

What are School Vouchers?

Though they can take many forms, essentially school vouchers are programs that allow individual student's families to use public tax dollars to pay for their child to attend a private school, including religiously affiliated schools. Sometimes they are called vouchers, other times they are called Education Savings Accounts (ESAs) or Tax Credit Scholarships.

Cost of School Vouchers to Taxpayers

A review of 25 years of voucher research found that record-keeping, student transportation, and other costs associated with vouchers could raise public educational costs by 25 percent or more (Carnoy, 2017).

If required to admit students by lottery, voucher schools often later push out students that are not performing well or are not conforming to the school's mission (Benveniste, Carnoy, and Rothstein, 2003). If this happens after the designated student count day within a state or district, the voucher money will stay with the voucher school, but the cost of educating that student is often shifted back to an area public school.

In an investigation of the earliest state adopters of vouchers, analysis found that a significant percentage (12%) of Wisconsin's voucher dollars were spent on failed schools that subsequently closed, speaking to a concern about the quality of education attained with public dollars when there are no mechanisms for state evaluation (Ford, 2016).

Effect of Vouchers on Academic Achievement

Analysis of 25 years of research on vouchers indicates that use of vouchers yields no overall improvement in test scores (Carnoy, 2017).

A 15 year study in 10 states with more than 1,000 families found that for wealthier students, vouchers led to better academic outcomes. However,

for low income students, use of vouchers to attend private schools yields *no* academic gains (Pianta & Ansari, 2018).

Similarly, a study of vouchers in Washington D.C. found no effect of voucher use on standardized test scores, though there is some evidence that vouchers might increase high school graduation rates (Wolf et al. 2013)

A longitudinal study of a voucher programs in Indiana and Louisiana found that private school voucher users scored significantly lower on state standardized tests than their public school-attending peers (Dynarski, 2016).

Though some point to Wisconsin's voucher program as evidence for success, the studies that show gains with voucher users are not statistically sound. More robust research has found either no effect of private school voucher use on state standardized tests or a marginal positive effect of voucher use (Carnoy, 2017; Witte et al. 2012)

References

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