



FAST FACTS
ON
WASHINGTON, DC
SCHOOL REFORM



IMPORTANT INFORMATION ON DC SCHOOL REFORM PROPOSALS

July 17, 2003

The effort to expand educational opportunities for children in The District of Columbia is fast moving through the Congress. There are many questions about what the proposed *three-sector strategy* to improving DC schools would do:

- How would it work?
- Do we have data about success in other places?
- What is the record on educational achievement in the District?
- What are the biggest arguments against this program and why are they being made?

The fact is that we do know if the proposed strategy would work. States that offer strong support for public school accountability programs, and provide a wide variety of choices yield the greatest educational results. In Colorado, Florida and Massachusetts, for example, student achievement rose as lawmakers committed to more resources for schools and more choices for parents.

The proposal before the Congress to boost spending for DC Public Schools, charter schools and for private school opportunity scholarships is a much needed prescription for what ails the District's schools. Supporting one sector over another doesn't work. The three-sector strategy is child-centered and supported by a majority of Americans, particularly those in failing schools. It may be controversial to some, but if our children aren't worth being controversial over, no one is.

Check out the enclosed information for details, and feel free to call the Center for Education Reform if we can help you more accurately navigate this increasingly important debate.

WHY SCHOOL REFORM IN THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

The notion that DC school children should have choices over both public and private schools is based on three important facts:

- Low quality public schools

Despite unprecedented federal and local spending in the District of Columbia (average per pupil cost is \$12,000), the district's scores are the lowest in the nation.

- Reading: Only 10% of District schoolchildren are proficient
- Writing: Less than 12% of District children can write at grade level

DC schools are not bad simply because poor children attend them. In fact, private and charter schools serving identical populations have demonstrated success at reaching the hardest to educate children.

- Parental Demand and Support

Washington, DC's public school choice programs are oversubscribed and in demand. Each year more than 1,000 children are on wait lists for each of the city's magnet programs. Charter schools in the District comprise 15% of the population with nearly 11,500 children attending them. Another 1,000 are on waiting lists.

When John Walton and Ted Forstmann as businessmen and philanthropists invested \$2 million into the Children's Scholarship Fund, more than 10,000 families applied for 1,000 seats.

- Bi-partisan civic support

Mayor Anthony Williams has acknowledged that as part of a broader strategy, scholarships are an important component of school reform in the District. Education Committee Chair Kevin Chavous of the City Council has long embraced greater choices for children. Business leaders who have developed the city and financed its cultural and industrial growth back the notion of supporting greater educational opportunities.

STUDENT PERFORMANCE IN THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA FROM THE MOST RECENT NATIONAL STATISTICAL DATA

READING

Ten percent of 4th Graders and 9 percent of 8th graders are proficient in reading, which means they can read at grade level. Sixty-nine percent of 4th graders do not even have basic skills, and for 8th grade, that number is more than 50 percent. (NAEP, 2002)

Note: DC's reading scores beat only Guam, the Virgin Islands, and American Samoa

WRITING

4th Grade writing proficiency is nearly as bad as reading. Only 12 percent can write at a level that is expected by that grade. Twenty seven percent are below basic levels of writing. In 8th grade, 34 percent of students are below basic and only 10 percent are proficient. (NAEP, 2002)

Note: Of all states and jurisdictions, the DC's 4th-graders had the third highest percentage of students scoring below basic, as well as the smallest number at proficient. DC's 8th-grade scores were second only to American Samoa's for the highest percentage of students scoring below basic.

MATH

When only 6 percent of 4th graders can do math at a proficient level, the problem is at crisis proportions. Worse still, fully 76% scored below basic. The figure was 77 percent for 8th graders, and in that grade, only 6 percent of students were doing grade-level math correctly

Note: Once again, only American Samoa, Guam and the Virgin islands kept DC out of last place.

THE TOP NINE LIES ABOUT SCHOOL CHOICE

1. The “Undermining-America” Argument

“‘Opportunity Scholarships’ sound terrific, until you understand its Orwellian meaning: Give up on public education in America; stop investing in it; siphon off as much of its funding as you can to enable a few ‘deserving poor’ to go to private (mostly religious) schools, and to hell with all the kids left behind.” – Sandra Feldman, President, AFT

Students shouldn’t be forced to remain in failing schools just to provide financial support to the system. Public education is about children, not others with a vested interest in the monopoly system. Plus, as economists Martin and Kathleen Feldstein comment, “most proposals are for vouchers that are considerably less than actual per-pupil expenditures, so... students who use vouchers to attend private schools will free up financial resources that can be spread among the children who remain in the system.”

