
Special Issues

The Milwaukee Voucher Program

The Wisconsin Legislature enacted a voucher program for the city of Milwaukee in 1990. Officially called the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, it has been the nation's largest voucher program for several years, with 11,621 students attending 102 private and religious schools in the 2002-03 school year.¹

Eligibility is limited to K-12 students who live in Milwaukee. Their family income may not exceed 175 percent of the federal poverty level, which was \$31,536 for a family of four in the 2002-03 school year. Students enrolled in a Milwaukee public school the previous year are eligible, as are children just beginning kindergarten and students in grades K-3 who attended any private school in the city the previous year. However, the total number of vouchers is capped at 15 percent of Milwaukee Public Schools' enrollment, or roughly 15,000 students. The 2002-03 enrollment is the largest since the program's creation.²

Private schools in the program may not deny admission to any student on the basis of race, religion, or previous test scores.³ The schools determine how many students with vouchers they are willing to accept for each grade, and then they must accept all eligible students, space permitting. If there are more applicants than available places, schools are supposed to hold a lottery to determine which students they will admit. However, a 2001 U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) report noted that the state does not monitor the lottery process and schools do not report on its actual use.⁴

Initially, the program was limited to nonreligious private schools, but in 1995 it was expanded to include religious schools. However, religious schools did not actually join the program until the Wisconsin Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of this change in *Jackson v. Benson* in 1998. As a result, many students who had already been enrolled in Milwaukee religious schools became eligible for vouchers. In fact, out of 4,862 new students entering the program in 1998-99, 2,252 (or 46 percent) had already been attending private school without a voucher; and just 1,433, or 29 percent, came from the city's public schools. (The remainder had not previously been enrolled in school and probably were beginning kindergarten).⁵ In the academic year 2001-02, approximately 71 percent of all students in the voucher program attended a religious school.⁶

The cost of the program. The amount of the voucher and, thus, the cost to taxpayers has continued to increase. In the 2002-03 school year, each voucher was worth an estimated \$5,785 or the private school's "operating and debt service" cost per student, whichever was less. The total cost of the voucher program was expected to be \$65.6 million that year, a record high. Private schools cannot charge students tuition above the amount of the voucher, and, in fact, the amount of the voucher actually exceeds the published tuition rates at some participating schools. Some researchers have noted that students with vouchers can provide a financial

windfall because some schools collect more from taxpayers via the voucher than they do from tuition-paying students. One study showed that, on average, Wisconsin taxpayers spend more than \$2,500 per voucher student above what tuition-paying students are charged.⁷ This is permissible under the law since the voucher can be based on a school's operating and debt service cost, rather than its tuition.

As the voucher program has grown, the state has gotten the money to fund it from three different sources. From 1990 to 1999, the entire cost was deducted from state aid that otherwise would have gone to the Milwaukee Public Schools. In 1999, however, with the inclusion of religious schools and the resulting spike in the number of students seeking vouchers, the Wisconsin legislature amended the funding structure so that half the cost of the program was borne by the Milwaukee Public Schools and the other half by all other Wisconsin public school districts. School districts were then permitted to raise their local property taxes in order to offset any reduction in state aid.⁸

But this did not solve the funding problems created by the voucher legislation. A 2001 report from the state's Legislative Fiscal Bureau revealed that the new funding plan, in conjunction with the state's already complicated system for funding public education, led to some unequal results. Two hundred thirty-eight Wisconsin school districts (including Milwaukee) suffered a net loss in state funds. Rural school districts suffered the most.⁹ At the same time, 187 districts actually experienced a net gain in state funding. This revelation prompted the state legislature to change the funding system again. Thus, during the 2001 legislative session, lawmakers amended the law so that 45 percent of the cost of the voucher program is now deducted from state aid to the Milwaukee Public Schools and 55 percent from the state's general purpose fund.¹⁰

What has all this meant for taxpayers in Milwaukee? They pay what amounts to two school taxes, one for the city's public schools and one for the voucher program. The state's Legislative Audit Bureau has confirmed that local property taxes would be lower without the voucher program.¹¹ A report from another organization concluded that a taxpayer in Milwaukee with a home valued at \$88,500 (the median value in the city) pays \$774 a year in property taxes for the public schools and another \$142 a year for voucher schools. In other words, roughly 16 percent of a taxpayer's total school tax bill is spent on the voucher program, although the program enrolls just 10 percent of the city's students.¹²

