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School Vouchers as a Legal Sanction

BY LISA SNELL

Introduction

School vouchers—which enable students to attend non-public schools of their choice—have generated heated controversy since they were first introduced as a solution to failing public schools. School-choice opponents argue that vouchers lead to a dichotomy of “haves” and “have nots,” wherein some students are unfairly left behind in the failing public schools.

The newest revelation in school-choice research demonstrates that private school vouchers and other school-choice options—including charter schools, home schooling, and programs that allow students to attend any public school—improve student achievement for the students who participate in school-choice programs. It also shows that vouchers actually improve student achievement for those students who remain in the public schools. The research justifies the use of school vouchers as a legal sanction by state governments and the federal government to force public schools to raise student achievement or lose students and funding.

As more evidence is compiled that demonstrates that vouchers work as an effective sanction to spur the public schools to improve, more legislation will be written to use vouchers primarily as a sanction rather than having it remain a matter of individual choice for families. In 2001, at least 21 states have bills pending that pertain to vouchers.

Vouchers can be double-edged swords, however. While using vouchers as a sanction can motivate public schools to improve their performance, presenting them as the only legal option obviates the need for more direct opportunities for parents to exercise choice in schools. This paper will examine the tension between programs that use vouchers as a legal sanction versus the traditional concept of vouchers as a way to empower parents with more educational choices for their children. ■

School Choice Improves School Performance

A popular argument against school choice is that choice programs “cream” the best students away from the public schools, thus draining both talent and resources from the public system. Yet a growing body of research demonstrates that school choice helps both the “choosers” and the “nonchoosers.” Jay P. Greene, a senior fellow at The Manhattan Institute, released in February 2001 the first detailed study of what happens when a school voucher program sanctions low-performing public schools.

A. Florida's A-plus Program

Florida is the first state to use vouchers as a legal sanction. According to Florida Statutes, Section 229.0537:

A public school student's parent or guardian may request and receive from the state an opportunity scholarship for the child to enroll in and attend a private school in accordance with the provisions of this section if: By assigned school attendance area or by special assignment, the student has spent the prior school year in attendance at a public school that has been designated pursuant to Section 229.57 as performance grade category "F," failing to make adequate progress, and that has had two school years in a four-year period of such low performance, and the student's attendance occurred during a school year in which such designation was in effect; or the parent or guardian of a student who has been in attendance of a student who has been in attendance elsewhere in the public school system or who is entering kindergarten or first grade has been notified that the student has been assigned to such a school for the next year.¹

Under Florida's “A-plus” program, each public school is assigned a grade of “A” through “F,” based on the proportion of its students earning a passing grade on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT). Students attending schools that receive two “F” grades in four years are eligible to attend a private school or to transfer to another public school. By offering vouchers to students as an opportunity to leave failing schools, the Florida plan is intended to motivate those schools to improve their academic performance.

In 1998–1999, the first school year of the program, a total of 53 students statewide received private education vouchers. In 1999–2000, there were 78 public schools that received a failing grade based on their cumulative test scores on the FCAT and would have been sanctioned with vouchers in 2000–2001. However, by the second year of the “A-plus” program, every school in Florida (including the 78 schools that had a failing grade the year before) managed to pull test scores up enough to avoid the voucher sanction.

Greene, an education researcher, recently analyzed FCAT test scores for the initial two years of the “A-plus” program. He found that “schools that received ‘F’ grades in 1998–1999 experienced increases in test scores that were more than twice as large as those experienced by schools with higher state grades.”²

From an "F" to an "A"

Fessenden Elementary School in Marion County, Florida is a high-poverty school (81 percent of the 560 students qualify for the federal free-lunch program), with a 41 percent student turnover from year to year. It is also one of only two Florida schools that made the leap from an "F" in 1999 to an "A" in 2000 under Florida's grading system.

After learning of the "F" designation in 1999, Fessenden principal Loretta Jenkins worked over the summer to devise a plan to boost the school's grade. The new plan changed reading instruction from a whole-language program to a phonics-based program. The new math curriculum allowed teachers to finish the math book for the first time before the end of the year, as well as actually review the concepts. Students were tested often to identify their strengths and weaknesses, and to track their individual progress. After-school tutoring was provided for children who were reading below grade level. Jenkins also hired five new teachers to reduce the student-teacher ratio to 18-1 in first through third grade.

Teachers were carefully monitored to ensure that the state's academic standards were emphasized in lesson plans. Fessenden teachers began spending 90 percent of class time on direct instruction. The fact that students' scores could be tracked to individual classrooms also helped to motivate teachers.

The results exceeded everyone's expectations. The school district had encouraged the school to raise their grade to a "D;" Jenkins was hoping for an improvement to a "C." Fessenden students posted double-digit improvements in reading, writing, and math, exceeding higher performance standards needed to earn an "A." Additionally, the number of students earning the lowest test scores decreased by 14 percent.

