School Choice in New York City After Two Years: An Evaluation of the School Choice Scholarships Program

*Interim Report*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 1997, the School Choice Scholarships Foundation (SCSF) announced that it would provide 1,300 scholarships so children of low-income families in grades K through four in New York City public schools could transfer to private schools. The scholarships were worth up to $1,400 annually and could be used for up to four years at both religious and secular schools. The SCSF received applications from more than 20,000 students between February and April 1997. From the pool of applicants, scholarship recipients were selected in a lottery held in May 1997.

In this report, we describe the second-year results for an evaluation of the SCSF program. The evaluation is based on a rigorous research design that takes advantage of the fact that the SCSF held a lottery. Accordingly, the evaluation allows for the conduct of a randomized experiment in which students were randomly selected for a treatment group (scholarship group) and a control group. The results are particularly relevant to the debate about the impacts of education vouchers on students and parents. Among the current voucher experiments, the SCSF program is the largest in terms of enrollment and shows results for the most diverse population of low-income students. Similar randomized field trials of school voucher interventions have been conducted in Dayton, Ohio, and Washington, D.C.

Key findings from the evaluation are as follows:

OUTCOMES

Impacts on School Facilities, School Climate, Parents’ Satisfaction with Schools, and Parental Communication and Involvement

• As reported by parents, the schools attended by the scholarship students were smaller than the schools attended by the public school students (385 students versus 525 students) and class sizes were smaller (two fewer students in the private school classrooms). Private schools were less likely than public schools to have a library, nurse’s office, child counselors, and special programs for non–English speakers and students with learning problems. In a few instances, private school parents reported more extensive facilities and programs, such as computer laboratories, music programs, and individual tutors. No differences were found concerning programs in art, programs for advanced learners, a gymnasium, and after-school programs.

• Compared with public school parents, private school parents were less likely to report the following serious problems at their school: students destroying property, tardiness, missing classes, fighting, cheating, and racial conflict. For example, 70 percent of the parents with a child in public school reported that fighting was a serious problem at their child’s school, as compared to 33 percent of the parents with a child in private school.
• Students in private schools were asked to complete more homework than students in public schools. 64 percent of the parents of children in private school said their child had more than an hour of homework per day, as compared to 41 percent of the parents whose child attended a public school.

• Parents of students in private schools said that they received more communication from their school about their children than did parents in public schools.

• The level of parent involvement for parents with students in private schools was about the same as for parents with public school children.

• Compared with public school students, private school parents said their children were more likely to have received religious instruction outside of school, participated in church youth groups, and attended religious services.

• Parents who switched from public to private schools were much more satisfied with their schools than parents who remained in the public schools—for example, when asked to grade their schools, nearly 40 percent of the parents in the scholarship takers group gave their school an A and less than 10 percent of similar parents in the public schools gave their schools an A.

**Impacts on Test Scores**

• On standardized tests, students *offered* scholarships (24 percent never used a scholarship when offered) generally performed at about the same level as students in the control group. That is, using the Iowa Test of Basic Skills to assess students’ performance in reading and mathematics, we found that, overall, students in the scholarship group performed at about the same level as did students in the control group. The same results hold for students who shifted from a public school to a private school.

• To see whether the voucher intervention affected the often reported test-score gap between whites and minority students, results were examined for Latinos and African Americans separately. African American students make up about 45 percent of the sample and Latino students about 46 percent. The pattern of impacts for Latino and African American students is inconsistent. We find no impact for Latinos. We find a significant average impact on the composite test scores for African American students. African American students offered scholarships scored about 3 points higher than similar students in the control group. The impact of going to a private school for two years for African American students was 4 percentile points.

• Much of the overall impact of a voucher on African American students’ achievement is concentrated among those students who were in 6th grade. The impact for sixth graders is statistically significant and large; the impacts of a voucher on African American students’ achievement in grades 3-5 are much smaller and not statistically significant.
• A comparison of the first- and second-year results for African Americans showed similarly sized impacts. In the first year, the overall impact of a voucher offer on reading for African American students was 3.5 percentile points and for the second year 3.4 percentile points; this difference is not statistically significant. For mathematics, there was a slight decline in impacts—from 5.4 to 3.1 points; that decline is also not statistically significant. Taken together, these findings suggest that the difference between the scholarship group and the control group remained about the same over the two years. Similar to the findings for African Americans, there were no significant changes for Latino students between year one and year two.

PARTICIPATION IN THE SCSF PROGRAM

• About 62 percent of the students offered scholarships used the scholarship for two full years, 12 percent used them in just the first year and not the second year, 2 percent used them only in the second year, and 24 percent never used them.

• Students who used the scholarships were generally similar to nonusers, but there were some differences. Baseline test scores were similar for scholarship takers and decliners; households of scholarship takers and decliners were equally likely to speak English as their main language; and mothers of takers and decliners were equally likely to have been born in the United States. Scholarship decliners were somewhat less likely than scholarship takers to have received special education services before the baseline testing session; mothers of scholarship takers had somewhat higher educational attainment than the mothers of the decliners; and scholarship takers lived in families with higher incomes than scholarship decliners (about $2,700 higher; the average income for takers was about $10,400).

• The most frequently cited obstacles that prevented parents from sending their children to the preferred school included cost (35 percent), transportation problems (14 percent), and lack of space at the school (10 percent).

• According to parental reports, the percentage of students attending school throughout the school year was similar for those attending public and private school. Similarly, the percentage of students who plan to attend the same school the next year was similar for the two groups, except that public school students were more likely to graduate from one school level to the next (private schools are more likely to have all grades K-8 within one school). Virtually no parents reported their child had been expelled from school. Suspension rates for students in public and private school were similar.

THE EVALUATION

The evaluation of the SCSF program in New York City presents a unique opportunity to examine the impact of educational vouchers on student and parent outcomes for students switching to private schools. New York City has a diverse population and is the nation’s largest school system. We computed the effects of vouchers on education outcomes by using a
randomized experimental design that allows us to compare two statistically equivalent groups of students and, in turn, to isolate the unique effect of vouchers on the measured outcomes.

Mathematica Policy Research has collected data three times on the same students and families since 1997 (1997, 1998, and 1999). We have just completed collecting a forth round of data and will report the results early in 2001. Each time we collected data, students were given the Iowa Test of Basic skills to measure their academic achievement in reading and mathematics. In addition, parents and students completed surveys in each of the three years so that we could learn more about their educational experiences and plans. The response rate for each test administration was moderately high—100, 78, and 65 percent in 1997, 1998, and 1999, respectively. Somewhat higher response rates were achieved for the parent and student surveys than for the achievement tests.