



THE RESEARCH ON PRIVATE EDUCATION CHOICE

Prepared by ExcelinEd – 2023

A substantial body of research shows that when families can use state-sanctioned funds to pay for private school and other academic experiences, everyone wins. Students graduate high school and attain college degrees at higher rates, schools improve academic achievement and become more diverse, parents are satisfied, and taxpayers save money.

A COMPREHENSIVE REVIEW OF PRIVATE EDUCATION CHOICE EFFECTS

The most comprehensive review to date of research on private school choice programs strongly suggests that these programs work.¹ A thorough literature review by the national organization EdChoice examines 175 rigorous studies of outcomes and impacts. A total of 151 studies show at least some positive effects, 12 find any kind of negative effect, and only 18 (about 10% of the total) find no visible impact one way or the other.² The studies are sorted into seven main research topics of interest, and break down as follows:

| Research Topic | Positive | Neutral | Negative |
|---|----------|---------|----------|
| 1. Test Scores of Choice Participants (17) | 11 | 4 | 3 |
| 2. Graduation and Educational Attainment of Choice Participants (7) | 5 | 2 | 0 |
| 3. Parent Satisfaction (32) | 30 | 1 | 2 |
| 4. Test Scores of Students Remaining in Public Schools (28) | 25 | 1 | 2 |
| 5. Effect of Choice Program on Racial Composition of Schools (7) | 6 | 1 | 0 |
| 6. Effect of Choice Program on Student Civic Values (11) | 6 | 5 | 0 |
| 7. Choice Programs' Fiscal Impact on Taxpayers and Districts (73) | 68 | 4 | 5 |

CHARACTERISTICS OF RIGOROUS, RELIABLE RESEARCH

When reviewing research on private education choice, consider three types of studies:

- **Random assignment experiments—the gold standard.** These are the most rigorous studies. This type of analysis uses a random lottery to separate students into “test” and “control” groups. The random selection of students provides researchers confidence that the observable effects are truly a result of participation in the program, not outside influences like parent involvement or student motivation.
- **Matching longitudinal studies—the silver standard.** When random assignment is not possible, silver-standard studies match students in choice programs with similar, non-participating students and track them over time.



- **Control variables—the bronze standard.** This option controls for student characteristics like income, race, and parents' level of education to determine a program's effect. This method of research should only be considered if gold and silver standard studies are not available.

WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SHOW?

Participants in Private Education Choice Programs See Academic Benefits

Of the 17 empirical studies on the academic outcomes of participating students, 11 show positive results for participants, four have neutral findings and three have negative findings. For example, participants in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program scored 10.7 percentage points higher in math and 5.8 percentage points higher in reading than public school peers.³

Private Education Choice Boosts Graduation and Other Post-K-12 Outcomes

Of the seven empirical studies on attainment outcomes of participating students, five show positive results for participants, while two reveal no impact. No negative outcomes have been found. An Urban Institute analysis found that Milwaukee voucher students and Florida tax-credit scholarship students were more likely to enroll in and graduate from college afterward. However, participating in Washington D.C.'s choice program had no effect on attainment.⁴

Parents More Satisfied with Access to New Options

Thirty of 32 empirical studies find parents are more likely to be satisfied with their child's education because of participating in a choice program. For instance, a survey of 3,000 Indiana parents of voucher and scholarship students were 5 to 7 percentage points more likely to be satisfied (and 10 to 20 percentage points more likely to be completely satisfied) with their child's school than their counterparts with children in district public schools.⁵

Students in Public Schools Also See Academic Benefits

Twenty-five of 28 empirical studies show improved academic outcomes of students who remain in public schools after education choice programs are implemented. A study of a Florida choice program found that low-performing public schools saw a 15-percentage point improvement in math after facing competition from nearby private schools.⁶