Private school accountability. Voucher schools do not have to employ certified teachers, and they are not required to administer state academic tests to their students; nor do they have to report on academic achievement to the public.¹³ Voucher schools also do not have to serve students who have special educational needs if doing so would necessitate making any more than minor adjustments to the school's existing programs or facilities. In effect, this means voucher schools can turn away children with disabilities.¹⁴

Once a school has been accepted into the voucher program, accountability provisions are minimal compared to those faced by public schools. A voucher school can remain in the program by meeting just one of the following four criteria: (1) at least 70 percent of its students

must advance one grade level each year; (2) average attendance must be 90 percent; (3) at least 80 percent of students must show significant academic progress; or (4) at least 70 percent of parents must meet parent involvement criteria that the school establishes.¹⁵ In other words, if a school is unable to meet any of the first three criteria, it can set its own benchmark to make sure it meets the criterion for parental involvement and thus remain in the program.

The dangers inherent in this laissez-faire attitude are obvious. By the sixth year of the Milwaukee voucher program, three voucher schools had gone bankrupt, and a fourth had halted operations. The bankruptcies left more than 400 students searching for a new school midway through the year. Two voucher school principals had been indicted, and one was sent to prison. Two of the schools had overcharged taxpayers \$390,000 by falsely inflating student enrollment numbers.¹⁶ A few years later, the chief executive officer of yet another voucher school was convicted of tax fraud. During his trial, the public learned of his previous conviction for rape and burglary.¹⁷

With the 2000-01 school year, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction began to insist that voucher schools provide documentation about school curriculum and the number of hours of instruction, as well as a building occupancy permit indicating that the school met basic safety and health code standards. Once the requirement for a permit was in place, it didn't take long to catch a Milwaukee man who was on the verge of defrauding taxpayers of more than \$141,000. The founder of the projected Sensus-Utcha Institute for Holistic Learning had applications in hand from approximately 130 parents, but the "Institute" didn't really exist—at least, there was no real school building.¹⁸

The founder planned to hold the school in his three-bedroom house, which had no electricity or heat. But that was not the only shocking revelation about this voucher school. The founder had informed parents that he had a relaxed attitude toward school attendance: Students could stay home and still be considered present. And he told the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, which covered the Sensus-Utcha story in some detail, that he was able to read books simply by laying his hands on them. Among his academic credits was a Ph.D. in "metaphysics" from a Minneapolis college. The 60-day program granting this degree reportedly cost \$199, although students were advised that they need not wait until they had completed the program before calling themselves "doctor." Except for the city's building occupancy permit, a requirement that did not exist for the first 10 years of Milwaukee's voucher program, the Sensus-Utcha Institute for Holistic Learning would have been fully qualified under Wisconsin law to accept voucher students and receive taxpayer dollars.

While some might say that state education authorities should be more vigilant, their hands are effectively tied. Here's how Tricia Collins, director of the voucher program for the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, puts it: "We are concerned about how public dollars are being used, but the law doesn't provide us with much oversight. When we do request something as simple as an occupancy permit, we get criticized for trying to undermine the program."¹⁹ Attempts by the former state superintendent of education and others

to require more public accountability from the voucher schools, including academic achievement requirements similar to those in public schools, have failed in recent years. The *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* recently noted the absence of critical accountability requirements:

The next state superintendent of public instruction must strive to put some controls on the program. Right now, for example, regulations would not stop a convicted murderer or rapist from opening a choice school. Oversight of the money is too lax, and the program lacks measures of academic success.²⁰

Court decisions. In 1998, the Wisconsin Supreme Court, in *Jackson v. Benson*, ruled 4-2 that the voucher program does not violate the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution because the benefit to religious schools is indirect and results from independent choices by participating parents. On appeal, the U.S. Supreme Court let stand the ruling by refusing to hear the case.

Polling data. A 2000 poll by the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel and the Public Policy Forum found that 60 percent of Wisconsin residents oppose giving public money to parents to pay for all or part of private school tuition, and 33 percent said they supported vouchers.

The Cleveland Voucher Program

The Cleveland program, enacted by the Ohio Legislature in 1995, was the nation's first publicly funded voucher plan that included religious schools. Although it is not the country's oldest or largest voucher program, it probably is the best known, thanks to the June 2002 U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* that declared the program constitutionally permissible.

