A revised version of this paper was published by the Brookings Institution Press in the 1999 book: *Earning and Learning: How Schools Matter* Edited by Susan E. Mayer and Paul E. Peterson

**An Evaluation of the New York City School Choice Scholarships Program: The First Year**

By

Mathematica Policy Research  
600 Maryland Ave. SW  
Washington, D. C. 20024-2512

and

Program on Education Policy and Governance (PEPG)  
Harvard University

prepared by

Paul E. Peterson, Director, Harvard Program on Education Policy and Governance  
Phone: 617-495-8312/495-7976  
Fax: 617-496-4428  
Website: http://data.fas.harvard.edu/pepg/

and

David Myers, Senior Fellow, Mathematica Policy Research  
Phone: 202-484-4523  
Fax: 202-863-1763

and

William G. Howell, Program Associate  
Harvard Program on Education Policy and Governance

October, 1998

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/
An Evaluation of the New York School Choice  
Scholarships Program: The First Year  

(Executive Summary)

The School Choice Scholarships Foundation (SCSF) announced in February 1997 that it would provide 1,300 scholarships so that children from low-income families currently attending public schools could transfer to private schools. The scholarships were worth up to $1,400 annually and could be redeemed for at least three years at both religious and secular schools. SCSF received initial application forms from over 20,000 students between February and late April 1997. Scholarship recipients were selected in a lottery held in May 1997 and began school the following fall.

In this paper we report the first-year results for an evaluation of the SCSF program. The evaluation takes advantage of the fact that the SCSF lottery allowed for the conduct of a natural randomized experiment, in which students were allocated randomly to scholarship and control groups.

Our major findings from a survey of scholarship parents and students, as compared to a similar group of families in the control group, are as follows:

Outcomes:

- After one year, students who received a scholarship scored higher in math and reading tests. Overall, the differences between all those in grades two through five who used their scholarships to attend a private school and the control group of students were small—around two percentile points in both subjects. However, sizeable differences were observed among those students who were in the fourth and fifth grades—four percentile points in reading and six points in math.

- Parents of scholarship users are much more satisfied with their children’s education. Half the scholarship users give their school an “A”, as compared to only one-eighth of the control group. Scholarship families were substantially more satisfied than the control group with every dimension of school life about which they were asked. For example, over half of the scholarship parents were very satisfied with the academic quality of the school, as compared to one-sixth of the control group. Similarly, 58 percent of the scholarship parents expressed the highest satisfaction with “what’s taught in school,” as compared to 18 percent of the control group. Scholarship students in third, fourth, and fifth grade are less likely to give it a failing grade.

- Parents reported that scholarship students attended smaller schools and were being educated in smaller classes. On average, the schools attended by scholarship students had 141 fewer students than the schools attended by students in the control group. Furthermore, the classes in which scholarship students were being taught had three fewer students on average than the
classes attended by the control group. Consistent with these findings, 42 percent of the scholarship parents reported being “very satisfied” with the class size at their school, but only 12 percent of the control group of parents reported a similar level of satisfaction.

- Scholarship students were less likely than the control group to have access to a library, cafeteria, nurse’s office, child counselors and special programs for non-English speakers and students with learning difficulties.

- As compared to those in the control group, parents of scholarship students were more likely to report that the following were not a serious problem at their school: students destroying property, being late for school, missing classes, fighting, cheating, and engaging in racial conflict. Twenty two percent of the parents in the control group were very satisfied with school safety, but almost half of scholarship parents were.

- Scholarship students were asked to do more homework, parents say. Fifty-five percent of the scholarship parents reported that their child had at least an hour of homework a day, as compared to 36 percent of the control-group parents. Sixteen percent of the control group of parents but only 10 percent of the scholarship parents reported that homework was too easy. Scholarship students were more likely than control-group students to report having difficulty with homework but were less likely to say their work was marked and returned to them.

- Parents of scholarship students report more frequent school communications from their child’s school and from their child’s teachers.

- Scholarship students are considerably more likely than the children in the control group to be subject to a dress code and to be required to wear a school uniform; they are less likely to be required to obtain a “hall pass” when leaving the classroom.

- Student mobility rates among schools within the school year are the same for the scholarship students and the members of the control group.

- Expulsion and suspension rates were low for both scholarship students and members of the control group. No difference between the two groups was detected.

- Using a scholarship reduced somewhat the racial isolation of minority students. Eighteen percent of scholarship parents replied that less than half of those in their child’s classroom were of minority background, while just 11 percent of the parents in the control group gave this response. Conversely, 37 percent of the control-group parents said all the students in the classroom were minority, as compared to just 28 percent of the scholarship parents.
• Parental self reports of their involvement in school and engagement in the education of their children was very high and much the same for both scholarship parents and those in the control group.

Making Use of a Scholarship Offer:

• Seventy-five percent of those offered scholarships made use of them. Families who made use of the scholarships were of somewhat higher income than those who did not. The expense of a private school was the most frequently given reason for not using a scholarship. Failure to pass an admissions test was hardly ever mentioned.

• Over 75 percent of the parents of scholarship users said that among the reasons “very important” for their choice of school were school safety, academic quality, what was taught in school, and school discipline. The school’s location, the children’s friends, and the sports program were least frequently mentioned as very important. Religious instruction was mentioned as very important by approximately half the parents.

• Thirty-four percent of scholarship parents said that, apart from their SCSF scholarship, they relied on family income to help pay for their private-school tuition. Twenty-two percent of the parents said their child had received a school scholarship, and 5 percent reported that they the school paid for some or, in a few cases, all of their remaining tuition. Sixteen percent of the respondents indicated that relatives and friends helped out.

Participation in the Program:

Families of scholarship applicants were similar to those eligible for participation in terms of income. However, they were more dependant on governmental assistance and more likely to be African American. On the other hand, mothers of scholarship students had more education and were more likely to report working full-time.

This is the first opportunity to estimate the impacts of a school choice pilot program by means of an evaluation that has all the following characteristics:

• a lottery that allocated scholarships randomly to eligible applicants;

• a lottery that was administered by an independent evaluation team that can guarantee its integrity;

• baseline data on student test performance and family background characteristics that were collected from a high percentage of the students and their families prior to the lottery;

• data on a broad range of characteristics that were collected from a high percentage of the test group and control group one year later.