



# *The Case Against Private School Vouchers*

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More than 50 years have passed since Milton Friedman first proposed private school vouchers as a public policy. During that time, proponents have spent hundreds of millions of dollars attempting to convince a skeptical public and lawmakers of the concept's efficacy, and yet, five decades later, vouchers still remain controversial, unproven and unpopular. Opposition to vouchers emanates from constitutional and democratic concerns, to practical and policy-related flaws, including many of those listed below.

- **Vouchers divert critical dollars and commitment from public schools**—Vouchers divert attention, commitment and dollars from public schools to pay private school tuition for a few students, including many who already attend private school. A dollar spent on a tuition voucher is a dollar drained from public education. Even proposals that purportedly create a “new” funding stream to pay for vouchers miss the mark: if new public money is available for education it should be invested in strengthening the schools that educate the vast majority of our students and are accountable to all taxpayers – our *public* schools.
- **Vouchers eliminate public accountability**—Vouchers channel tax dollars into private schools that do not face state-approved academic standards, do not make budgets public, do not adhere to open meetings and records laws, do not publicly report on student achievement, and do not face the public accountability requirements contained in major federal laws, including special education. They also do not have to accept all students. Existing voucher programs, from Florida to Cleveland to Milwaukee, have suffered from scandal and fraud due to the lack of public accountability inherent in these programs.
- **Vouchers are no way to raise student achievement for all**—Despite built-in screening advantages for private schools, a GAO report to Congress on the Cleveland and Milwaukee voucher programs noted that the most credible research found “*little or no difference in voucher and public school students’ performance.*” The federal evaluation of the Washington, D.C. voucher experiment discovered the same two years running.
- **Vouchers leave behind many students, including those with the greatest needs**—Vouchers leave behind many disadvantaged students because private schools may not accept them or do not offer the special services they need. Students with disabilities “*were actively counseled out of the (voucher) program,*” in Cleveland, a state official acknowledged.

- **Vouchers waste taxpayer money**—Vouchers force taxpayers to support two school systems: one public and one private, the latter of which is not accountable to all the taxpayers supporting it. Existing private school students usually are eligible to receive vouchers, creating a new cost to taxpayers.
- **Vouchers give choices to private schools, not parents**—Private schools decide if *they* want to accept vouchers, and then how many students *they* want to admit. And even if a voucher student does gain acceptance into a private school, the school can later reject him or her for numerous reasons, as the evaluator of Milwaukee’s program documented. The lawmaker who founded the Milwaukee voucher program later questioned the dismissal of students by private schools, and criticized the ability of private schools to select parents and students instead of parents selecting schools as proponents typically claim will occur.
- **Vouchers remain publicly unpopular**—Utah voters, in 2007, overwhelmingly voted to repeal a state voucher program by a margin of 62 percent to 38 percent. This marked the 11<sup>th</sup> time in 11 referenda over the past 30 years that voters have decisively rejected specific voucher or tuition tax credit proposals.

## The Voters’ Choice:

### A History of State Referenda on Vouchers and Tuition Tax Credits

State <i>(including Washington, D.C.)</i>	Year	Proposal	Result
Maryland	1972	Vouchers	Rejected 55% to 45%
Michigan	1978	Vouchers	Rejected 75% to 26%
Washington, D.C.	1981	Tuition tax credits	Rejected 89% to 11%
Oregon	1990	Tuition tax credits	Rejected 67% to 33%
Colorado	1992	Vouchers	Rejected 67% to 33%
California	1993	Vouchers	Rejected 70% to 30%
Washington	1996	Vouchers	Rejected 64% to 36%
Colorado	1998	Tuition tax credits	Rejected 60% to 40%
Michigan	2000	Vouchers	Rejected 69% to 31%
California	2000	Vouchers	Rejected 71% to 20%
Utah*	2007	Vouchers	Rejected 68% to 32%

\*Voters in Utah repealed a program already created by the state Legislature, as opposed to voting on a proposed program.



# *Vouchers Fail the Achievement Test*

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A common refrain among voucher advocates is that the taxpayer-funded tuition checks will permit students to attend “better” schools. Yet the preponderance of credible research comparing voucher students to public school students, along with recent studies comparing public and private schools overall, has deeply undermined the pro-voucher claim.