Beginning with the 1996-97 school year, the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program, as it is officially called, granted vouchers to 2,000 students in grades K-3. The program enrolled about 5,200 students by the 2002-03 school year, with about 50 private schools participating. Most new students are in grades K-3, and they can continue to receive a voucher through the eighth grade. Students already attending private schools are eligible to receive a voucher. To be eligible, students must reside within the Cleveland school district limits.²¹

The voucher program is funded from the Cleveland public schools' share of a state program, Disadvantaged Pupil Impact Aid (DPIA), which is supposed to provide money to help pay for smaller class sizes, all-day kindergarten, and reading improvement programs in the public schools.²² During the 1999-2000 school year, the voucher program cost \$11.2 million, thus reducing the DPIA funds for the Cleveland public schools from \$80.5 million to \$69.3 million.²³ Instead of being spent to help disadvantaged public school children, the money went to students in the voucher program, many of whom had attended private schools even before receiving a voucher.²⁴

The vouchers cover from 75 percent to 90 percent of the private school's tuition, depending on family income, up to a maximum of \$2,250. Although the voucher program has no income cap on eligibility, students from families with incomes not exceeding 200 percent of the federal poverty level get priority. Students with higher family incomes are put on a waiting list and receive vouchers if any remain unused. Nearly 30 percent of the students in the program at the end of the 2001-02 school year were from families whose income exceeded the 200 percent threshold. In fact, a special state audit in 1998 revealed that some vouchers had gone to students whose family's annual incomes ranged from \$50,000 to \$90,000.²⁵

New students interested in a voucher must first participate in a lottery held at the state level. If they are awarded a voucher, they then apply to a participating private school. If the school has more applicants than available space, students are selected by a school-level lottery. As is the case with the Milwaukee program, it cannot be established that private schools actually use a random selection process because the state does not monitor the school-level lotteries.²⁶

In fact, a special state audit did uncover problems with the state-level lottery process. When state auditors observed the lottery drawing for the 1999 school year, they found no written policies or procedures in place to govern the drawing. Moreover, since applicants' eligibility is not determined prior to the lottery, "...the potential exists for applicants who are from low-income families to be left out of the program because an applicant from a higher income bracket was selected in the lottery," as the audit states.²⁷

Private schools in the program may not deny admission to students on the basis of race, ethnicity, or religion. They can, however, use a student's past academic performance or disciplinary record in their admissions decisions.²⁸ Originally, voucher schools were to accept students without regard to such information, but many religious schools objected to the restriction. According to the program's original director, "They didn't want to be hampered in terms of accepting students."²⁹

Private schools in the Cleveland voucher program do not have to admit "separately educated handicapped students" (that is, no students with an Individualized Education Plan).³⁰ Although the state will pay 100 percent of the extra education costs beyond the basic tuition amount, it is up to the private school to determine whether it will accept children with disabilities.³¹ Many parents of former voucher students have complained that the program does not meet the needs of children with disabilities, and a former voucher school operator and a state official have admitted that this is the case.³²

Court decisions. On June 27, 2002, the U.S. Supreme Court, in a 5-4 decision in *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*, ruled that the Cleveland program does not violate the First Amendment's Establishment Clause. That decision overturned a federal appeals court ruling in December 2000.

Florida's Voucher Programs

A+ Opportunity Scholarships. When Florida's original voucher program was enacted in 1999, it became the nation's first statewide voucher program. (Note: Colorado enacted a statewide program in 2003.) It was part of a broad education reform plan that grades all Florida public schools based on test scores. Students in grades 1-12 who spent the previous school year in a Florida public school that received an "F" grade on state assessments for two years out of four are eligible for a voucher. Students who previously attended another public school, or who are entering kindergarten or first grade, and are assigned to attend a school rated "F" two years out of four also can receive a voucher.³³

The voucher can be used at eligible religious or other private schools or at another public school, provided it has a state grade of "C" or higher. The amount of the voucher—between about \$3,800 and \$4,300 in the 2002-03 school year—is equal to what would have been spent on the student in his or her assigned public school or the tuition of the private school, whichever is less.³⁴

Participating private schools must accept the voucher as full tuition, must admit students randomly and without regard to previous academic performance, and cannot require students to participate in religious instruction or activities. Although teachers in participating private schools should have a college degree or three years of teaching experience in public or private schools, the schools can employ teachers who merely have undefined "special skills, knowledge, or expertise that qualifies them to provide instruction in subjects taught."³⁵ Participating private schools also must "demonstrate fiscal soundness" by having operated for one school year or, if they are start-up schools, they must provide documentation to show they have sufficient capital or credit to operate for the upcoming school year.³⁶