2. The “Creaming” Argument

“At best, vouchers offer increased opportunity for a relative handful of children who will be carefully selected by the private schools that have the luxury of deciding whom they want to admit.” – Steven R. Shapiro, Legal Director, American Civil Liberties Union

John Witte found in his review of the Milwaukee voucher program that “the students in the Choice program were not the best, or even average students from the Milwaukee [public] system.” Worse according to other researchers, nearly 37 percent of Milwaukee’s public schools employ screening measures prohibited for schools in the choice program. Finally, wealthier parents often have already moved their children to neighborhoods with better public schools or to private schools. The fact of the matter is low-income parents are left behind by the current system, and all school choice programs are targeted at those parents.

3. The “Radical Schools” Scare

“Can you imagine a KKK group, Skinheads, witches or other cult groups setting up schools to teach their philosophy and using taxpayers’ dollars to do so?” – Former California Assembly Speaker Willie Brown

Approximately 96 percent of private school children attend schools that are accredited or evaluated by national, regional or state private school organizations maintaining standards accepted or recognized by federal, state, and local agencies, according to Dr. Charles O’Malley, who handled private education issues for three U.S. Secretaries of Education.

4. The “Church-State” Argument

“Taxpayers must never be forced to pay for religion.” – Rev. Barry W. Lynn, Executive Director, Americans United for Separation of Church and State

In June 2002, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that parents exercising their individual free choice could use vouchers on private schools — whatever their affiliation.

5. The “Lack of Accountability” Argument

“Voucher programs lack accountability... Public schools must also comply with all federal, state, and local civil rights, health and safety requirements.”- Statement by several organizations, including the ACLU, Anti-Defamation League, National PTA, and NEA

Schools of choice are accountable directly to parents, who voluntarily choose to enroll their children in them. When such schools aren’t doing their jobs, they lose students, and can go out of business. Not so for public schools.

6. The “Big Brother” Argument

“Private school vouchers would make parochial schools less parochial and private schools less private, subjecting them to public supervision and compromising their independence.” – Richard Riley, former Secretary of Education

Sound choice plans include provisions to protect the independence of private schools. The most compelling evidence comes from the Milwaukee experience. The longest running school choice program of its kind, the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program has not led to excessive or intrusive regulations on private schools. In fact, with every passing year, more private schools have opted to participate in the program (from seven in the first year to 102 now).

7. The “Choice is Expensive” Argument

“A voucher rarely covers the cost of tuition. The losers will be the minorities and the low-income students.” – Representative Robert Scott, D-Virginia

As the U.S. Department of education reported in June 2003, the average private school tuition is \$4,689, while the average public school expenditure per pupil was \$7,392, more than 50 percent higher than average private school tuition costs.

8. The “Choice is Limited” Argument

“A simple mathematical exercise will immediately point out that the numbers don’t work. A voucher system, regardless of the amount of money provided, can only accommodate a minimal number of public school students.” – Gerald Tirozzi, former Assistant Secretary of Education

As demand for private and alternative public schools increases, so too will their supply. As previously mentioned, the number of private schools in the Milwaukee program rose from seven to 102. In another choice program, the number of charter schools have grown from one to nearly 3,000 since 1992.

9. The “Failed Experiment” Argument

“There is no compelling case to be made for vouchers based on the achievement data.” – Alex Molnar, Professor, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee

Even though choice is just in its infancy and has had to contend with court challenges, underfunding, and constant legislative threat, research shows it is working. In New York City, DC, Ohio, Wisconsin, and other places, researchers have shown that in choice programs the most at-risk students post gains in excess of those earned in the public school system.

RECENT POLLS SHOWING SUPPORT FOR CHOICE:

African-American Support:

- 57% of African Americans support vouchers (up from 48% in 1996), versus 43% who oppose them. In the general population, 52% of people support vouchers (up from 43% in 1996).
- In ranking their *public* schools, only 35.2% of African Americans rated their school "Excellent/Good," (down from 41% in 1996) versus 53.7% of the general population (down from 63.7% in 1996).

2002 National Opinion Poll: Education (Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, May 2003)

- 72% of African Americans support permitting parents to use tax dollars allotted for their child's education "in the form of a scholarship to attend a private, public or parochial school of their choosing." 63% of the total population provided the same answer, as did 64% of Hispanics.

When the question asks for support for allowing parents to send children to the school of their choice rather than only the one to which they are assigned, but without mentioning "tax dollars," support is even greater. Then 75% of African Americans support choice, 70% of Hispanics, and 76% of the general population.

2002 National Survey of Attitudes Toward School Choice (Center for Education Reform/Zogby, August 2002)

- 63% of respondents (all African Americans) said they would place their children in either private or charter schools were the option offered. In addition, 64% of respondents reported having a favorable impression of BAMPAC when they learned the group supports "opportunity scholarships." In addition, 56% of African Americans rated their schools a "C" or below.

