

Results of a School Voucher Experiment: The Case of Washington, D.C. After Two Years

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August 2001

Paper prepared for the Annual Meetings of the American Political Science Association, August 30-September 2, 2001, San Francisco, California. An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the National Center for Education Statistics 2001 Data Conference, Mayflower Hotel, Washington, D.C., July 25-27, 2001.

This research is a product of the Program on Education Policy and Governance (PEPG) in collaboration with the Georgetown University Public Policy Institute (GPPI). PEPG is located within the Taubman Center on State and Local Government, John F. Kennedy School of Government and within the Center for American Political Studies, Department of Government, Harvard University. Mailing address: Taubman 306, Kennedy School of Government, 79 J. F. Kennedy St., Harvard University, Cambridge, MA 02138. Phone: 617-495-7976/495-8312; Fax: 617-496-4428; Website: www.ksg.harvard.edu/pepg/. The GPPI is located at 3600 N Street, NW, Washington, D.C. 20007. Phone: 202-687-9186/202-687-9152; Fax: 202-687-5544; Website: <http://www.georgetown.edu/grad/gppi/>.

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(Executive Summary)

In the fall of 1997, the Washington Scholarship Fund (WSF) announced the expansion of a privately funded school voucher program in Washington, D.C. originally established in 1993. In the spring of 1998, over six thousand students from public and private schools applied to the new program; of these initial applicants, over one thousand were offered scholarships, 809 of whom were attending public school at the time.

WSF awarded scholarships by lottery, thereby making it possible to conduct an evaluation designed as a randomized field trial. This evaluation examines the impact of the first two years of the WSF program on those students who completed the baseline testing, were attending public school, and were in grades 1-7 in the spring of 1998. The evaluation estimates the program's impact on student test scores in reading, math and combined achievement, as well as other educational and social outcomes, as reported by parents and students.

Key findings from the evaluation are as follows:

- The students who had switched to private school two years earlier were much more likely to provide tolerant responses to questions about civil liberties than were members of the control group. Forty-seven percent of the private-school students polled would permit a member of a group they dislike to live in their neighborhood, compared with just 26% of the public school students. Higher proportions of private-school students than public-school students would allow members of disliked groups to give a speech (34% vs. 18%) or run for president (37% vs. 20%).
- Eighty-one percent of private-school parents gave their child's school a grade of "A" or "B," as compared to 60 percent of public-school parents. None of the private-school parents graded their child's school "D" or "F," whereas 11 percent of public-school parents assigned their child's school such low ratings. The higher satisfaction of private-school parents than public school parents was most pronounced regarding the following school characteristics: amount of information from teachers, freedom to observe religious traditions, class size, safety, student respect for teachers, and the teaching of moral values.
- Private schools assign more homework than public schools, according to parent and student surveys. Private school students report an additional 24 minutes of homework assigned per day compared with their public school peers.

- Fighting appears to be a more significant problem in public schools, as 50 percent of the public-school parents describe fighting as a serious problem at their child's school compared with 26 percent of the private-school parents.
- Private-school parents were just as likely as the members of the control group to report that their child has a learning disability, a physical disability, or difficulty understanding English. Based on parental responses, the private schools in the study perform as well, or better, at meeting the special needs of these students.
- Parents report that public school enrollments are larger—an average of 434 students in public schools, as compared to 182 students in private schools.
- Parents report that class sizes are smaller in private schools—an average of 17 pupils per class, as compared to 23 in public school.
- Parents of students in public schools were much more likely than private-school parents to report that their school has a variety of special facilities and programs, including: special programs for non-English speakers, a nurse's office, prepared lunches, a cafeteria, special programs for advanced learners, arts programs, special education programs, a computer lab, and a gym.
- Nearly 75 percent of those offered a scholarship reported success in finding a school they preferred. By comparison, 57 percent of the parents in the control group said their children went to a desired school.
- None of the parents offered a scholarship reported that their child was refused admission to a preferred private school because of religious considerations. Less than one percent of private-school parents said that their child was asked not to return to his or her school in the coming year.
- Academic quality was the most common reason cited by both private and public-school parents for choosing their child's school. None of the parents listed the sports program or the child's friends as the main reason for selecting their school.
- Some critics have claimed that private schools will skim the "best and the brightest" of student applicants, refusing to admit students who face serious educational challenges. To observe whether this occurred in the District of Columbia, we compared the students who made use of the scholarship to those who did not. No educational skimming was observed among the younger students. There was no statistically significant difference in the educational performances of takers and decliners on the baseline reading or math tests of students entering grades three through six. However, takers in grades seven through nine had higher initial test scores than decliners.
- In some respects, individuals who used their scholarships came from more financially and educationally advantaged families. Specifically, scholarship takers

had a slightly higher annual household income--an average of about \$20,500, as compared to about \$18,000 for scholarship decliners. Mothers of takers had four-tenths of a year more education, were less likely to be receiving government assistance or to have moved recently, and were more likely to have voted in the previous election. However, takers and decliners did not differ significantly in the likelihood that the mother was employed, married, or foreign born. Mothers who are Hispanic or Catholic were somewhat more likely to use the scholarship. Mothers who are African American or Baptist were somewhat more likely to decline it.

- As previously reported, African American students who switched to private schools scored 9 national percentile rank (NPR) points higher than their public school peers in combined math and reading achievement. That difference is statistically significant beyond the highest level commonly used by social scientists, $p < .01$. Ninety-three percent of those participating in the study in the second year (700 students) were African American.
- The difference in performance between the African American students who used the voucher and those in the control group averaged 10 NPR points in math and 8 NPR points in reading. Each of those differences, alone, is statistically significant.
- The achievement gains of the voucher users, relative to the control group, did not vary significantly between older and younger grade cohorts, as had been the case after one year.
- For the small group of non-African American students in the second year evaluation (53 students), no significant test score differences were observed between the voucher users and the members of the control group.

Operating for the first time on a large scale in 1997, WSF offered lottery winners annual scholarships of up to \$1,700 to help pay tuition at a private elementary school for at least three years. To be eligible, families need to live in D.C. and have an income below 2.7 times the federal poverty line. For a family of four in 2000, 2.7 times the poverty line was \$46,035. Telephone applications were received between October 1997 and March 1998. In response to invitations sent by WSF in the spring of 1998, applicants attended verification sessions where eligibility was determined, students were tested, older students filled out short questionnaires, and adult family members completed longer questionnaires. The lottery was held on April 29, 1998. Fifty-three percent of children offered a scholarship took the scholarship and used it to attend a private school. After two years, 38 percent of those originally offered a scholarship were still using it. The data reported in this paper are taken from student tests and responses from parents and students obtained at follow-up sessions in the spring of 2000. Slightly more than half of the families in the study attended the Year Two follow-up sessions.

It is too soon to ascertain the long-term impact of the voucher program sponsored by the Washington Scholarship Fund. Initial results, however, indicate that parents with students in private schools are much more satisfied with their child's school. School-parent communications are more extensive, and students are assigned more homework, in the private

sector. After two years in private schools, African American students outperformed their public-school peers by 9 percentile points in combined math and reading, a statistically significant difference. The private-school students also demonstrated higher levels of political tolerance than did the members of the control group.

The evaluation of the Washington Scholarship Fund's voucher program in Washington, D.C. is an activity of the Harvard Program on Education Policy and Governance, which is jointly sponsored by the Taubman Center on State and Local Government, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University and the Center for American Political Studies in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Harvard University. It is being performed in collaboration with Georgetown University's Graduate Public Policy Institute. The conclusions expressed in this report are solely those of the authors.