In the program's first year (1999-2000), there were just two double "F" schools, which enrolled approximately 900 students. Of these students, only 58 claimed a voucher to attend a private school; another 85 transferred to a different public school.³⁷ By the 2001-02 school year, just 46 students were using a voucher to attend a private school through this program.³⁸ When the state issued grades for the 2002-03 school year, 10 schools received their second "F" in four years, making up to 9,000 more students eligible for vouchers. Approximately 900 transferred to a different public school, but just over 600 took a voucher and enrolled in a participating private school. However, by two months into the school year, approximately 170 of the 600 students—or one in four—had left the private schools and re-enrolled in public schools. In fact, many of those students returned to their "F" rated schools.³⁹

Court challenges to A+. In August 2002, a Florida Circuit Court judge ruled in *Holmes v. Bush* that the voucher program violates the state constitution, which prohibits spending tax dollars on religious institutions, including schools. The state has appealed the ruling, and the program has been allowed to continue during the appeal process.

Polling data on A+. This program does not enjoy great popularity among Floridians. According to a 2002 statewide poll for the *St. Petersburg Times* and the *Miami Herald*, 53 percent of Floridians oppose the voucher plan, while 44 percent say they support it.⁴⁰

McKay Scholarships—The special education voucher program. Although it initially received far less attention than the state’s signature voucher program, the Florida Legislature also enacted, in 1999, a pilot voucher program aimed at children with disabilities. In its first year, the program, which was dubbed “McKay Scholarships” after the state senator who pushed for the legislation, was limited to one county, and just a few students participated. Special education students not making progress in at least two areas of their Individualized Education Plan (IEP) were eligible for vouchers.

During the 2001 legislative session, however, lawmakers expanded the program so that virtually any special education student who was in a Florida public school the previous year can receive a voucher. IEP progress is no longer a consideration for eligibility; students qualify if their parents are dissatisfied with the public school their child attends.

Approximately 7,000 students received a McKay voucher in the 2002-03 school year.⁴¹ That represents approximately 2 percent of all special education students attending Florida public schools. McKay vouchers are worth about \$4,500 to \$21,000, depending on the child’s disabilities.

The U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights points out a potential shortcoming in the McKay program: Students using this voucher are considered “private school children with disabilities.” As a result, they forfeit their rights to a “free appropriate public education” as guaranteed under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and “have no individual entitlement to ... special education and related services.”⁴² Also, some federal nondiscrimination laws also do not apply to private schools taking taxpayer-funded vouchers in the Florida program.⁴³ As is the case with Florida’s A+ program, teachers in McKay program private schools do not need to be certified, or, in this case, even have a high school diploma.⁴⁴

What the Research Shows about Vouchers and Academic Achievement

Given the strong differences of opinion about vouchers, it may be no surprise that even researchers, whom one might expect to be completely objective, have entered the fray. At this point there is no clear winner in the contest between advocates and critics. As a team of RAND analysts said in their 2001 study, “So many key questions remain unanswered that neither the hopes of choice supporters nor the fears of its opponents can currently be confirmed.”⁴⁵

In comparing the academic performance of voucher students and public school students, some researchers have found no differences; some have found higher performance for public

school students; and some have found higher performance for voucher students. Part of the debate over the research has focused on the credibility of the researchers.

Terry Moe, a voucher supporter who has written two well-regarded books about vouchers, addressed that question when he spoke at the Brookings Institution in 2001. “In the voucher issue,” Moe said, “it’s important, I think, to know where the author is coming from because so much of this literature, unfortunately, is infused by ideology and is slanted and is not particularly well done and is not particularly scientific. I think that’s really a bad thing and something that we need to get away from.”⁴⁶

When the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) submitted its own review of publicly funded voucher programs to Congress, however, it noted that a couple of voucher studies did meet its criteria for solid research. They were two official evaluations that had been contracted by the states involved: John Witte’s study of the Milwaukee voucher program and Kim Metcalf’s of the Cleveland program. And, as the GAO study noted, “the contracted evaluations of voucher students’ academic achievement in Cleveland and Milwaukee found little or no difference in voucher and public school students’ performance.”⁴⁷

