

School Choice in Washington, D. C.: An Evaluation After One Year

by

Patrick J. Wolf
William G. Howell
Paul E. Peterson

February 2000

Paper prepared for the Conference on Vouchers, Charters and Public Education, sponsored by the Program on Education Policy and Governance, Harvard University, March 2000.

The Program on Education Policy and Governance (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: <http://data.fas.harvard.edu/pepg/>

School Choice in Washington, D. C.: An Evaluation After One Year (Executive Summary)

In the fall of 1997 the Washington Scholarship Fund announced the expansion of a previously establishment, 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.

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 six to seven months of the WSF program on the students in grades 2-8 who had previously been attending public school but shifted to private schools in the fall of 1998. Specifically, the evaluation estimates the program's impact on student test scores in reading and mathematics as well as other educational and social outcomes, as reported by parents and students. In 1999 the Children's Scholarship Fund, a nationwide school-choice scholarship program, provided additional support to the WSF program.

The main findings of this initial evaluation are that

- 95 percent of those participating in the program were African American.
- African American students who switched to private schools in grades two through five outperformed their public-school peers by 3 national percentile points in reading and 7 points in math. The difference in student math performance is statistically significant, but the difference in reading is not.
- African American students attending private schools in grades six through eight scored 2 national percentile points higher in math but trailed their public school peers in reading by 8 points. The difference in reading is statistically significant, but the difference in math is not.
- No significant differences between the test score performance of non-African American students in private and public schools were observed in either reading or math.
- 46 percent of private-school parents gave their school an "A," as compared to 15 percent of public-school parents. This difference also manifested itself when parents were asked about specific aspects of school life. For example, 60 percent of the private-school parents, but only 20 percent of the public-school parents, said they were "very satisfied" with school safety. Additionally, 56 percent of the private-school parents, but just 17 percent of the public-school parents, were "very satisfied" with their school's academic program.
- Parents of those in public school were more likely to report that the following were serious problems at their school: students destroying property, being late for school, missing classes, fighting, and cheating. Fifty-five percent said fighting was a serious problem in public school, as compared to 25 percent in private school; forty-nine

percent claimed tardiness was a problem in public school, as compared to 34 percent in private school; thirty-seven percent of public school parents claimed property destruction was a problem at their schools, versus 17 percent of private school parents; forty-four percent of public-school parents and 18 percent of private-school parents claimed truancy was a problem; and 33 percent of public-school parents reported cheating to be a serious problem, as compared to 23 percent of private-school parents.

- Nearly 81 percent of those offered a scholarship reported success in finding a school they preferred. By comparison, only 48 percent of the public-school parents said their children went to a desired school.
- Students moving from private to public schools in lower grades adjust more quickly to their new educational environment than do students in the middle grades of six through eight. Whereas younger students attending private schools are more likely than public-school students to say students are proud to attend my school, the opposite results are obtained for students in the middle years. A similar pattern of responses is observed when students are asked what "grade" they would give their school, whether they like their school a lot, and whether students get along well with teachers. Suspension rates reported by parents for younger students are similar in private and public schools, 5 and 7 percent, respectively, but considerably higher in private school than public school for students in grades 6-8, 20 percent as compared to 3 percent.
- Parents report that public schools are larger—an average of 438 students in public schools, as compared to 217 students in private schools.
- Parents report that class sizes are smaller in private schools—an average of 18 pupils per class, as compared to 22 in public school.
- Parents of students in public schools were much more likely to report that their school had a nurse's office, cafeteria and special programs for non-English speakers. On the other hand, private-school parents were more likely to report that their school had individual tutors, an after-school program, and a program for advanced learners.
- A higher percentage of parents of students in private schools reported being notified when their child was sent to the office for the first time for disruptive behavior (90 percent, as compared to 63 percent for public-school parents), receiving notes about their child from the teacher (94 versus 77 percent), receiving a newsletter about what is going on in school (91 versus 69 percent) and parents participating in instruction (69 versus 53 percent).
- Private schools assign more homework than public schools, according to parent reports. Private school parents also are more likely to describe their child's homework as "appropriate" in its level of difficulty.

The evaluation also provides information relevant to the following issues that have been raised in the debate over vouchers:

- Critics of school-voucher programs often argue that school choice destabilizes students' education both during a given school year and from one year to the next. In Washington, once differences in graduation rates were accounted for, no differences in school mobility were observed between public and private schools either within the school year or in parental plans for the following year.
- Some critics have suggested that low-income families may base their school decisions on factors having little to do with their child's education. To examine this issue, we asked parents to list the three most important considerations in choosing the school the child attended. Sixty-eight percent said academic quality was the most important reason. The next two most important considerations, religious instruction and school discipline, were mentioned by 38 percent of the parents. Less than 2 percent included the sports program or child's friendships.
- Some have said 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 those who made use of the scholarship with those who did not. No educational skimming was observed among 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 one through five. However, takers in grades six through eight had higher initial test scores than decliners.
- In some respects, individuals who used their scholarships came from slightly more advantaged families. Scholarship takers had slightly higher incomes—an average of about \$17,800, as compared to about \$15,800. Mothers of takers had one-third of a year more education, were less dependent on welfare, and were more likely to be employed full-time. However, takers and decliners did not differ significantly in the likelihood that mothers and fathers were living together, the likelihood that the mother was married, or the average number of children in the home. Nor was there a significant difference in the likelihood that the mother was African American.

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. 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; 47 percent of children offered a scholarship declined the offer. 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 1999.

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 the educational climate in private schools is superior to that in public schools, and that parents with students in private schools are much more satisfied with their child's school. Home-school communications are more extensive in the private sector, and students are expected to do more homework. After six

to seven months in their first year after changing schools, African American students in grades two through five attending private schools outperformed their peers in math by 7 percentile points, a statistically significant difference. They also scored 3 percentile points higher in reading, but this difference is not large enough to be certain that the finding did not occur by chance.

However, the evaluation also indicates that students in their middle years – grades six through eight – have found it difficult to adjust when moving from a public to a private school. Since the data for the median student was collected in March of the first year of transition, it is not yet clear whether these adjustment problems will continue or dissipate. But these older students, in contrast to students in lower grades, reported less enthusiasm for their new school, were more likely to be suspended, and scored lower on the reading test than their public-school peers. However, no differences in the older students' math performance were observed.

It is premature to draw strong conclusions from these findings, but the results do suggest that vouchers for low-income families may be particularly effective, initially at least, if concentrated on students in lower grades. These students have fewer problems adjusting to private school and score higher in math after six or seven months in a private school setting.

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.