

WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 1965
June 20, 2008

Safer Kids, Better Test Scores: The D.C. Voucher Program Works

Shanea J. Watkins, Ph.D.

In January 2004, Congress passed the District of Columbia School Choice Incentive Act of 2003, the first federally funded school voucher program in the United States. Now known as the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program, this initiative provides scholarships of up to \$7,500 to more than 1,900 low-income students in the District. A recent U.S. Department of Education (DOE) evaluation of the program should provide policymakers with some encouragement, as the report demonstrates that the Opportunity Scholarship Program is having a positive impact on students and families alike.¹

Academic Achievement. The DOE evaluation reviews the first two years of the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program, examining approximately 19 months of instruction. The results indicate that students who received vouchers realized higher academic achievement than students who were not awarded a voucher, though the differences between both groups of students were not statistically significant.²

Despite this lack of statistical differentiation, students who participated in the Opportunity Scholarship Program achieved higher reading scores than students who did not. The study also indicated that certain subgroups of students experienced significant positive gains in reading achievement.³ These results are encouraging because they offer compelling evidence of two years of positive achievement gains for D.C. voucher program participants.⁴

Relying on a random assignment experiment, the DOE study compared the results of students who were awarded vouchers as part of a lottery process to those of students who applied for but did not receive a voucher. Several other voucher program studies using random assignment have been conducted to determine the effects that school vouchers have on math and reading achievement. These studies include evaluations of public and privately funded voucher programs in Wisconsin,⁵ North Carolina,⁶ Ohio,⁷ and New York.⁸ In each study, students who participated in a voucher program experienced significant gains in math and reading achievement compared to their peers in the public school system.

Of particular importance to the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship program is the fact that, in several cases, significant gains in academic achievement were not observed until after the third or fourth year of program participation.

Parental Satisfaction and Feelings of School Safety. Parents have many motivations for participating in a school choice program. One common assumption is that parents choose a different school primarily for improved academics. However, there

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/Research/Education/wm1965.cfm

Produced by the Center for Data Analysis

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

is some evidence that moving their children into a safer school was, at least initially, one of the primary motivations for parents participating in the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship program. Such motivation was especially evident for parents involved in the program from its inception.⁹ Given that school violence is a persistent problem in the D.C. public school system, parents are—logically—most concerned with the physical well-being of their children at school.¹⁰

The D.C. Opportunity Scholarship program has had a significant impact on parental satisfaction and feelings of safety. According to the DOE evaluation, parents participating in the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship program were significantly less likely to

report that their child's school was dangerous when compared to parents who were not offered a scholarship. Furthermore, voucher parents were also significantly more likely to report that they were satisfied with their child's school.

Parents who are satisfied with their child's school and who are not worried about their child's safety would presumably focus on other education-related matters, including academic quality. That's exactly what the School Choice Demonstration Project found: In focus groups, parents expressed that, as they grew more confident in the security of their children, they were more apt to focus on "academic considerations, such as class size, curriculum and the overall rigor of the school's program."¹¹

1. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, "Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Impacts After Two Years," June 16, 2008, at <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pdf/20084023.pdf> (June 19, 2008).
2. Statistical significance is a measure by which researchers can determine whether or not some phenomenon happened by only chance, instead of being attributed to the conditions being studied. In the case of vouchers, researchers want to know if the voucher is causing the achievement effect, or if some other random factor may be influencing the outcome. Most frequently, researchers set this at 95% significance. The results of a study that meets this significance requirement would be interpreted as only happening by chance 5 out of every 100 times observed.
3. The authors warn that these results should be interpreted cautiously as further reliability testing shows that these results might only be observed by chance.
4. The first year evaluation found similar effects for math achievement as are reported for reading achievement in this year's evaluation. See U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, *Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Impacts After One Year*, June 2007, at <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pdf/20074009.pdf> (June 19, 2008).
5. Jay P. Greene, Paul E. Peterson, and Jiangtao Du, "School Choice in Milwaukee: A Randomized Experiment," in Paul E. Peterson and Bryan C. Hassel, eds., *Learning from School Choice* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1998), and Cecilia Elena Rouse, "Private School Vouchers and Student Achievement," *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Vol. 113, No. 2 (May 1998).
6. Jay P. Greene, "Vouchers in Charlotte," *Education Matters*, Summer 2001, at http://media.hoover.org/documents/ednext20012_46b.pdf (June 19, 2008).
7. William G. Howell and Paul E. Peterson, *The Education Gap: Vouchers and Urban Schools*, revised ed. (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2006).
8. John Barnard, Constantine E. Frangakis, Jennifer L. Hill, and Donald B. Rubin, "Principal Stratification Approach to Broken Randomized Experiments: A Case Study of School Choice Vouchers in New York City," *Journal of the American Statistical Association*, Vol. 98, No. 462 (June 2003); Howell and Peterson, *The Education Gap*; Alan B. Krueger and Pei Zhu, "Another Look at the New York City School Voucher Experiment," Princeton University, Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs *Policy Brief*, April 2003, at http://www.wws.princeton.edu/policybriefs/krueger_voucher.pdf (August 31, 2006); and Paul E. Peterson and William G. Howell, "Latest Results from the New York City Voucher Experiment," paper prepared for presentation before the Association of Public Policy and Management, Washington, D.C., November 2003, at <http://www.educationnext.org/unabridged/20042/peterson.pdf> (August 31, 2006).
9. Thomas Stewart, Patrick J. Wolf, Stephen Q. Cornman, and Kenann McKenzie-Thompson, "Satisfied, Optimistic, Yet Concerned: Parent Voices on the Third Year of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program" Georgetown University Public Policy Institute, School Choice Demonstration Project *Report 0702*, December 2007, at <http://hpi.georgetown.edu/scdp/files/PSV3.pdf> (June 19, 2008).
10. Dan Lips and Evan Feinberg, "Improving Education in the Nation's Capital: Expanding School Choice," Heritage Foundation *Background* No. 2137, May 14, 2008, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Education/bg2137.cfm>.

What Congress Should Do. The D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program has provided hundreds of families with an alternative to public schools that, more often than not, fail to meet the safety and educational needs of students. Yet, despite its successes, vouchers are under attack, with District of Columbia Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton spearheading legislative efforts to eliminate the program.¹²

Failing to reauthorize the Opportunity Scholarship Program would leave families and students involved in the program without the ability to choose a school that is safer and more effective. A new Web site, Voices of School Choice (<http://www.voicesofschoolchoice.org>), provides firsthand accounts of how the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program has changed the lives of involved parents and students for the better.

Congress should expand school choice options for District families, thereby giving more students the opportunity to attend a secure and successful school of their parents' choice. At a minimum, Members of Congress should reauthorize and fund the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship program to allow the 1,900 children who are already flourishing in the voucher program to retain school choice. Beyond helping these disadvantaged families, continuing the program will provide additional evidence documenting the extent to which students can benefit from school choice.

—Shanea J. Watkins, Ph.D., is Policy Analyst in Empirical Studies in the Center for Data Analysis at The Heritage Foundation.

11. Stewart *et al.*, "Satisfied, Optimistic, Yet Concerned," p. 9.

12. Valerie Strauss and Bill Turque, "Fate of D.C. Voucher Program Darkens," *The Washington Post*, June 9, 2008, at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/06/08/AR2008060802041.html> (June 18, 2008).