An Evaluation of the Horizon Scholarship Program
in the Edgewood Independent School District,
San Antonio, Texas: The First Year

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(Executive Summary)

Do school vouchers take the "best and the brightest" from public schools? Do vouchers allow private schools to "cream" the top of the public school? Are students from low-income families who receive vouchers admitted to a school they prefer? Are low-income voucher students at risk of suspension and expulsion? Answers to these questions are provided by an evaluation of a voucher program of national significance--it is the first to offer vouchers to all students from low-income families residing in a particular school district. The program, which was announced in April 1998, is located in the Edgewood school district in San Antonio, Texas.

The debate in Edgewood has focused on the extent to which the program would recruit "the best and the brightest" of public-school students. The Texas Federation of Teachers has said the program would "shorten the honor roll" in public schools. Edgewood school superintendent Dolores Munoz, claimed: "I guarantee you that at least 80 percent will be the high-achieving students. The private schools are having the choice of the best students around,…and their doors are…not open for every child."

Evaluation results indicate a wide variety of students and families took advantage of the vouchers that were available in Edgewood. The Horizon students and families resemble public school students in some respects but differ modestly in others. The degree of selectivity is as follows (statistical significance for each of the findings is noted):

- Voucher students scored at the 37th percentile on the math test; Edgewood public-school students scored at the 34th. Difference is not significant. Voucher students scored at the 35th percentile on the reading test, public-school students scored at the 28th. Difference is significant.

- Twenty-three percent of voucher students had been in programs for gifted students, as compared to 29 percent of public-school students. Difference is not significant. 8 percent of voucher students had learning disabilities, as compared to 16 percent of public-school students. Difference is significant.

- The average income for Horizon families was $15,990, versus $15,939 for public-school families. Ninety-six percent of voucher students were Latino, as compared to 93 percent of public-school students. Neither difference is statistically significant.

- Mothers of voucher students had completed, on average, 12 years of education, as compared to 11 years for mothers of public-school students. Fifty percent of voucher mothers were employed full time, as compared to 37 percent of public-school mothers. Both differences are significant.
• Four percent of voucher mothers were receiving welfare, as compared to 5 percent of public-school mothers. Forty-five percent of voucher parents were living together, versus 43 percent of public-school families. Neither difference is significant.

• Twenty-two percent of voucher mothers were receiving food stamps, as compared to 33 percent of public-school mothers. This difference is significant.

• Two-thirds of voucher mothers attended religious services at least once a week, as compared to 40 percent of public-school. This is a significant difference; however, it is not known whether this difference in religious activity preceded participation in the voucher program or is a concomitant of program participation.

Additional findings from the evaluation include:

• Ninety-two percent of voucher families said their child was in a school the family wants the child to attend, as compared to 75 percent of public school families. This difference is statistically significant.

• Five percent of both voucher and public school students had been suspended from school during the past year.

• Only 7 percent of voucher students had changed schools since the beginning of the school year, as compared to 16 percent of public-school students. This difference is significant.

• Thirty-nine percent of Edgewood public school parents report that guns and other dangerous weapons are a very serious problem at their school, as compared to 28 percent of voucher parents. This difference is significant.

• Fifty-two percent of Edgewood public school parents report fighting as a serious problem at their school, as compared to 28 percent of voucher parents. This difference is significant.

• Voucher parents, on average, report their child is in a class of 21 students, as compared to a class of 20 students in Edgewood public schools. This difference is not significant.

• Sixty-one percent of voucher parents are very satisfied with the academic quality of the school, as compared to 35 percent of public school parents. This difference is significant.
Horizon Scholarship Program

The Horizon program, sponsored by the Children’s Educational Opportunity (CEO) Foundation, offered vouchers to all students from low-income families in grades K-12 attending Edgewood public schools, which serve a predominantly low-income, Latino population. Almost all students were eligible, inasmuch as 90 percent of all students who live in the Edgewood Independent School District live in families eligible for free or reduced price lunch. No first-come, first-serve, lottery, or other criteria were imposed upon participants by the CEO program.

The program was announced in April 1998 and began at the start of the 1998-99 school year. Vouchers could be used to pay tuition at private schools, either religious or secular, or to obtain a seat at a public school outside the Edgewood school district. Elementary students received scholarships worth up to $3,600, while high school students were granted scholarships worth up to $4,000. Horizon officials report that 837 students used scholarships to attend 57 schools in the first year of the program.

Evaluation Procedures

The evaluation team obtained information during the 1998-99 school year from three groups of families with children between the ages of 8 and 17: 1) those receiving a Horizon voucher; 2) a sample of students and their families residing in the Edgewood district; and 3) a sample of students and their families in three comparison districts in Texas.

The evaluation team asked Horizon parents and students as well as a representative sample of Edgewood public-school parents and students to complete a questionnaire concerning the school the student was attending. Students also took the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) in reading and mathematics. The test publisher scored the tests. Tests were administered during the 1998-99 school year, the first year the program was in operation, thereby providing information on student abilities shortly after they had been given the opportunity to participate in the Horizon’s program.

This initial report compares the background characteristics, test scores, experiences, and opinions of Horizon students and parents with those of Edgewood public-school students and parents. A subsequent report will provide information on the political and institutional context for the Horizon program in Edgewood as well as of three comparison districts. This latter report will also present information that allows for comparisons between students and parents living in the Edgewood school district with students and parents living in three comparison districts. These data will serve as a baseline for a non-experimental evaluation to be conducted over the next several years.

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