Detractors suggest that it will be difficult for the school to maintain the high scores on the FCAT for the 2000-2001 school year. Jenkins calls these allegations "petty jealousy." She says, "When it's not you, you throw darts at everything. We're just going to continue doing what we're doing. We want our kids to perform."³

Greene's analysis of individual schools' FCAT reading scores showed that schools originally receiving a failing grade showed an average gain of almost 18 points. Comparatively, schools receiving an "A" grade in 1999 improved by an average of only 1.9 points. Schools rating a "B" or "C" grade showed almost identical improvement in student reading: 4.85 points and 4.6 points, respectively (see Table 1).

Table 1: Florida A-plus Voucher Program Comparing Test Score Gains by School Grade

School Grade Given by State in 1999	Change in FCAT Scores from 1999 to 2000		
	Reading	Math	Writing
A	1.90 (202)	11.02 (202)	.36 (202)
B	4.85 (308)	9.30 (308)	.39 (308)
C	4.60 (1223)	11.81 (1223)	.45 (1223)
D	10.02 (583)	16.06 (583)	.52 (583)
F	17.59 (76)	25.66 (76)	.87 (76)

The change for F schools compared to schools with higher grades is statistically significant at $p < .01$. Math and Reading scales are from 100 to 500.
The writing scale is from 0 to 6.
Number of schools is in parentheses.

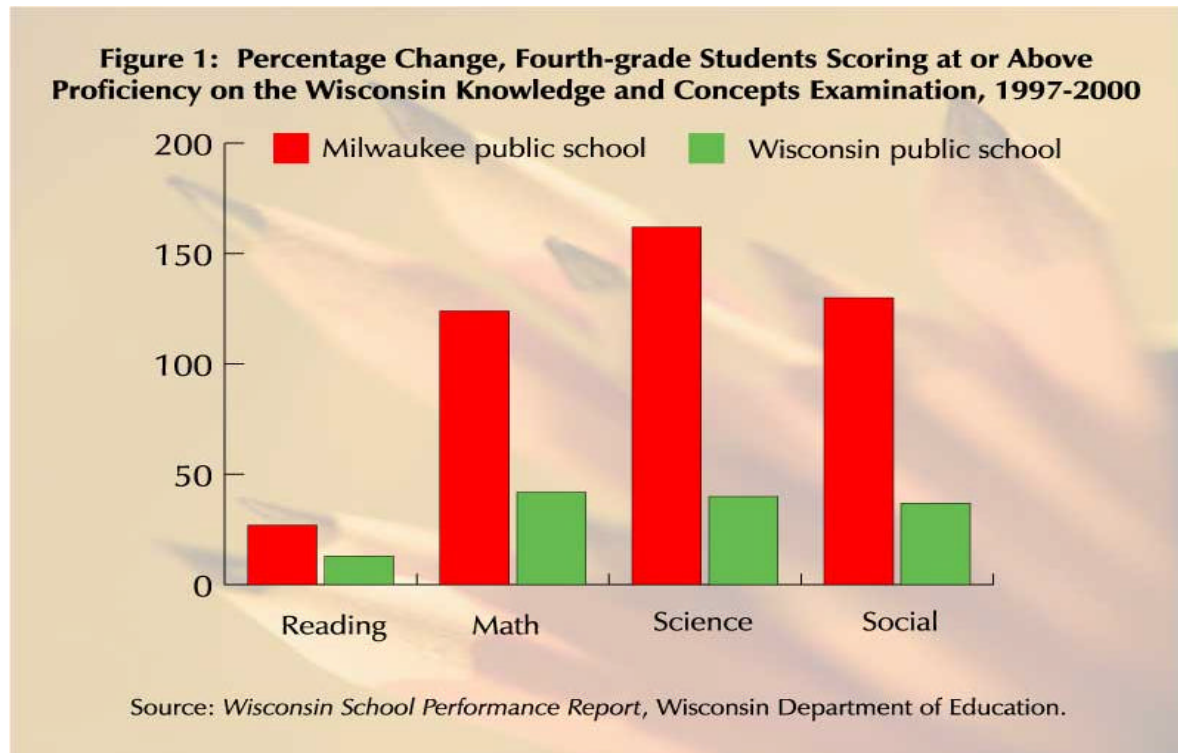
Source: Jay P. Greene, "An Evaluation of the Florida A-plus Accountability and Choice Program," The Manhattan Institute, February 2001, p. 6.

In addition to Greene’s analysis of the “A-plus” program, there is a growing body of empirical and anecdotal evidence that points to improvements in government-school performance when competition is introduced.