BAMPAC 2002 National Opinion Poll (Black America's Political Action Committee, August 2002)

General Support:

- Despite designing the question to elicit negative responses, the 2002 PDK/Gallup poll found that 52% of respondents support giving parents the ability to send their children to a public, private or religious school. In addition, 63% of "nonwhites" supported allowing parents "to send their school-age children to any public, private, or church-related school they choose" even when "the government would pay for all or part of the tuition."

The 34th Annual Phi delta Kappa/Gallup Poll (August 2002)

- 51% of respondents would support “providing parents in low-income families with tax money in the form of school vouchers to help pay for their children to attend private or religious schools.” 45% of respondents said if vouchers were available to send their children to private school, they would take them.

Associated Press Poll on school vouchers (August 2002)

- 50% of respondents support helping low-income parents pay private or religious school tuition. Support is 57% among “low-income” groups.

ABCNews.com Poll (July 16, 2002)

In addition to these national polls, several state-level polls have also shown support for choice.

Choice is Popular With Black Families; Surveys Show High Parent Satisfaction

More and more parents are choosing their children’s schools, and are happier when they do according to surveys administered by the National Household Education Surveys Program (NHES) between 1993 and 1999. In that time the percentage of students enrolled in schools the old-fashioned way – based solely on their addresses – decreased from 80 percent to 76 percent. This was accompanied by a corresponding increase – from 11 percent in 1993 to 14 percent in 1999 - in the percentage of students enrolled in public schools of choice, be they charter schools, magnet schools, or schools chosen in open enrollment programs. The remaining 9-10 percent were in private and church-related schools. Choice is especially popular with Black families, whose children enroll in public choice schools at a higher rate than either Whites or Hispanics. Most telling: choosing parents, whether their children were enrolled in public or private schools of choice, were happier with the teachers, academic standards, order and discipline in their schools than were parents whose children attended assigned schools. *Trends in the Use of School Choice: 1993-1999 (Stacey Bielick and Christopher Chapman, National Center for Educational Statistics, May 2003)*

RESEARCH REVEALS THAT SCHOOL CHOICE WORKS

Washington, DC Scholarship Students Do Better

This study of students who used scholarships to attend private schools in Washington, DC, Dayton, OH and New York City found that African American scholarship students in all three cities outpaced their public school peers on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. On average, across the three cities, African American scholarship students outpaced the control group remaining in public schools by 3.3 National Percentage Ranking (NPR) points in the first year, and 6.3 NPR the second year. These scores also translated into African American scholarship students closing the Black/White achievement gap by almost one-third.

Test Score Effects of School Vouchers in Dayton, Ohio, New York City, and Washington D.C.: Evidence from Randomized Field Trials (William Howell, Patrick Wolf, Paul Peterson and David Campbell, August 2000)

New York Choices Yield Increases in Black Student Achievement

Additional analysis of effects of choice on African American students in New York City attending private schools using scholarships found that these students outscored their peers on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. Researchers found that African American scholarship students outpaced their peers by 6.1, 4.2, and 8.4 National Percentile Rank (NPR) points at the end of their first, second and third years, respectively. When looking at the data with a different set of classifications as asked by critics, positive effects are still seen in at least two out of three years.

Efficiency, Bias, and Classification Schemes: Estimating Private-School Impacts on Test Scores in the New York City Voucher Experiment (Peterson and Howell, Harvard University, June 2003)

Texas Program Resulted in Public School Improvements

Using data obtained from the Texas Education Agency, this analysis shows that within a year of establishing the Children's Educational Opportunity Foundation's HORIZON voucher program in Edgewood, district schools began to greatly outpace neighboring districts in all areas of the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS). This is a good sign that the ripple effect is working in Edgewood.

Analysis of Edgewood ISD TAAS Scores as Compared to Surrounding School Districts and to All Districts in Texas (Robert B. Aguirre, Children's Educational Opportunity Foundation, January 2003)

Cleveland Choice Program Has Positive Effects

Cleveland students who have used scholarships the longest might be on pace to eventually have appreciably higher achievement than Cleveland's public school students. Statistics in the report also suggest that choice - which in Cleveland includes public school choice and charter schools, in addition to the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program - might be "raising all boats," as scores across the board were on the rise between 1998 and 2001.

Evaluation of the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program: 1999-2001 (Kim Metcalf, Indiana Center for Evaluation, March 2003)

Cleveland, *continued* - After two years, pupils at Cleveland's private schools performed seven percentage points higher than the national average in reading and 15 points higher in math. Harvard's study of the Milwaukee schools found that, after four years, pupils in voucher schools had math scores 11 percentage points higher than their unlucky public contemporaries, and six points higher in reading.

