What Are School Vouchers and How Do They Work?

School vouchers are public subsidies that are given directly to parents (sometimes in the form of tax credit) to be used for students to pay for tuition at non-public schools. In other words, private voucher programs allow states and districts to provide parents a sum of public money (e.g., a voucher) that can be used to pay tuition at a private school of their choice, often including religiously affiliated schools. The voucher is typically capped at a particular threshold amount, which may or may not cover the full cost of private school tuition.

Over 30 states have voucher programs or some closely related form of private school choice. Other related programs include (a) tax-credit scholarship programs, where individuals or business can donate their tax-credits or deductions to public or private school entities; and (b) education savings account programs, where states set aside money for participating students to use towards approved educational expenses (e.g., tutoring, private school tuition, online courses, therapy).

Research on School Vouchers

Preliminary research on school voucher programs has demonstrated equivocal outcomes; some studies have tied student participation in voucher programs to improved academic achievement, whereas other reviews of existing research have suggested voucher programs have negligible impact or even negative impact on student academic achievement compared to public schools. Listed below are highlights from recent research and ongoing systematic reviews. However, additional research is needed to draw meaningful and definitive conclusions:

- Academic achievement growth for voucher students is similar to their public school counterparts, demonstrating no clear positive impact or gains for students using vouchers (Center on Educational Policy [CEP], 2011; National Bureau of Economic Research, 2015).
- Specific states have demonstrated conflicting student outcomes for those attending voucher schools:
  - Students participating in Louisiana’s school voucher program had substantially lower academic achievement (National Bureau of Economic Research, 2015)
  - Students using vouchers in Milwaukee increased the likelihood that students would graduate from high school and go to college (Wolf, 2008)
  - Washington D.C. students participating in their voucher program demonstrated small increases in reading achievement and high school graduation rates, but no evidence for improvements in math achievement (Wolf et al., 2013)
  - While some studies may show graduation rates were higher for voucher students, many studies do not control for factors such as demographic differences (e.g., SES, race/ethnicity, parent educational attainment, employment status) between families who
use vouchers, which when controlled for, often result in negligible differences between students in public schools and those using vouchers in private schools (CEP, 2011)

- Student rates of satisfaction with their own schooling and other indicators of success including school climate were not significantly different between students using vouchers in private schools and their public school counterparts (Wolf et al., 2010)

How School Vouchers Could Impact Students With Disabilities

The Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) grants critical rights and protections to students with disabilities to ensure that they have an equal opportunity to pursue a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment. However, most states require students receiving vouchers to waive their rights to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) provided by IDEA when they elect to attend a private school (Hensel, 2010; Cunningham, 2013; COPAA, 2016). Further, private school voucher programs raise the potential for lack of inclusion or lack of acceptance for students with disabilities. Private schools have the ability to select the students they want to serve and can refuse to educate a child if they deem their instructional program is not a fit for the student (NCSL, 2015); schools do not have to “accept” students who do not meet certain requirements. It is important to ensure parents are provided with sufficiently detailed information about the extent of special ed services available in order to provide FAPE in schools they are considering, so they can make a reasoned and informed choice.

Listed below are a few state examples of how vouchers have been applied to students within special education:

- The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, one of the oldest voucher programs in the country, does not require schools that receive voucher students to provide special education services. They can deny entry to students who are considered too severe to serve, and can choose to stop serving students at any time (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2017).

- A recent survey on voucher and education savings account (ESA) programs conducted by the U.S. Government and Accountability Office (GAO) found that student eligibility for private schools is often based on student disability status or family income (GAO, 2016). Findings suggest that “the Department’s Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services will consider guidance about the responsibilities of SEAs and LEAs to ensure that IDEA’s equitable services provisions are applied to students with disabilities enrolled by their parents in private schools under State voucher and ESA programs” (GAO, 2016).

- Some states offer special education vouchers, such as Florida’s McKay Scholarship for Students with Disabilities. This allows IDEA-eligible students to receive a voucher for a sum of money that may or may not be equal to the state funded portion of the cost of their education in a public school. Families are then responsible for covering the remaining cost via supplement vouchers or other means (Almazan & Marshall, 2016; Winters & Greene, 2011), suggesting that only certain families may have the means, or elect to cover the difference for their child to attend a private school.
How Are Schools Held to Rigorous Accountability and Standards?

It is important for schools to be accountable to families and the public regarding the quality of instruction and services provided to students. This safeguard applies to all public schools. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) gives states the flexibility to effectively manage federal educational policies to meet the needs of their school communities. Under ESSA, public schools are held accountable for four indicators. For elementary schools those indicators include academic performance in English language arts (ELA) and math, English language learner (ELL) proficiency, another statewide academic indicator of choice, and one statewide non-academic indicator of choice. For high schools, accountability indicators include ELA and math performance, ELL proficiency, graduation rates, and one statewide academic indicator of choice. These indicators allow state education stakeholders to customize their accountability systems in ways they have not been able to before.

An accountability system can be based on a variety of indicators of student growth toward postsecondary college and/or career readiness. Chosen academic and non-academic accountability indicators need to contribute to identifying schools for ESSA supports and recognition, the timely reporting of information to education stakeholders, and establishing meaningful education goals and interim targets for the state and its school communities. ESSA accountability provisions apply to public schools; however not all private schools (including those that could receive voucher funds) are required to follow those same standards.

It is important for voucher programs to be full participants within these accountability mandates. Any use of public monies to a non-public school entity (including vouchers) should also require participation in the state accountability system, allowing for meaningful comparison of student educational outcomes and to help ensure all students are making progress toward high standards.

References


Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, Milwaukee Parental Choice Program. Retrieved from: http://dpi.state.wi.us/sms/choice.html


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