Initial Findings from an Evaluation of School Choice Programs in Washington, D.C. and Dayton, Ohio

by

Paul E. Peterson

Jay P. Greene

William G. Howell

and

William McCready

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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: data.fas.harvard.edu/pepg/
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(Executive Summary)

In the summer of 1998, President Bill Clinton vetoed congressional legislation that would have established a pilot school voucher program for low-income families in the District of Columbia. While this veto killed any chance of a publicly funded voucher program being established in the nation’s capital, it did not curb reforms within the private sector. Indeed, exactly when Clinton issued his veto, the Washington Scholarship Fund Pilot Program (WSF), a privately funded voucher program established in 1997, was preparing to send over 1,000 low-income children to the school of their choice.

At about the same time the Parents Advancing Choice in Education (PACE) program offered school scholarship to students from low-income families in Dayton and other parts of Montgomery County, Ohio. Students entering kindergarten through twelfth grade were eligible. For the 1998-99 school year, scholarships were offered to 530 students previously enrolled in public schools and 250 students already in private schools.

Both programs awarded scholarships by lottery, thereby making it possible to conduct an evaluation designed as a randomized experiment. Initial results from the experiment are expected to be available in about a year. This report on applicants to the two cities’ programs compares the baseline responses of qualified families with children in public schools and private schools. Parental responses are from all applicants, no matter what grade their child is in; most student responses, however, are from pupils in fifth and sixth grades.

Among applicants to these two voucher programs, private school students are significantly more likely than students in public schools to report being in a positive educational climate. Differences were as follows:

- Reporting "I do not feel safe at this school" – in both cities, around 5 percent of private-school students, as compared to over 20 percent of public school students.

- "Strongly agree" that "teachers care about students" – about 70 percent of students in private schools in both cities as compared to 55 percent of public-school students in Washington and 46 percent in Dayton.

- "Strongly agree" that "teaching here is good" – about two-thirds of private-school students, as compared to 52 percent of Washington’s public-school students and 35 percent of Dayton’s.

- Reporting "a lot" of cheating at school – 8 percent of private-school students as compared to 39 percent of public-school students.
• Strongly agree that "some teachers ignore" cheating – 9 percent of applicants from Dayton’s private schools and 13 percent from Washington’s, as compared to 25 percent of public-school applicants in both cities.

• Satisfied "with the way my education is going" – 90 percent in private sector as compared to 75 percent in Washington’s public sector and 70 percent in Dayton’s.

• Encouraged "a lot" by teachers to study current events –around 45 percent for applicants from private-schools in both cities, as compared to about 35 percent of public-school students.

• "Strongly agree" that "student misbehavior makes it hard to learn" – in both cities, less than 20 percent of applicants from private sector as compared to about 35 percent of those from the public sector.

• Reporting "there are many gang members in school" – in both cities, less than 10 percent of private-school students as compared to over 20 percent of public-school students.

Parents echo student reports. Parents of children enrolled in private schools are more likely to "strongly agree" with the following statements about their current school:

• School is safe;

• Teaching is good;

• Teachers help all the students;

• School listens to parents;

• Parents work together to support school;

• Rules for behavior are strict;

• School puts high priority on learning.

On these items, differences between the responses of private and public school applicants range between 30 to 40 percentage points; they remain large even when statistical adjustments are made for the demographic characteristics of the two groups of parents.

In both cities, parents were more satisfied with private schools than they were with public schools. Around 60 percent of private-school parents gave their school an "A," as compared to less than a fifth of public-school parents. In both cities, differences in parental satisfaction with public and private schools is further evident when you ask about a wide variety of aspects of school life:
• Approximately two-thirds of the private-school parents, but only about a quarter of the public-school parents, were “very satisfied” with school safety.

• Nearly two-thirds of the private-school parents, but less than one-fifth of the public-school parents, were "very satisfied" with their school's academic program.

• Two-thirds of the private-school parents were "very satisfied" with school discipline at the school, as compared to less than one-fourth of the parents of students still in public schools.

Again, in both cities, private schools demonstrated a greater capacity to stimulate conversations, community participation and other forms of social capital among low-income, inner-city families. For example,

• Nearly a third of the parents of Washington's and Dayton’s public-school applicants "seldom or never" discussed school affairs with other parents, as compared to about 15 percent of private-school parents in the two cities.

• Approximately three-fourths of families of applicants from private schools, but only about two-thirds of public-school applicants, said they felt part of their community, feeling it was more than just a place to live.

Applicants with children in public schools said the most important reasons for applying for a private-school scholarship was to find a school with higher academic standards and a better curriculum. Parents also said they were interested in smaller class sizes and improved safety for their children. Least important was the school's location.

The WSF and PACE programs reached a segment of the disadvantaged population not previously served by Washington's or Dayton's private schools. In both cities, the applicants from public schools were more likely than private-school applicants to be African American, parents were less likely to be married, and families were more dependent on government aid. Mothers of public-school applicants in Washington were less well educated.

Having greatly expanded in 1997, WSF offered lottery winners annual scholarships of up to $2,200 to help pay tuition at a private school for at least three consecutive years. PACE offered scholarships worth up to $1,200 for at least four years. In both cities, telephone applications were received between October 1997 and March 1998. In response to invitations sent by WSF and PACE, applicants attended verification sessions, where eligibility was determined, students were tested, older students filled out short questionnaires, and adult family members completed longer questionnaires while waiting for testing to be completed. The lottery selecting scholarship winners was held in April 1998. The data reported in this paper are taken from responses from parents and students at these verification and testing sessions.

Inasmuch as these findings are based on information from public and private school parents prior to the beginning of the scholarship program, they could be due to the self-selection of parents who chose to apply for a school voucher. Indeed, private school applicants are
applying mainly to stay in their current school, whereas public school parents are applying precisely because they want to leave their current school. The responses reported here, therefore, may not be indicative of the attitudes of public and private school parents generally – though we present evidence that strongly suggests that they are. Nonetheless, most findings hold after statistical adjustments have been made for demographic characteristics. The evaluation of these pilot programs is a joint activity of the Harvard Program on Education Policy and Governance and Northern Illinois University's Social Science Research Institute.

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1 The research program, though, is limited to studying those entering grades one through eight.