Milwaukee. John Witte’s study compared the achievement of voucher students with students who remained in the public schools and concluded, as already noted, that there were no clear differences between the two groups. He did, however, find that the parents of children in voucher schools were, by and large, satisfied with the schools their children were attending. More significantly, he also found that the mothers of voucher students were more likely to have attended college, had higher educational goals for their children, and were more involved in their children’s education than their public school counterparts—factors that would be expected to lead voucher students to be noticeably more successful than their counterparts in public school, rather than merely to hold their own.⁴⁸

However, another study by Jay Greene, Paul Peterson, and Jiangtao Du, which followed a different methodology from Witte’s, got different results. Instead of comparing matched groups of students in public and voucher schools, these researchers compared the achievement of voucher students with that of students who had applied for a voucher but did not receive one. Greene, Peterson, and Du reported significant achievement gains among voucher students by the third and fourth year.⁴⁹

Other researchers, among them John Witte, have challenged these results, saying that the groups are not comparable for various reasons. To begin with, the difference in parental education level between the two groups means you cannot compare them without taking that difference into account—“controlling for it,” in the language of social scientists—and Greene, Peterson, and Du neglected to do this in their formal analysis. And in the course of the three or four years, the two groups diverged even more widely. In the voucher schools, less successful children either left or were pushed out, so that the cream of the crop remained for

Greene, Peterson, and Du's comparison. The children in the public school comparison group, on the other hand, were more likely to be low-achieving. Critics also complained that the number of students left in the two groups—the sample size—was too small and too poorly defined to permit a valid comparison. In fact, of the original 341 students in the voucher program, just 85 remained after four years, prompting John Witte to say, "It remains unclear to me how these schools can work the miracles some choice supporters claim if the children are not in the schools."⁵⁰

Unfortunately, the arguments on both sides are highly technical and difficult to follow. However, the GAO study agreed with Witte about the validity of the Greene, Peterson, and Du study, citing flaws in the study's design that "call into question the Harvard team's findings of improvements in students' test scores."⁵¹ (For more detailed information about the conflicting Milwaukee research, see "Vouchers and Student Achievement: A Review of the Evidence," by NSBA [<http://www.nsba.org/site/docs/9200/9129.pdf>] or visit the American Federation of Teachers Web site [<http://www.aft.org/research/vouchers/mil/index.htm>].

No data on student achievement in the voucher schools has been collected since 1995 because the Wisconsin Legislature ended the evaluations, and voucher schools are not required to test their students or to make public the results if they do. However, Cecilia Rouse, a researcher at Princeton University, did compare the achievement of students in Milwaukee voucher schools with that of low-income children in public school. The public school children, who were in a program that involved smaller classes, outperformed voucher students in reading and did as well in math.⁵²

Cleveland. Two teams have examined the Cleveland program. Kim Metcalf, who is under contract with the state of Ohio to perform the official evaluation, found no statistically significant difference in academic achievement between voucher students and public school students after the program's first year. After the second year, he found voucher students' language scores were somewhat higher than those of their public school peers, although the difference was not statistically significant. There were no differences in reading, math, science, or social science scores. Metcalf's most recent evaluation, released in March 2003, revealed that public school students had made larger academic gains than students in the voucher program. Overall, there was "no clear or consistent pattern that can be attributable to program participation"⁵³

Metcalf's research also found that parents of students who applied for vouchers had more years of education and were more involved in their children's education than public school students' families, factors that nearly always lead to improved student performance.

One of the more interesting findings in Metcalf's official evaluation centered on the academic achievement of students at two schools established in response to the voucher program. Students at those schools scored lower than public school students in *all* subjects tested, and

these differences were statistically significant.⁵⁴ The start-up schools, known as Hope Academies, are precisely the kind of entrepreneurial enterprises that voucher advocates often tout as one of the benefits of a voucher program. Ironically, the founder and owner of the Hope Academies happened to be one of the driving forces behind the creation of the Cleveland voucher program. He later converted his voucher schools into charter schools, which receive considerably more money per student from state taxpayers.

Researchers Paul Peterson, Jay Greene, and William Howell also examined the Cleveland program. In contrast to Metcalf's official study, the Peterson, Greene, and Howell study reported student achievement gains for students in the Hope Academies. However, instead of comparing Hope school students with Cleveland public school students, they compared Hope scores with those of unsuccessful applicants to the Milwaukee voucher program who took a different test.⁵⁵ The recent GAO report noted the flaws in the Peterson, Greene, and Howell Cleveland study but did not include its findings because the study failed to meet the GAO's criteria.⁵⁶

Florida. Florida taxpayers have no way of knowing how voucher students are performing in comparison with their peers in the public schools. Taxpayers also cannot compare school-by-school performance, since private schools are not required to administer the state assessments by which public schools are judged. The voucher program does require participating students to take the state's assessments, but those scores have never been publicly released. The state claims that doing so would be an invasion of privacy for private school students and contends that only their parents need to know how the students are doing academically—even though state taxpayers are funding their education.

