouldn't be afraid of innovation.

But don't buy the baloney that all of public education is in disarray. Or that there are miracle fixes.

Quality public education has been one of our nation's greatest achievements. It's part of what has made us strong, united and truly a land of opportunity.

Let's build on that success, not dismantle it.

E-mail sblow@dallasnews.com

Online at: http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/dn/localnews/columnists/sblow/stories/DN-sblow_04met.ART.North.Edition1.3dd078a.html

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Scholarship idea is not a big opportunity for blacks

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Four days before Education Secretary Margaret Spellings held a news conference last month to tout a bill that would provide \$100 million to help students escape troubled public schools, her department quietly issued a report that calls into question the efficacy of that idea.

If passed, the legislation would make available "opportunity scholarships" for students in poor-performing public schools to transfer to another public school, get tutoring or receive scholarships to attend a private school. Don't be fooled by these options. Opportunity scholarships is a euphemism for school vouchers. It's an attempt to mask a bad idea with an appealing label.

"We are one step closer to ensuring that parents can make choices that strengthen their children's future and give them a great start in life, regardless of their resources or the communities they live in," Spellings said July 18.

Before going out on that fragile limb, she should have read the study issued by the National Center for Education Statistics, a unit of the Education Department she runs. According to that report — which compared reading and math scores of fourth- and eighth-graders in public and private schools — economics, social background and race had a negative impact on the test scores of private school students.

Surprising findings

In the overall study, students in private schools outperformed public school students by a fairly wide margin on math and reading tests. But when the scores of the students of the same racial identity, economic status and social condition were compared, the researchers said, there was virtually no difference (with the exception of eighth-grade reading) between those who attended private and public schools. In other words, the results don't support the idea that school vouchers are an educational life raft for students from failing schools.

"The results ... are nothing more than we expected," says Reg Weaver, president of the National Education Association. "We know what it takes to improve public education, and it's not vouchers."

He's right. Vouchers are a bad idea that conservatives have recycled. After the 1954 Supreme Court decision that outlawed racial segregation in public schools, right-wingers in Virginia hatched a scheme to give "tuition grants" to parents who didn't want their children to attend integrated schools.

Blacks left out

One of the state's jurisdictions, Prince Edward County, did just that for five years, offering white students tuition grants to attend private academies. Black students got nothing but an educational shaft. The proposed scholarships are a shaft of another sort for black students. They deflect attention from the failure of states and the federal government to ensure that all children have access to a quality public education.

This latest voucher scheme, if implemented, would likely give a small percentage of students in underperforming schools an escape hatch. The rest would serve as guinea pigs for conservatives' argument that such a program will pressure public schools into doing a better job of educating those who are left behind. It won't.

"We know what it takes to improve public schools," Weaver says. "Certified teachers. Smaller class sizes. Adequate and equitable

<http://usatoday.printthis.clickability.com/pt/cpt?action=cpt&title=USATODAY.com+-+Scholarship+ide...> 10/12/2006

funding. Safe and orderly schools and qualified staffs. And anything that takes away from that is not good."

Spending \$100 million on these scholarships is a bad idea. Most private schools don't want students who have discipline problems, who have special needs or whose parents show no interest in their education. Giving these kids a scholarship isn't going to change that.

Public schools, on the other hand, must try to educate a vast cross section of this nation's youngsters. So instead of trying to deflect attention from the failure of states and the federal government to give public schools what they need to meet this challenge, voucher proponents offer them empty promises. This latest one is called "opportunity scholarships."

DeWayne Wickham writes weekly for USA TODAY.


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This editorial adds another dimension to the lessons from the charter-school study finally released by U.S. Dept of Ed. See highlighted portion below:

August 27, 2006
Editorial

Exploding the Charter School Myth

A federal study showing that fourth graders in charter schools score worse in reading and math than their public school counterparts should cause some soul-searching in Congress. Too many lawmakers seem to believe that the only thing wrong with American education is the public school system, and that converting lagging schools to charter schools would cause them to magically improve.

The study, based on data from 2003 on students' performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, found charter school students significantly behind their non-charter-school counterparts. But it also showed that not all charter schools are created equal.

On average, charter schools that were affiliated with public school districts performed just as well as traditional public schools. That may be a disappointment to advocates who expected them to show clear superiority. But the real stunner was the performance of free-standing charter schools, which have no affiliation with public school systems and are often school districts unto themselves. It was this grouping that showed the worst performance.

Free-standing charter schools often bite off more than they can chew. The presumption is that without the bureaucratic restraints of the public school system and the teacher unions, charter schools can provide better education at lower cost. But the problem with failing public schools is that they often lack both resources and skilled, experienced teachers. While there are obvious exceptions, some charter schools embark on a path that simply recreates the failures of the schools they were developed to replace.

Charter school advocates denounced the new federal study even before it was released and took issue with its methodology, which is not perfect. But this study does not stand alone. The evidence so far shows that charter schools are not inherently superior to the traditional public schools they often seek to supplant — and that they are sometimes worse.

One advantage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 was the wave of education studies it started. They offer hope that Congress will look at the record when it considers reauthorizing the law next year. If it does, lawmakers will back away from the part of the act that offers charter schools as a cure-all. They should instead home in on the all-important but largely neglected issue of teacher training and preparation — which trumps everything when it comes to improving student achievement.

These studies argue for a more nuanced federal policy that does not just advocate wholesale charter conversion but instead defines and supports successful models only. Beyond that, Congress needs to grasp the obvious, which is that the quality of the teacher corps is more crucial to school reform than anything else. The original law required states to provide highly qualified teachers in core subject areas by this year. But the Education Department simply failed to enforce the rule, partly because of back-channel interference by lawmakers who talked like ardent reformers while covering up for state officials clinging to the bad old status quo.

Four years later, the national teacher corps is still in a shambles. Until Congress changes that, everything else will amount to little more than tinkering at the margins.

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