"An Evaluation of the Cleveland Voucher Program After Two Years," June 1999, Harvard University's Program on Education Policy and Governance

Choice Causes Dramatic Ripple Effect

Examines schools in Milwaukee, WI, Arizona, and Michigan that faced significant choice competition. Significant competition was defined as either charter schools or scholarship programs that could potentially take at least 5 percent of a public school's enrollment; that required large proportions of per-pupil funding to follow children, and; that have existed for a few years. In all three places, those districts facing the most competition raised achievement most dramatically. She also found that the negative effects of any "cream-skimming" that possibly accompanied choice were totally "swamped" by the positive effects of competition.

How School Choice Affects the Achievement of Public School Students (Caroline Hoxby, Harvard University, September 2001)

Florida Choice Programs Helps Those Most in Need

Florida's scholarship program for special education students serves 9,202 students, whose parents are nearly universally satisfied with their choices. According to this poll, 92.7% of current McKay participants are satisfied with their McKay schools; only 32.7% were similarly satisfied with their public schools. For non-white's, 85.3% of parents reported they are satisfied with their McKay school, vs. 29.5% of whom report they were satisfied with their public schools.

Vouchers for Special Education Students: An Evaluation of Florida's McKay Scholarship Program (Jay P. Green and Greg Forster, Manhattan Institute, June 2003)

Milwaukee Program Yields Student Increases

A 1996 Harvard University study of Milwaukee's school voucher program found significant academic gains for economically disadvantaged youngsters who use school vouchers, narrowing the test score gap between white and minority students. The report demonstrates that if similar success could be achieved for all minority students nationwide, it could close the gap separating white and minority test scores by one-third to more than one-half. The study compared students in Milwaukee's choice program with others who, under random selection, applied but were not awarded vouchers. The authors found that math scores of choice students were 5 and 12 percent higher for third- and fourth-year school choice participants, respectively. Reading scores of choice students in the third and fourth years were, on average, 3 and 5 percent higher, respectively.

Princeton University economist Cecilia Rouse, who analyzed test scores of students in the Milwaukee program, reported that "being selected to participate in the [Milwaukee] choice program appears to have increased the math achievement of low-income, minority students by 1.5-2.3 percentile points **per year** (emphasis added)."

"Private School Vouchers and Student Achievement: An Evaluation of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program," Quarterly Journal of Economics, May 1998.

SCHOOL CHOICE AT-A-GLANCE

What Is “School Choice”?

“School choice” gives parents the opportunity to choose their child’s school. Children attend traditional public schools based solely on address. Wealthier individuals can move to areas with the best schools, or enroll their child in a private school. Low-income individuals do not have this luxury. Because a parent has chosen the school their child will attend, school choice fosters parental involvement and high expectations by placing parents’ rights and the best interests of the child over the interests of a bureaucratic system. There are four basic programs: **full school choice programs, private scholarship programs, tax-driven programs, charter schools.**

Does school choice work?

Recent studies have shown that African-Americans using privately-funded scholarships in New York City out-gained public school students. Students using vouchers in Cleveland have sizable achievement gains and those using vouchers show the greatest improvement over time.

Don't Choice Programs Just Educate the Best Students?

No, half of charter school students are minorities and 66% have identified special students needs. Choice scholarship programs in Cleveland, Milwaukee, Florida and Colorado target at-risk children exclusively from low-income families. The programs in Vermont and Maine provide schooling in rural locations. Private scholarship programs specifically target low-income, at-risk children. School choice programs are aimed at low-income kids in failing schools and districts.

Are Choice Scholarships Programs Constitutional?

In June 2002 the Court declared in a 5-4 decision that "neutral educational assistance programs that ... offer aid directly to a broad class of individual recipients defined without regard to religion" are constitutional. The legal battle over choice has not ended. “Blaine Amendments” exist in 47 state constitutions prohibiting “compelled support” of religion. These laws passed are vestiges of nineteenth century anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant movements. In 2004, the U.S. Supreme Court will rule on Blaine amendments, possibly removing the last of the major legal impediments standing in the way of parental choice.

Where Are These School Choice Programs?

There are four publicly-sponsored full school choice programs in *Cleveland OH, Milwaukee WI, Florida and Colorado*. Charter School laws exist in 40 states and DC. The ten states that do not have charter laws are *Washington, Montana, Wyoming, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Alabama, West Virginia, Maine and Vermont*. For a complete description and breakdown of all choice programs please visit our website at http://www.edreform.com/school_reform_faq/school_choice.htm.