B. Milwaukee’s Parental Choice Program

The Milwaukee, Wisconsin Parental Choice Program (MPCP) has grown from seven private schools, 300 voucher students, and \$0.7 million in 1990–1991 to 103 private schools, an estimated 9,600 students, and an estimated \$49 million in 2000–2001.⁴ Although one goal of the MPCP was to encourage improvement in the public schools, during its early years Howard Fuller, former superintendent for the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS), reports that the voucher program had limited impact on MPS. Fuller’s explanation is that participation in the MPCP was limited to a small percentage of MPS students (1 percent during 1991–1993) and 1.5 percent during 1993–1995. In 1995, the program was expanded to allow for 15 percent of MPS enrollment, or 15,000 students. In 1998, the Wisconsin Supreme Court upheld all aspects of the expansion, including participation by religious schools. As a result, the program’s size has increased to close to 10,000 students.⁵

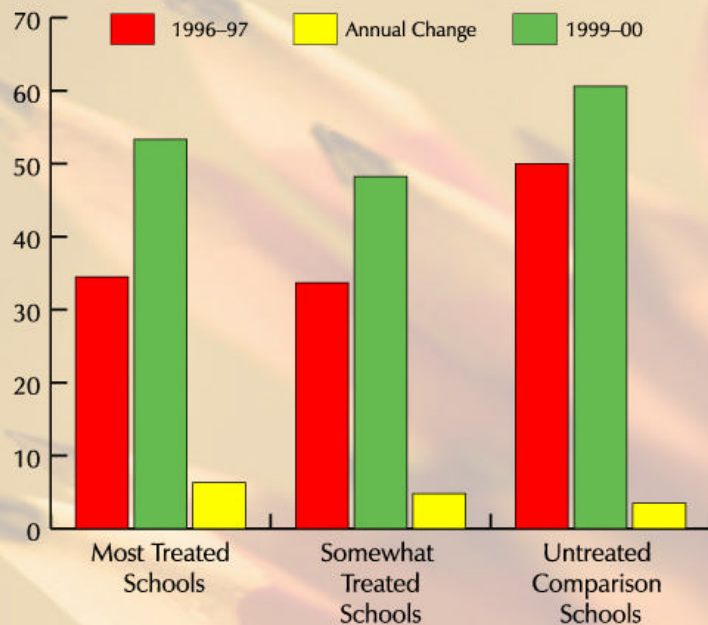
Over the past 10 years in the Milwaukee school system, the performance of students attending public schools has improved dramatically. When comparing test scores of MPS students to the rest of the state, MPS students showed remarkable improvement both in absolute terms as well as relative to the rest of the state.⁶ By every test measure at fourth, eighth, and tenth-grade levels in reading, math, science, and social studies, MPS students improved in local, state, and national assessments between 1997 and 2000. For example, between the 1997–1998 and 1999–2000 school years, the national percentile rank of MPS fourth-grade students improved from a 36 percentile ranking to a 50 percentile ranking in math, 29 to 51 in science, and 35 to 52 in social studies (see Figure 1).⁷



In addition, *USA Today* reported that the MPS test scores have improved significantly since the 1998 MPCP expansion. From the 1997–1998 school year to the 1999–2000 school year, the percentage of fourth-graders scoring at or above proficiency on the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concept Examination went from 45 percent to 58 percent, math scores went from 45 percent to 58 percent, science scores went from 28 percent to 69 percent, and social studies scores went from 29 percent to 68 percent (see Figure 1).⁸

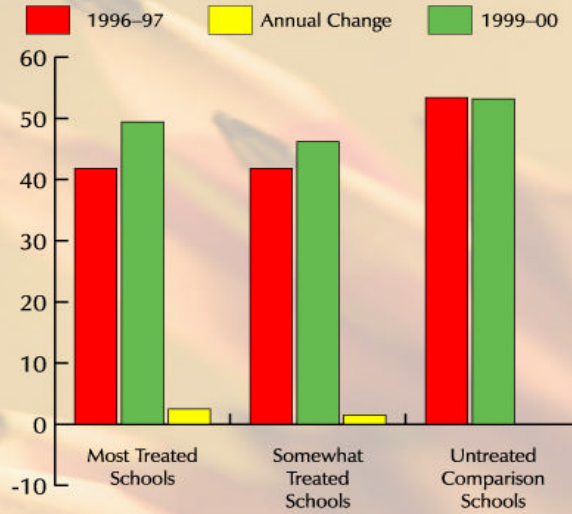
Harvard economist Caroline M. Hoxby recently completed a rigorous examination of the effects of the Milwaukee school choice program on student achievement in the public schools.⁹ Hoxby found that at public elementary schools where many students receive vouchers, performance improved faster than at public schools where only a few students received vouchers. Both Milwaukee schools with a large number of voucher students and those with a few students who took the vouchers did better than a control group of students outside Milwaukee, where no students were eligible for vouchers. In Milwaukee, Hoxby examined performance from the 1996–1997 school year through the 1999–000 school year. She evaluated schools' productivity, which she defined as the ratio of standardized test scores in various subjects to per-student spending. She considered higher scores to indicate improvement only if they didn't accompany vastly higher spending.

