SCHOOL CHOICE IN DAYTON, OHIO AFTER TWO YEARS: An Evaluation of the Parents Advancing Choice in Education Scholarship Program

(Executive Summary)

In the spring of 1998, Parents Advancing Choice in Education (PACE), a privately funded non-profit corporation, offered low-income parents within the Dayton metropolitan area an opportunity to apply for a scholarship to help defray the costs of sending their child to private schools in Dayton and other parts of Montgomery County, Ohio. All students from low-income families entering a grade between kindergarten and twelfth grade were eligible. PACE offered scholarships to 515 students who were in public schools at the time and 250 students who were already enrolled in private schools. This evaluation examines the program’s impact after two years on those students in grades 2-9 who had been attending public schools prior to receiving a scholarship.

PACE distributed scholarships among applicants by lottery, thereby making it possible to conduct an evaluation as a randomized experiment. All students who applied for the program and attended second-year follow-up sessions completed the Iowa Test of Basic Skills in reading and mathematics. Parents were invited to respond to a questionnaire about their experiences with their school, as were students in grades 4-9. By comparing student test scores and the questionnaire responses of families who received a scholarship with those who entered the lottery but did not receive a scholarship, we are able to estimate the effects of the offer of a voucher, as well as the effect of actually attending a private school. Similar randomized field trials of school voucher interventions are currently being conducted in New York City and Washington, DC.

In 1999 the PACE scholarship program expanded, reinforced by additional resources made available by the Children’s Scholarship Fund, a nationwide scholarship program. At the same time, the maximum value of the scholarships awarded increased to $1,700 for elementary school students and $2,300 for high school students. Although the PACE program remains in operation, this is the final year of this evaluation.

Key findings from the evaluation are as follows:

Impacts on Parental Satisfaction, School Climate, School Facilities, Ethnic and Religious Considerations, Homework, and Parental Communication and Involvement

• Parents whose children attended private schools were much more satisfied with their children’s schools than were similar parents whose children remained in Dayton public schools. Approximately 40 percent of private-school parents gave their child’s school an “A”, as opposed to just 16 percent of comparable public-school parents. When asked about various specific aspects of their child’s school, private-school parents were more likely than public-school parents to report that they were “very satisfied” with what is taught, the teaching of moral values, the respect teachers show students, the level of teamwork among the school staff, overall academic quality, the quality of teaching, the freedom students have to observe their own religious traditions, and their child’s safety.
• Private-school parents reported fewer serious discipline problems in their child’s school than their public-school counterparts did. Sixty-one percent of public-school parents reported that fighting is a serious problem in their child’s school, as compared to just 11 percent of private-school parents. Forty-six percent of public-school parents reported that students missing classes is a serious problem in their child’s school, as compared to just 11 percent of private-school parents. Parents reported similarly large differences between public and private schools with regard to the level of cheating, destruction of property, tardiness, and the threat of guns or other weapons.

• As reported by parents, the private schools attended by students participating in the evaluation were much smaller than the schools attended by public-school students (an average of 299 students versus 443 students). Private schools were more likely than public schools to have a music program, but less likely to have a gym or a nurse’s office. No difference was observed in the average class sizes of students attending private and public schools.

• Attending a private school had no clear impact on the extent of ethnic integration students experienced in school. Switching to a private school did increase somewhat the percentage of students attending a school that was less than 50 percent minority (from 18 percent to 60 percent), this effect was equally large among the African American students participating in the evaluation. Private-school students and public-school students were equally likely to report that they eat lunch with students of a different racial background. Private-school parents were significantly less likely to report that racial conflict was a serious problem in their child’s school.

• Ninety-two percent of the private-school students participating in the evaluation attended schools with a religious affiliation. Thirty percent of parents of students in private schools reported that they were “very satisfied” with the extent to which students can observe religious traditions in their school, as compared to 11 percent of public-school parents. Private-school students were more likely than public-school students to report attending religious services “a lot” in the past year (54 percent versus 23 percent).

• No significant differences were observed in the amount of time spent on homework by students in private and public schools, as reported by parents. Student reports, however, suggest that private-school students complete slightly less homework each day than their public-school counterparts (0.9 hours versus 1.2 hours). On the other hand, private-school parents were more likely to report that their child’s homework assignments were at an “appropriate” level of difficulty (94 percent versus 72 percent).

• More private-school parents than public-school parents reported speaking to classes about their jobs (77 percent versus 36 percent) and actually participating in instruction in their child’s classroom (75 percent versus 45 percent).
However, no other significant differences were observed in the level of communication between parents and schools in public and private schools.

- Twenty-five percent of public-school parents reported working on school projects with their child frequently in the past month, as opposed to just 4 percent of private-school parents. Similarly, public-school parents were more likely to report that they attended school activities with their child (25 percent versus 6 percent) and that they spoke with other parents about their child’s school at least once a week (39 percent versus 19 percent).

- Private-school students were less likely than public-school students to agree with the statement “to do well in school, good luck is more important than hard work” (4 percent versus 34 percent).

**School Selection and Impacts on Student Attendance Patterns**

- Some critics of school choice have suggested that low-income families empowered to select a school may base their decisions primarily on non-academic considerations. In Dayton, however, this does not appear to have been the case. Over 38 percent of parents offered a scholarship indicated that academic quality was the most important consideration in their choice of school. The next two most important school characteristics to be cited by PACE parents were “what is taught” and school discipline. No scholarship parents selected the school’s extracurricular activities, its sports program, or the fact that it was attended by their child’s friends as the most important factor in their decision.

- Critics also frequently argue that increasing school choice will destabilize students’ educational experiences, both within a given school year and from one year to the next. There is little evidence from Dayton to support this claim. While students attending private schools were absent slightly more often in the previous month than students in public schools (2 days versus 1), they were also slightly less likely to have been late to school (0 days versus 1). No differences in school mobility rates were observed either during the second year of the program or in parental plans for the following year. Nor were PACE students more likely than public-school students to have been suspended from school for disciplinary reasons.

**Impacts on Student Test Scores**

- As previously reported, after two years African American students who attended private schools scored 8 national percentile points higher on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills in reading and 7 points higher on a combined reading and math score. Their score also increased by 5 points on the math section of the test, although this gain falls just short of statistical significance.
• Non-African American students did not differ significantly from their public school counterparts in their performance in math or reading.

**Impacts on Parental Satisfaction and School Disruption by Race**

• The PACE program’s impact on parental satisfaction and assessments of the level of disruption in their schools also differed by race. The overall level of satisfaction among parents of African American students attending private schools increased by four fifths of a standard deviation over their public-school counterparts. For whites, the effect of switching to a private school was half as large and statistically indistinguishable from 0. However, white parents’ assessments of the overall level of disruption in their child’s private school decreased by more than 2 standard deviations, while those of African Americans remained essentially unchanged.

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