



Questions and Answers about Educational Vouchers: Facts, Figures and a Summary of the Research

September 2010

Educational vouchers have gained increasing currency in recent months as a potential school reform strategy in Pennsylvania. Both Pennsylvania gubernatorial candidates have publicly endorsed vouchers in some form, and the Pennsylvania legislature has expressed interest in this topic as well. Vouchers could have dramatic effects on education in the commonwealth, and could have implications nationwide.

The following 14 questions and their answers provide important information about vouchers that can inform debates and discussions about this critical educational reform issue. This document is based on recent, reputable research that uses rigorous statistical techniques and is not funded by political or politically biased sources.

THE BASICS

What is an educational voucher program?

An educational voucher program is a system through which parents are given a tuition certificate, funded by the government or a private organization, which can be used to pay for all or part of the tuition for a child to attend a participating private school.

What are the stated purposes of voucher programs?

The stated purposes of educational voucher programs are to provide disadvantaged students with the opportunity to attend private schools in order for them to receive a better education, and to create competition for the public schools so that they will improve their instructional programs.

How are vouchers funded?

Publicly-funded voucher programs utilize public education funds to provide resources to students' parents that can be used to pay tuition at a private school.

Privately-funded programs are supported by foundations and other independent sources.

How widespread are voucher programs in the United States?

As of 2009, 60,000 students were participating in publicly funded voucher programs. This represents .1% of the 49 million students attending public school in the U.S.¹ However, new voucher programs have been proposed in Florida, New Jersey, Illinois and Pennsylvania in 2010.

PARTICIPATION IN VOUCHER PROGRAMS

What are the characteristics of students who participate in voucher programs?

Students who participate in vouchers tend to be:

- Low income: Most voucher programs are designed for students from families at 185% of poverty or less.
- Ethnic and racial minorities: Most voucher programs exist in districts with high proportions of African American and Latino students.
- From large urban school districts: Most vouchers programs exist in urban school districts, and are therefore utilized by urban students.
- From families with higher levels of parental education: Among those who qualify for vouchers, families at the high end of the income scale are more likely to participate than those at the lowest ends.²

Voucher programs reporting demographic data:

- Washington, D.C.: More than 94% of students in the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program were African American, compared to 85% in the public schools, and the average family income was \$18,652.³
- Milwaukee: African Americans and Latinos are slightly underrepresented in the voucher program (61% of African Americans participating vs. 62% in the public schools; 12.8% of Latinos participating vs. 19.1% in the public schools).⁴
- New York City: Families using vouchers were 48% African American and 45% Hispanic. Families receiving welfare represented 59% of recipients, while the average family income was \$9,983.⁵

Do all students offered vouchers use them?

No. In the most recent experimental evaluation of Washington, D.C.'s publicly funded voucher program, 25% of students offered vouchers did not use them at all; and 34% used the voucher for less than the full three years of the voucher period examined. Forty-one percent of students offered vouchers used them for the full three years of the study.⁶

What factors limit participation in voucher programs?

Research conducted on an array of voucher programs reveals a range of factors that determine if available vouchers are used by students and their families. Whether a student and his/her family will use a voucher depends on whether:

- The voucher amount covers the tuition of available private schools
- There are enough spaces in private schools to accommodate those with vouchers
- Students with vouchers meet the academic standards of private schools
- There is adequate, affordable transportation to private schools
- Private schools offer adequate special education services.⁷

THE IMPACT OF VOUCHERS ON STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

What effect does voucher participation have on student achievement?

Reputable research on voucher programs in Milwaukee, Cleveland and Washington, D.C. indicates that they produce few if any statistically significant effects on student achievement. Publicly funded vouchers have been linked to slight increases and decreases in reading and math scores ranging from -.03 to .11 in effect size, but these effects are neither statistically significant nor meaningful changes.⁸ In short, there is little evidence that vouchers increase achievement for students who utilize vouchers.

What does the research say about the impact of vouchers on high school graduation rates and college readiness?

Nothing. Graduation rates, college enrollment, and post-school success have not been the focus of research because of the lack of data and the complex nature of voucher programs. Research would be of great value in this area.