Figure 2A: Fourth Grade Math Scores in Wisconsin Voucher School Comparison



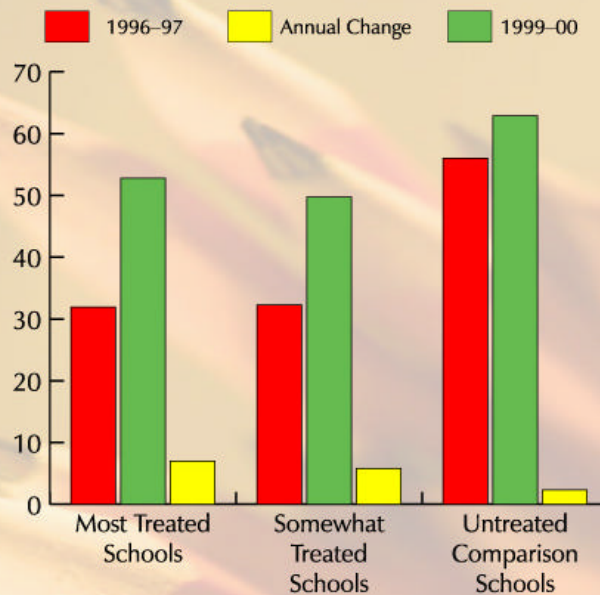
Source: Caroline M. Hoxby, "School Choice and School Productivity: Could School Choice Be a Tide that Lifts All Boats?" Paper presented at Conference on the Economics of School Choice, National Bureau of Economic Research, Islamorada, Florida, February 22–24, 2001.

Figure 2B: Fourth Grade Language Scores in Wisconsin Voucher School Comparison



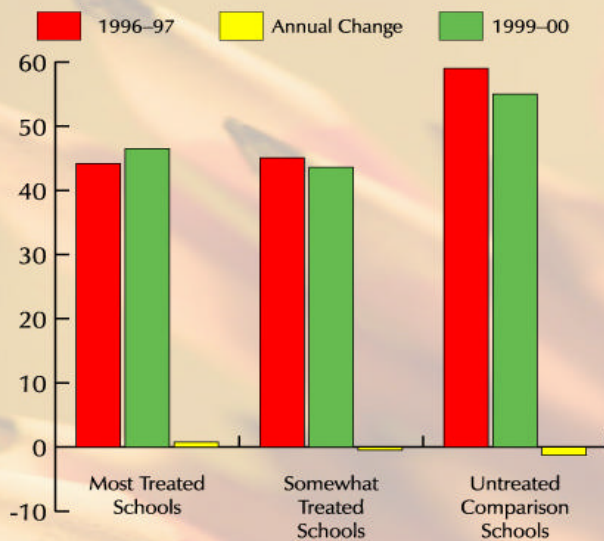
Source: Caroline M. Hoxby, "School Choice and School Productivity: Could School Choice Be a Tide that Lifts All Boats?" Paper presented at Conference on the Economics of School Choice, National Bureau of Economic Research, Islamorada, Florida, February 22-24, 2001.

Figure 2C: Fourth Grade Science Scores in Wisconsin Voucher School Comparison



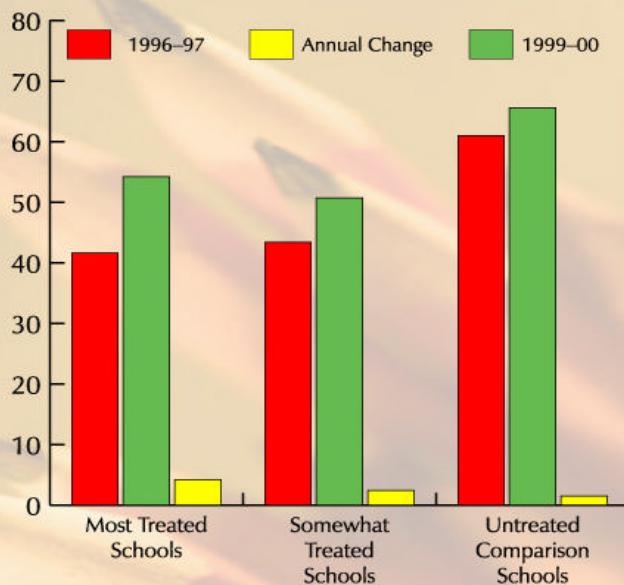
Source: Caroline M. Hoxby, "School Choice and School Productivity: Could School Choice Be a Tide that Lifts All Boats?" Paper presented at Conference on the Economics of School Choice, National Bureau of Economic Research, Islamorada, Florida, February 22-24, 2001.

Figure 2D: Fourth Grade Reading Scores in Wisconsin Voucher School Comparison



Source: Caroline M. Hoxby, "School Choice and School Productivity: Could School Choice Be a Tide that Lifts All Boats?" Paper presented at Conference on the Economics of School Choice, National Bureau of Economic Research, Islamorada, Florida, February 22-24, 2001.

