

ISSUE BRIEF

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The Value of Parental Choice in Education: A Look at the Research

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Over the past decade, a growing body of empirical research examining the impact of school choice has emerged. Education researcher Greg Forster, PhD, conducted an analysis of all existing empirical evaluations of school choice programs to date. According to Forster, 11 out of 12 random assignment studies found that choice improved the academic outcomes of participants; not a single evaluation found that school choice had a negative impact on academic outcomes.

Forster also examined the empirical evidence on the impact of school choice on students who remained in nearby public schools. Of the 23 such studies conducted to date, 22 have found that school choice improves outcomes at public schools.¹

Increased Graduation Rates. Making up this body of empirical evidence on school choice are several congressionally mandated evaluations of the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program (DCOSP), which provides scholarships to students from low-income families living in Washington, D.C., to attend private schools of choice. When the DCOSP was established in 2003, Congress mandated that the U.S. Department of Education conduct evaluations of the program's impact on participants. The fourth and final evaluation, completed in 2010 by Patrick

Wolf, PhD, found statistically significant increases in graduation rates as a result of using a scholarship to attend a private school of choice. According to the random assignment evaluation, there was a 21 percentage point increase in graduation rates for DCOSP students.²

The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP) provides scholarships to students from low-income families to attend a private school of choice. As with the DCOSP, numerous evaluations of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program have been conducted over the past several decades. Notably, MPCP students have increased their likelihood of graduating and subsequently enrolling in college by four to seven percentage points.³

Improvements in the Public System. The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program provides dollar-for-dollar tax credits to corporations that contribute to organizations that provide vouchers to children from low-income families to attend private schools of choice. Researchers Cassandra Hart and David Figlio examined whether the test scores of students in public schools that risked losing students to private schools through the tax credit program improved relative to students in public schools that were less affected by the scholarship program.

"We find that they do," write Hart and Figlio, "and that this improvement occurs before any students have actually used a scholarship to switch schools. In other words, it occurs from the threat of competition alone."⁴ Similar findings revealed that students in the Milwaukee public school system were "performing at somewhat higher levels as a result of competitive pressure from the school voucher program."⁵

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at
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Better Access to Services for Children with Special Needs. Florida is home to the McKay Scholarship Program for Students with Disabilities, which provides vouchers to students with special needs to attend a private school of choice. Researchers Jay P. Greene and Marcus A. Winters examined the impact of the McKay program on the students who remained in the public school system and found outcomes akin to the competitive pressure boost resulting from the tax credit scholarship program.⁶ Greene and Winters found statistically significant increases in the test scores of students with disabilities who remained in the public system as more private schools entered the McKay program, suggesting “that schools were serving those students better when they faced more competition from the McKay program.... Vouchers do not drain public schools of their ability to serve disabled students; instead, schools are pushed to serve those students better.”⁷

McKay scholarship recipients are also more likely to obtain the services they need. An empirical evaluation by Greene and Forster found that 86 percent of McKay scholarship recipients reported that their school provided all promised services; just 30 percent reported that their assigned public schools

provided all of the services required under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

Moreover, researchers Virginia Weidner and Carolyn Herrington reported that “almost 90% of McKay respondents...were satisfied or very satisfied with the school their child attends, whereas only 71.4% of public school respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with the school their child attends.”⁸

Increased Parental Satisfaction and Involvement. High levels of parental satisfaction in school choice programs is a recurring theme. More than 70 percent of survey respondents in Arizona’s innovative education savings account program reported being “very satisfied” with their children’s educational experience.⁹ Similarly, parents of students in the DCOSP were more satisfied with their children’s schools than were parents of children in the control group.¹⁰

According to a national poll of mothers with school-age children, 66 percent support universal vouchers for children to attend a school of choice; 69 percent support tuition tax credit options. The poll, conducted in 2013 by the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, found that just 43 percent of mothers surveyed gave their local public school a grade of “A” or “B,” down from 62 percent the year before.¹¹