THE IMPACT OF VOUCHERS ON SCHOOL DISTRICTS

What effects have voucher programs had on the performance of public schools in districts in which they exist?

The relatively low quality of research addressing this question does not allow for a definitive answer. External factors that cannot be controlled (e.g., changes in amount and type of resources; curricula reforms; teacher mobility) prevent researchers from isolating the effects of voucher programs on school districts thus far.⁹

THE PENNSYLVANIA CONTEXT

How does Pennsylvania's Senate Bill 1405 compare to existing public voucher programs?

SB1405 would create a publicly funded educational voucher system that is very similar to other existing publicly-funded voucher programs. Below is a brief comparison of SB1405 with the three publicly funded voucher programs with available data.

Table 1. Comparison of Publicly Funded Voucher Programs to SB1405

Location	Sponsor	Selection Method	Grades	Student Eligibility
Milwaukee	State of Wisconsin	Lottery	PreK-12	Low income
Cleveland	State of Ohio	Lottery	K-8	Low income
D.C.	Federal Government	Lottery	K-12	Low income
Pennsylvania (as proposed in SB 1405)	State of Pennsylvania	Lottery	K-12	Low income in district with ≥ 1 chronically failing school

Source: Howell & Peterson (2002) Table 2.1 and Wolf (2008)

What do the courts say about vouchers?

The case of *Zelman et al. v. Simmons-Harris et al.* (2002) provided legal support for vouchers when the US Supreme Court determined that vouchers could be used to attend religious schools under specific circumstances. The case concerned the Cleveland program that gave students vouchers to attend public and private schools. The court ruled that this was not in violation of the separation of church and state.

State courts have also ruled on voucher programs.

- The Florida Supreme Court struck down a voucher program in 2006 known as the Opportunity Scholarship Program for students attending schools that received an “F” under the state’s A+ Plan for Education. The program was declared unconstitutional partially due to the *Blaine Amendment* in the state constitution restricting state aid to religious organizations.
- The Colorado Opportunity Contract Pilot Program was challenged in 2003 on grounds that the state constitution grants local school boards control over public schools. The law would have made vouchers available to low-income, low-achieving students in school districts with eight or more low-performing schools.

Does Pennsylvania's Constitution restrict the use of public education funds for religious schools?

Yes. Under the Pennsylvania State Constitution, “No money raised for the support of the public schools of the Commonwealth shall be appropriated to or used for the support of any sectarian school.”

Where can I get more information about voucher programs?

The National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education (NCSPE) at Teachers College, Columbia University provides independent, non-partisan information on and analysis of privatization in education, including voucher programs. You can access their web site at: <http://www.ncspe.org>.

For 20 years, Research for Action has provided rigorous research and analysis designed to raise important questions about the quality of education available to disadvantaged students, and the effects of educational reform efforts on students, schools and communities.

¹ National Center for Educational Statistics.

² Belfield, C.R. (2006). *The evidence on education vouchers: An application to the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program*. Retrieved from the National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education. New York: Teachers College, Columbia University.

³ Wolf, P. (2008). School Voucher Programs: What the Research Says About Parental School Choice. *Brigham Young University Law Review*, Volume 2008, no. 2.

⁴ Kisida, B., Jensen, L. I., & Wolf, P. (2009). *The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program: Descriptive report on participating schools* (Report #8). University of Arkansas: School Choice Demonstration Project.

⁵ Howell, W.G & Peterson, P. (2002). *The Education Gap: Vouchers and Urban Schools*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.

⁶ Wolf, P., Gutmann, B., Puma, M., Kisida, M., Rizzo, L., and Eissa, N. (2009). *Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Impacts After Three Years* (NCEE 2009-4050). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education.

⁷ Rouse, C.E. & Barrow, L. (2009). School vouchers and student achievement: Recent evidence, remaining questions. Annual Review of Economics, Volume 1, pages 17-42; and Wolf et al., 2009.

⁸ Rouse, C.E. & Barrow, L. (2009).

⁹ Rouse, C.E. & Barrow, L. (2009).