Figure 2E: Fourth Grade Social Study Scores in Wisconsin Voucher School Comparison



Source: Caroline M. Hoxby, "School Choice and School Productivity: Could School Choice Be a Tide that Lifts All Boats?" Paper presented at Conference on the Economics of School Choice, National Bureau of Economic Research, Islamorada, Florida, February 22-24, 2001.

Hoxby divided Wisconsin public elementary schools into two groups: those where more than two-thirds of the students had family incomes low enough to qualify for the voucher program which she labeled “most-treated,” and those where fewer than two-thirds of students qualified which she labeled “somewhat treated.” For comparison, she found 12 Wisconsin schools outside Milwaukee that are in urban areas and have relatively high numbers of poor and black students, which she labeled as “untreated.” Students outside Milwaukee cannot receive vouchers. She found that productivity in math, science, social studies, and grammar improved fastest at the most-treated schools and slowest at the control group of untreated schools (see Figures 2A–E).

Education researcher Howard Fuller points out several specific education improvements that have been made by the MPS since the voucher program was started:¹⁰

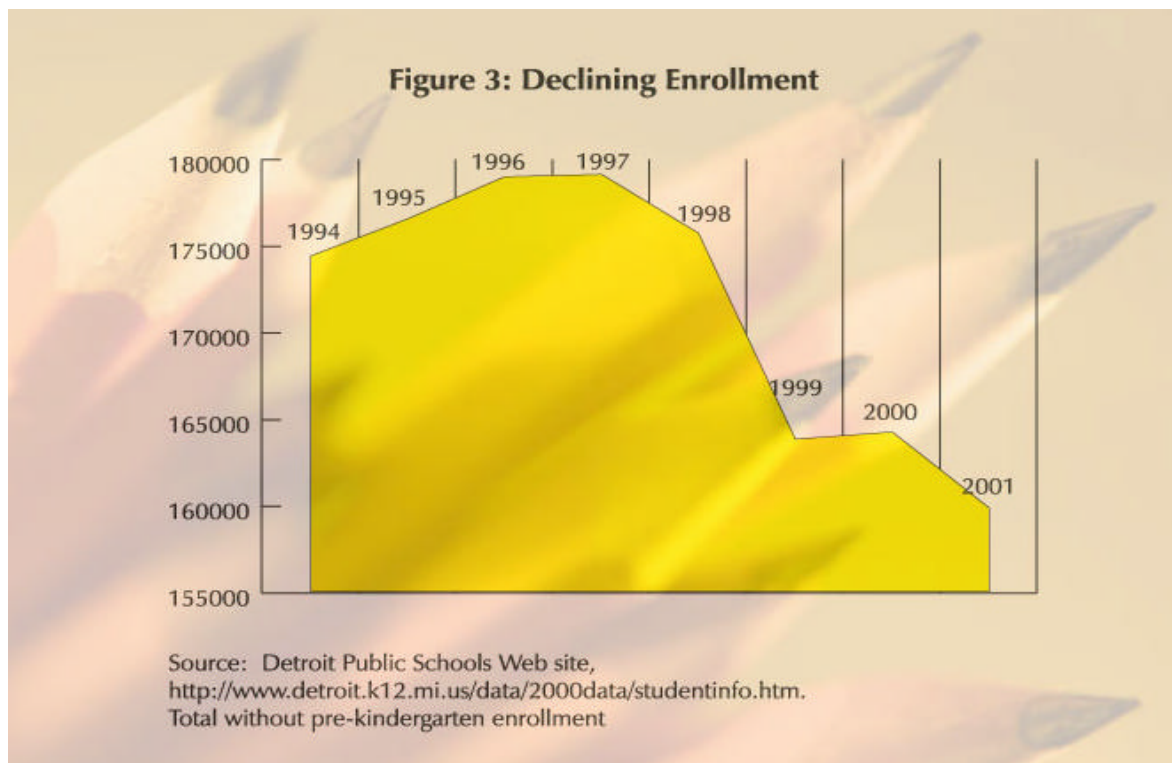
- **More Early Education.** Since 1995, MPS has expanded the number of its five-year-old kindergarten programs and expanded those programs to all-day schedules, 80 percent of four-year-old kindergarten programs are now all-day, and the number of three-year-old programs has tripled.
- **Expanded Before- and After-School Programs.** In 1995, MPS had one school with before- and after-school childcare, recreation, and tutoring programs. Now, as a result of competition, MPS has 82 preschool programs serving 28,000 children.
- **The Growth of Charter Schools.** In 1995, MPS had approved only one charter school. By the 2000–2001 school year, six additional charter schools were approved that are now serving several thousand students.
- **Strengthened Graduation Requirements.** Minimum grades and test scores have been established.

C. Michigan’s Public School Choice

In 1996, the Michigan legislature gave families a school-choice program that allows children to attend other public schools in their own and in neighboring school districts. This school-choice program is motivating traditional public schools to compete for students, because students can now choose from many participating schools. Detroit public schools, for example, lost 19,000 students to charter schools and other school districts in four years (see Figure 3). Detroit also lost more than \$80 million in revenue from the departing students.