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1. Greg Forster, “A Win-Win Solution: The Empirical Evidence on School Choice,” Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, April 2013, <http://www.edchoice.org/CMSModules/EdChoice/FileLibrary/994/A-Win-Win-Solution--The-Empirical-Evidence-on-School-Choice.pdf> (accessed March 17, 2014).
 2. Patrick Wolf et al., *Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Final Report*, U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, June 2010, <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/20104018/pdf/20104018.pdf> (accessed March 17, 2014).
 3. Patrick Wolf, “Comprehensive Longitudinal Evaluation of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program: Summary of Fourth Year Reports,” University of Arkansas, Department of Education Reform, School Choice Demonstration Project, March 2011, http://heartland.org/sites/all/modules/custom/heartland_migration/files/pdfs/30111.pdf (accessed March 17, 2014).
 4. Cassandra M. D. Hart and David Figlio, “Does Competition Improve Public Schools?,” *Education Next*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Winter 2011), <http://educationnext.org/does-competition-improve-public-schools/> (accessed March 17, 2014).
 5. Wolf, “Comprehensive Longitudinal Evaluation of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program.”
 6. Jay P. Greene and Marcus A. Winters, “The Effect of Special Education Vouchers on Public School Achievement: Evidence From Florida’s McKay Scholarship Program,” Manhattan Institute for Public Policy Research *Civic Report* No. 52, April 2008, at http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr_52.htm.
 7. Stuart Buck and Jay P. Greene, “The Case for Special Education Vouchers,” *Education Next*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Winter 2010), <http://educationnext.org/the-case-for-special-education-vouchers/> (accessed March 17, 2014).
 8. *Ibid.*
 9. Jonathan Butcher and Jason Bedrick, “Schooling Satisfaction: Arizona Parents’ Opinions on Using Education Savings Accounts,” Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, October 2013, <http://www.edchoice.org/CMSModules/EdChoice/FileLibrary/1019/SCHOOLING-SATISFACTION-Arizona-Parents-Opinions-o-Using-Education-Savings-Accounts.pdf> (accessed March 17, 2014).
 10. Wolf et al., *Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program*.
 11. Paul DiPerna, “Schooling in America Survey: What Do Mothers Say About K-12 Education?” Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, May 8, 2013, <http://www.edchoice.org/Research/Reports/Schooling-in-America-Survey--What-Do-Mothers-Say-About-K-12-Education-.aspx> (accessed March 17, 2014).

School choice also increases parents' involvement in their children's education. In an evaluation of the DCOSP, researchers Stephen Q. Cornman, Thomas Stewart, PhD, and Patrick Wolf detailed dramatic increases in parental involvement as reported by the parents:

Our research suggests that one of the most positive consequences of the OSP is that parental involvement with their child's education has increased. Parents of high school, middle school and elementary students across both cohorts in the first and second year of the OSP emphatically stated that their parental involvement had dramatically increased when their children entered the OSP program.¹²

In a subsequent qualitative evaluation, University of Arkansas researchers reported:

By the end of the second year of data collection it became very clear to us that the vast majority of the families were moving from a marginal role as passive recipients of school assignments to active participants in the school selection process in very practical ways. For example, they were being

challenged to collect information about several schools; review this information and use it to refine their choices; and eventually visit schools and engage teachers and administrators in a completely new fashion. This type of thinking and behavior is commonly associated with other big-ticket purchases like homes or cars. Yet, the average family in the OSP does not own a home or car and often has not acquired some of the transferable experiences and skills that are involved with these transactions.

This realization suggested that most OSP parents were essentially moving from the margins to the center of their children's academic development.¹³

Using Research to Inform Policy. A growing body of empirical evidence demonstrates the many positive benefits of providing choice in education. Instead of policies to increase spending on the public education *system*, states and local school districts would better serve students by empowering parents with *control* over their share of education funding.

—*Lindsey M. Burke is Will Skillman Fellow in Education at The Heritage Foundation.*

12. Stephen Q. Cornman, Thomas Stewart, and Patrick J. Wolf, *The Evolution of School Choice Consumers: Parent and Student Voices on the Second Year of the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program*, Georgetown University School Choice Demonstration Project, May 2007, <http://hpi.georgetown.edu/scdp/files/PSV2.pdf> (accessed March 17, 2014).

13. Thomas Stewart et al., "Family Reflections on the District of Columbia Opportunity Scholarship Program: Final Summary Report," University of Arkansas, Department of Education Reform, School Choice Demonstration Project, January 2009, http://www.uaedreform.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/01/Family_Reflections_DCOSP_2009_Final.pdf (accessed March 17, 2014).