A highly publicized study released in 2001 by Jay Greene for the pro-voucher Manhattan Institute claimed that public schools that had received an "F" and were thus facing an immediate "voucher threat" made twice the gains in test scores as higher-rated public schools.⁵⁷ Voucher advocates embraced the study as proof that voucher programs benefit public schools by increasing competition for students. However, a number of other researchers attacked the credibility of Greene's study. For example, two researchers from Rutgers University contend Greene "vastly overestimated" the test score gains of the "F" schools, and Stanford University professor Martin Carnoy found that "there was no direct relation" between the increase in scores and the threat of vouchers.⁵⁸ Greene's study also failed to consider the impact of increased resources and extra teachers provided to the "F" schools, nor did he address similar test score gains made by Florida schools labeled as failing in the year before the voucher program even began.⁵⁹

Privately funded voucher programs. With no data available from the Milwaukee program since 1995 and so few students using vouchers in Florida, some researchers have begun focusing on the nation's privately funded voucher programs. A 2002 GAO report found that, nationwide, 46,000 students attend K-12 private schools through 78 privately funded voucher programs. The average amount of the voucher in those programs ranges from \$600 to \$2,000 per student, covering roughly 20 percent to 65 percent of the actual tuition.⁶⁰

The most publicized studies have been led by Paul Peterson, and, like his previous studies, they have presented positive findings about student achievement in voucher schools. They have also been subject to a good deal of criticism.

The Peterson team examined three separate privately-funded voucher programs in New York City; Dayton, Ohio; and Washington, D.C. Findings from the three-year study are included in a recent book by Peterson called *The Education Gap*. However, it was the second-year results—released in the late summer of 2000 during the height of a presidential campaign, national elections, and two high-profile voucher referenda on the ballots in California and Michigan—that drew the attention of the national press and aroused considerable controversy.

Peterson pointed to academic gains by African-American students and suggested that voucher programs could eliminate the test score gap between African-American students and white students. Voucher proponents nationwide seized on the study, and favorable media attention followed. Shortly thereafter, the policy research company that had gathered and analyzed the data for the New York City study took the unusual step of issuing a press release calling Peterson's claims "premature." The research company said there were no significant gains in overall test scores for students who had used vouchers. Rather, the company said, gains were limited to a single group of students in one grade. "Because the gains are so concentrated in this single group, one needs to be very cautious in setting policy based on the overall modest impacts on test scores," said David Myers, one of the lead investigators for the research company. "We really need to learn why this group stands out so much. Until we understand this better, we cannot place much policy weight on it."⁶¹

More recently, a pair of Princeton University researchers questioned the full three-year New York City findings by the Peterson team. Alan Krueger and Pei Zhu concluded that the academic achievement differences for African-American students who used vouchers and those who didn't were statistically insignificant. Among their criticisms, they noted that Peterson's findings excluded 44 percent of the students in the experiment.⁶²

The Peterson team's Dayton study ended after two years because too few students remained in the program for any data to be statistically relevant. In Washington, Peterson's team had reported academic gains after two years, but those gains disappeared after the third year. As with Dayton, attrition proved problematic in the Washington program, as just 29 percent of the initial voucher students studied remained in the program after three years.⁶³

Peterson's far-reaching claims should not be entirely surprising given his stated personal affection for vouchers. Over the years he has made no secret of his support for vouchers and his desire to see an expansion of programs nationally. "I would like to see us try it out on a larger scale," he said in a PBS "Frontline" interview in 2000. "The voucher option looks like it might have benefits. ... It has no downside."⁶⁴

It may also be worth noting that pro-voucher foundations, including the Friedman Foundation and the Walton Family Foundation, have provided financial support for the research done by Peterson and his various teams. However, Peterson writes that the research and the authors' interpretations of the findings were not subject to the funders' approval.⁶⁵

Note: For periodic updates to "Special Issues," please visit NSBA's Voucher Strategy Center Web site, www.nsba.org/novouchers.

Endnotes

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