For the 2000–2001 school year alone, more than 3,000 students who live in Detroit started classes in other districts.¹¹ Highland Park, a neighboring district, persuaded 1,326 students to enroll in its new public school that was reopened by the district specifically to lure Detroit students.¹² It offered all-day kindergarten, lower class size (18 students in first grade), and after-school tutoring and recreation programs.¹³ The Highland Park district launched a \$32,000 marketing campaign, mailed brochures to eight Detroit zip codes, and placed radio spots and newspaper ads.¹⁴ Highland Park received about \$800,000 more in revenue for its new students.

Now Detroit school officials are looking at ways to finance programs that will keep students in Detroit—including adding all-day kindergarten and reducing class size. “We are looking under every rock and seeing how to reorganize to be more efficient with dollars and effective in getting results,” said Robert Moore, senior deputy chief executive of Detroit schools.¹⁵



An August 2000 report by the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, documents a wide variety of competitive responses to the Michigan school-choice program by Michigan school districts.¹⁶ Based on case studies from several Michigan school districts, the report concludes that:

The evidence is clear: school choice and competition put pressure on low-performing districts to improve their academic performance. Students in failing districts have largely already been “left behind” by people who can afford to choose between better government schools and private schools. Choice programs are providing alternative school options to parents who otherwise could not afford them, while forcing districts to respond to student needs and parental desires.¹⁷

D. District-wide Scholarships in Edgewood, Texas

In Edgewood, Texas, scholarship programs are making a difference. Children’s Educational Opportunity Foundation—the first-ever private scholarship program to target an entire district—provided 1,200 students with scholarships for private schools. As a result, the school district has reported dramatic increases in student performance. In the 1999–2000 school year, students in the district had an 80-percent passing rate on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TASS), as well as improved attendance and lower dropout rates. By contrast, six years ago, Edgewood reported dropout rates of about 50 percent, and only 38 percent of its students could pass the state’s mandatory TASS. Edgewood school district officials contend that the improvements are unrelated to the voucher program, and a more systematic study of Edgewood school improvement needs to be completed to determine the relationship between vouchers and school improvement. However, there is a strong correlation between the voucher program and improved test scores, attendance rates, and lower dropout rates.

E. Research Shows Competition Improves Public School Performance

A new Education Freedom Index (EFI) devised by the Manhattan Institute ranks states according to the amount of school choice parents and students have—including private school vouchers, charter schools, minimal regulation of home schooling, and programs that allow students to attend any public school. The EFI shows a positive correlation between a state’s ranking on this index and student achievement. For example, Texas is in 6th place on the EFI, while South Carolina comes in 43rd. In student achievement, 24 percent of Texas students scored at the “proficient” level on recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests, compared with 18 percent of South Carolina students. The average SAT score was also 42 points higher in Texas than in South Carolina.¹⁸

Another study, released late last year by Caroline Hoxby, shows that competition increases public school performance. She found that achievement, measured by test scores and a student’s future earnings, is higher when there is more choice among school districts.¹⁹ Hoxby compared regions based on the number of school districts they have. In Miami, for example, one district covers the entire county; by contrast, Boston has 70 school districts within a 30-minute commute to downtown. Hoxby found that a one standard-deviation increase in the available public school district choices resulted in a 3-percentile point improvement in test scores and a 4 percent increase in wages for students upon entering the work force—all for 17 percent less per-capita expenditure. In Boston, similarly-ranked students scored 1.4 grades higher and graduated student earned 15 percent more than in Miami.

By examining variation in the amount of choice and competition currently available in the United States, both Hoxby’s research and the Manhattan Institute’s EFI “suggest that areas with more choice and competition experience better academic outcomes than areas with less choice and competition,” says Greene.²⁰

Vouchers as a Legal Sanction

A. State Voucher Legislation

Since some evidence indicates that school vouchers are one effective way to motivate failing public schools to improve student achievement, new legislation will likely emerge at the state and federal levels that uses vouchers as a legal sanction against poorly performing schools. A survey of voucher legislation in 2001 reports that 21 states are currently considering voucher legislation. Of those, 10 states have linked their legislation specifically to failing or poorly performing schools.²¹ While the particulars of these bills vary widely from small pilot programs to statewide voucher initiatives, in all cases they allow students who are attending failing schools to receive vouchers to attend the school of their choice.