## **No academic advantage in publicly-funded voucher programs**

A 2001 GAO report to Congress confirmed that the official, state-mandated and state-funded evaluations of the Milwaukee and Cleveland voucher programs “found little or no difference in voucher and public school students’ performance.”<sup>i</sup> The same report also cast doubt on the validity of research that claimed positive academic benefits from vouchers, noting that the studies of Milwaukee and Cleveland by pro-voucher researchers Jay Greene and Paul Peterson contained flaws so significant that GAO could not include the results.

Kim Metcalf, the state-contracted researcher for the Cleveland program, found that students who attended private schools that were established to take advantage of the voucher program (fulfilling the free market theory that new schools will emerge to meet demand) were outperformed academically by their public school peers in all academic subjects.<sup>ii</sup>

Meanwhile, a Congressionally-mandated evaluation of the federally-funded Washington, D.C. voucher program has twice found no statistically significant differences in academic achievement between voucher students and their public school peers.<sup>iii</sup>

## **Pro-voucher research on privately-funded voucher programs debunked**

With research on taxpayer-funded voucher programs unhelpful to their cause, voucher advocates have also funded research into privately-funded voucher programs seeking evidence to support their claims. And despite trumpeting findings from research into programs in New York City and Dayton (Ohio) the pro-voucher claims unraveled under scrutiny. For example, the aforementioned Peterson promoted academic gains for African-American students in the New York City program during the 2000 presidential campaign, only to see the policy research company that gathered and analyzed the data call those claims “premature.”<sup>iv</sup> That was followed by Princeton University researchers who reanalyzed the data and concluded that the so-called gains for voucher students were statistically insignificant and the previous claims could be substantiated only by excluding achievement results of 44 percent of the students in the experiment.<sup>v</sup> Meanwhile, the Dayton portion of the Peterson study ended after two years because too few voucher students remained in the private schools for any data to be statistically relevant.<sup>vi</sup>

### **National studies undermine claims of private schools' superiority**

Three separate studies in recent years have turned conventional wisdom on its head regarding the long-held assumption that private schools are “better” than public schools. University of Illinois researchers found that when factoring in demographic and socioeconomic status, public school students at every income level outperformed private school students on the 4<sup>th</sup> grade and 8<sup>th</sup> grade math exams for the 2000 National Assessment of Educational Progress.<sup>vii</sup> A U.S. Department of Education study released in 2006 also found that after controlling for socioeconomic and demographic differences, public school students performed about evenly with private school students on the 2003 NAEP exam. Specifically, public school students outperformed private school pupils by a statistically significant margin on 4th grade math, were outperformed by private school pupils by a statistically significant margin on 8th grade reading, and performed about equally to private school students on 4th grade reading and 8th grade math.<sup>viii</sup> One year later, a study for the Center on Education Policy examined a nationally representative sample of low-income students attending urban high schools, and, after controlling for socioeconomic and parental involvement factors, found that public school students performed at the same academic level as private school students, were as likely to attend college, to be satisfied in their jobs and to be as civic-minded in the mid-20's.<sup>ix</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> “School Vouchers: Publicly Funded Programs in Cleveland and Milwaukee,” U.S. General Accounting Office, 2001.

<sup>ii</sup> “A Comparative Evaluation of the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program,” Indiana Center for Evaluation, 1998.

<sup>iii</sup> “Evaluation of the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program: Impacts after Two Years,” Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, 2008; “Evaluation of the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program: Impacts after One Year,” Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, 2007.

<sup>iv</sup> “Voucher Claims of Success are Premature in New York City,” Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., press release, 2000.

<sup>v</sup> “Another Look at the New York City School Voucher Experiment,” Alan B. Krueger and Pei Zhu, 2003.

<sup>vi</sup> “School Vouchers: Characteristics of Privately Funded Programs,” U.S. General Accounting Office, 2002.

<sup>vii</sup> “Re-Examining a Primary Premise of Market Theory: An Analysis of NAEP Data on Achievement in Public and Private Schools,” Christopher Lubienski and Sarah Theule Lubienski, 2004.

<sup>viii</sup> “Comparing Private Schools and Public Schools Using Hierarchical Linear Modeling,” Braun, Jenkins and Grigg, U.S. Department of Education, July 2006.

<sup>ix</sup> “Are Private High Schools Better Academically Than Public High Schools?,” Harold Wenglinsky, Center on Education Policy, October 2007.