Most of these bills are similar to the Florida legislation, wherein public schools are graded based on testing criteria and each grade, “F” to “A,” represents specific score ranges on a standardized test. An atypical approach is to designate students who attend the lowest one-third-ranked schools as eligible for vouchers. This effectively grades schools on a curve and ensures that students in the worst-performing public schools will always be eligible for vouchers. For example, the current proposed bill in New Hampshire states that “a parent shall be eligible to receive a parental choice scholarship if the public school within the district or the school to which the child has been assigned has average scores in the bottom one-third on statewide basis in the state assessment tests for both of the two years preceding the parent’s initial application for a scholarship.”²²

B. President Bush’s Proposed Voucher Sanction

At the federal level, this trend is also evident in President Bush’s education proposal this year to sanction failing public schools. The central component of the Bush plan would overhaul the Title I program for disadvantaged students by requiring states to develop systems of rewards and penalties to hold districts and students accountable for academic progress. Specifically, states would be required to test all students in grades three through eight in reading and mathematics every year as a condition of receiving Title I aid. The voucher sanction in Bush’s plan, which did not survive the bipartisan legislative process, would have given students at disadvantaged schools failing to make “adequate yearly progress” for three consecutive years a voucher to use Title I funds to transfer to a higher-performing public or private school.

C. Vouchers as Sanction Versus Vouchers as Choice

A tension exists between vouchers as a legal sanction and vouchers as a vehicle for parental choice. The threat of voucher sanctions appears to motivate public schools to improve. Yet for most parents, the improvements gained from the voucher sanction are far less immediate than what they would gain by simply enrolling their children in better schools.

Additionally, with vouchers used primarily as a sanction, change in the educational system is driven by incentives created by a centralized, one-size-fits-all set of standards—while with real-choice vouchers, change is driven by the individual and varied preferences of parents. In the latter case, there are richer incentives and richer opportunities for differentiation, thus more satisfied parents. In other words, voucher sanctions are comparable to the government managing a competition between Ford and Chevrolet to produce a government spec sedan, while real-choice vouchers are comparable to the current auto market.

From a parent’s perspective, there are several problems with the way voucher sanctions are conceived and implemented:

- Most voucher legislation gives states from two to five years to improve before the sanction kicks in. For most parents, this is too long a time to leave their child in a failing school.

- The criteria for what qualifies a school as “failing” is very low. Many parents have children in poor schools that have not been designated as “failures” and will thus never be sanctioned with a voucher—yet still do not deliver an education that parents feel is satisfactory.
- Even for schools officially designated as “failures,” the amount of improvement necessary to avoid a voucher sanction is often minimal.

D. Why Voucher-sanction Initiatives Are Not Enough

Individual states vary widely in how they determine what constitutes a “failing” school. Many states have set standards that deem a school’s performance adequate if less than half its students meet state standards for proficiency. At least eight states have set their standard at or around the 40th percentile, and a few have set the standard even lower. In Alabama, for example, more than half of a school’s students must score below the 38th percentile for the school to be put on an intervention track, and more than half must score below the 23rd percentile to immediately target a school for improvement efforts. Thus some states’ criteria for a failing school are too far below what reasonable people would consider failing. Even so, these will never be designated as “failing” based on state criteria for failure.

Some states require schools to meet an absolute target or performance threshold. In Texas, for example, a rating of “acceptable” means that at least 50 percent of students in each sub-group at a given school must pass the state assessment in reading, writing, and math. But do the parents of the students who either did or did not pass the Texas Assessment of Academic Progress find this level of achievement to be “acceptable”?

Another factor that affects standards of evaluation is the concept of adequate yearly progress (AYP), and how it is measured. AYP is determined at the state level and is tied to meeting performance goals and state standards. Certain states require schools to demonstrate relative growth by setting an annual growth target that is based on each school’s past performance and often reflects its distance from state goals. California schools, for example, are assigned individualized annual growth targets based on 5 percent of the difference between their academic performance index score and the statewide interim performance target.

The formula is complex, and is based on student scores on the Stanford-9 test. Schools receive a raw score between 200 and 1,000. The California statewide school target is set at 800. The state of California would like to see all schools average 800 on these Stanford-9 test scores.

To illustrate, let’s examine a typical California school: El Cerrito Elementary, in Corona, California. In 1999, El Cerrito had a raw API score of 585 based on the Stanford-9. Once the raw score was established, the score was then subtracted from the state target score of 800. The difference of 215 was then multiplied by 5 percent to come up with an AYP requirement of 11 percentage points.

This means that to maintain what the state considers to be adequate yearly progress, El Cerrito Elementary must achieve at least an 11 percentage point improvement on the Stanford-9 test by the conclusion of the 2000–2001 school year. Assuming that the school can achieve the mandated minimums each year, it will still be two decades before El Cerrito Elementary can meet the state target score of 800.

The real failures of El Cerrito Elementary become increasingly apparent when actual improvements in reading scores on the Stanford-9 are considered. In 1998, the average second-grade test scores were at the 36th percentile. By the year 2000, average second-grade reading scores went up to the 38th percentile. During the same two-year period, third-grade reading scores gained one percentage point, to the 38th percentile. Fourth-grade scores showed the greatest improvement, from the 31st to the 44th percentile. Fifth- and sixth-grade scores improved slightly more than second- or third-grade scores, yet neither were above the 44th percentile. In spite of these low scores, El Cerrito has not been designated as a failing elementary school. Even if El Cerrito were to be classified as failing, under most voucher initiatives El Cerrito has demonstrated “adequate yearly progress” on standardized tests and is safe from sanction.

The U.S. Senate and the U.S. House of Representatives are trying to address the often-slow progress of AYP. But even in their fast-track recommendations for school improvement, the current versions of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) reauthorization bills would require states’ AYP standards to be high enough to bring all students up to the proficient level within 10 years. In Bush’s proposed education plan, failing schools would be given three years to improve, based on individual state’s criteria for failing—then as long as a failing school makes adequate yearly progress, based on individual states’s requirements for improvement, it would be given 10 years to meet state standards for proficiency.

Recommendations

A. Grade Schools on a Curve or Establish a Lowest Percentile

When considering how to frame voucher legislation, schools should be graded on a curve. Currently, the most common way to grade schools is to assign a designation based on specific test scores. Some states designate schools as failures when a certain percentage of students fail a standardized test. In Texas, for example, if every school could meet the state requirement of a 50-percent passing rate on the TASS, then no schools would be eligible for sanction. In order to solve this problem, legislation should be defined that makes what constitutes a “failure” more flexible. As schools improve, the threshold to avoid sanction should be raised.

An even better approach would be to designate a percentage of the lowest-scoring schools to receive the vouchers. If the bottom third or fourth of the lowest-performing schools are always threatened with sanction, they will work harder to continually improve and sustain school improvements over time. This standard would ensure that schools will continually compete to stay out of the lowest-scoring percentile, rather than simply meeting the minimum score required to avoid an “F” designation.

B. Use Vouchers as a Sanction in Conjunction with Other School Choices

As shown earlier, research suggests that areas with more choice and competition experience better academic outcomes. Therefore, voucher-sanction initiatives should be used as a supplement to a multi-faceted menu of school choice. In addition to vouchers, state governments should:

- **Legislate Open Enrollment Policies.** All students in failing schools should immediately be eligible to transfer to a better public school, as in Michigan.
- **Institute Tax Credit Programs.** Florida has passed a robust tax credit that can be used by corporations to fund private scholarships. The tax-credit program promises to raise \$50 million for scholarships for low-income public-school students—enough to provide over 12,000 students with \$3,500 scholarships for private-school tuitions. Tax credits could similarly be given to individuals who contribute to private scholarship funds.
- **Support Strong Charter School Laws.** In states like Arizona, California, and Michigan, charter schools have provided parents with a real alternative to public schools.

Conclusion

How many parents want to leave their child in a school for three years while the school struggles to get off the failing list? How many families have 10 years to wait for their local public school to meet minimum state standards? When policymakers think about legislating vouchers as legal sanctions to motivate public schools to improve, they need to decide which outcome is more desirable for the parents with students enrolled in a low-performing school: a small number of students receiving vouchers so that failing schools can improve student achievement by several percentile points to rise just above an “F” designation, or thousands of students receiving vouchers in an area where parents have a real choice among schools for the quality of their child’s education?

Imagine the frustration of Florida parents with children in those failing schools who are now denied the opportunity of a real education for their children simply because an 18-point improvement earned a formerly failing school a grade of “D.” The “F” schools did improve, but still showed an average reading score of only 272 out of a possible 500 points on the FCAT. How many of those Florida parents with students enrolled in a school that is now 20 points above an “F” would send their children somewhere else if they had the opportunity? As legislators and policy analysts consider replicating the Florida voucher model throughout the United States, they should keep in mind the tension between public school improvement, the standards that measure improvement, and the issue of real parental choice.

From a parent's perspective, the best option is a program that sanctions the public schools while also providing parents with as many school-choice opportunities as possible—through tax credits, charter schools, and public school choice—so that they can give their child the best possible education while their child is still in school. ■

About the Author



Lisa Snell is director of the Education and Child Welfare Program at Reason Public Policy Institute, where she oversees RPPI's research on social services and education issues. Her most recent RPPI policy studies include *Remedial Education Reform: Private Alternatives to Traditional Title I*, *Child Welfare Reform and the Role of Privatization*, *Private Options to Help Students Read*, and *Innovative School Facility Partnerships: Downtown, Airport, and Retail Space*.

Related RPPI Studies

Response to Bush Education Plan: School Vouchers are Needed to Enforce Bush's Accountability Program, By Lisa Snell, E-brief 110, January 2001

Private Options to Help Students Read, By Lisa Snell, Policy Brief 14, December 2000

Innovative School Facility Partnerships: Downtown, Airport, and Retail Space, By Mathew Taylor and Lisa Snell, Policy Study No. 276, December 2000.

Endnotes

- ¹ www.leg.state.fl.us/statutes.
- ² Jay P. Greene, *An Evaluation of the Florida A-plus Accountability and School Choice Program* (Cambridge, MA: Program on Education Policy and Governance, Harvard University, February 2001), p. 4.
- ³ Karla Scoon Reid, "From Worst to First," *Education Week*, April 11, 2001, p. 32–37.
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