Private Education Choice Leads to More Diverse Schools

Six out of seven empirical studies show that choice programs move students from more segregated schools into less segregated schools, with the tenth study showing no impact. As a researcher noted after studying a Louisiana voucher program: "The bottom line take-away from our analysis is that 82 percent of student transfers made possible by the Louisiana Scholarship Program reduced racial stratification in the voucher students' former public schools, a clear win for desegregation efforts in the state of Louisiana."⁷

Private Education Choice Promotes Shared Civic Values

Of 11 studies, six show positive effects on participants' civic values, while the rest showed no effect. A 2008 report reviewed 21 studies that looked at the effect of education choice on seven civic values: political tolerance, voluntarism, political knowledge, political participation, social capital, civic skills and patriotism.⁸ In nearly all cases, there was an advantage for schools of choice compared to public schools in promoting these values. The researcher writes, "The most intriguing explanation for the apparent education choice advantage in promoting civic values is a generally higher level of order and discipline in schools of choice."



Private Education Choice Programs Are More Fiscally Efficient

Among 73 empirical studies on education choice’s financial impact on taxpayers and school districts, 68 found that choice programs save money, four studies show choice programs are revenue neutral, and five show added costs to taxpayers. Dollars awarded through a choice program represent expenditures from the state treasury. But those costs are more than offset by allocating at a lower rate than the public school per-pupil rate. A 2021 EdChoice report surveyed 40 choice programs around the nation and found a cumulative savings between \$12.4 and \$28.3 billion, or between \$1.80 and \$2.85 recouped for each dollar spent. In a typical program, if half the funded choice students switch from a public school, the result is a net positive fiscal impact.⁹

MIXED RESULTS AND ACADEMIC FINDINGS IN CONTEXT

Washington, D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program (DC OSP) - Gold Standard

The Institute of Education Science (IES) released a [report](#) in 2019 analyzing third-year outcomes for students participating in the DC OSP. The report found neutral results in math and reading achievement (not statistically significant impacts for students after three years in the program).¹⁰ However, consider the following:

1. A gold standard 2018 IES report showed academic gains for DC OSP students, particularly in the long-term.¹¹ It is common for students to enjoy greater achievement gains when they participate in a choice program for longer durations.
2. The same report found that DC OSP “had a statistically significant positive impact on both parents’ and students’ general perceptions of school safety.”
3. DC OSP students receive significantly less funding than their counterparts in district and charter schools. Voucher students receive no more than [\\$10,200 in grades K-8 and \\$15,300 in grades 9-12](#), compared to nearly \$25,000 in D.C. charter schools and over \$36,000 in district public schools.¹²

Indiana Choice Scholarship Program (CSP) - Silver Standard

A 2017 [study](#) by R. Joseph Waddington and Mark Berends on academic outcomes in Indiana’s Choice Scholarship Program (CSP) suggests a statistically significant decline in math scores, primarily during a student’s first and second year in their new private school. However, performance improved for students that remained in the CSP. After four years, CSP students surpassed their public school peers in English and regained level-footing with their peers in math.¹³

Ohio’s EdChoice Scholarship Program - Silver Standard

A 2016 [study](#) of Ohio’s EdChoice Scholarship Program (not affiliated with the national organization), showed that “students, on average, who move to private schools under the EdChoice program tend to perform considerably worse than observationally similar students who remained in public schools.”¹⁴

1. The study’s negative findings are tempered by a research design that falls short of the gold standard. EdChoice Students during the years studied were only eligible if their public school academically fell below a certain level based on state testing. The study looked at students near this cutoff—those who earned participation because their school barely made eligibility and similar students in schools who just missed eligibility—and compared their performance over time. Because of this methodology, the researchers were not able to study students who would have been most likely to benefit: students from the lowest-performing public schools.
2. Notably, the authors also observed that “the EdChoice program improved the performance of students eligible to participate—most of whom remained in the public schools.” In other words, students who were eligible but did not use scholarships saw achievement gains.



¹ EdChoice, “The 123s of School Choice: What the research says about private school choice programs in America,” updated April 2022, <https://www.edchoice.org/research-library/?report=the-123s-of-school-choice-2#report>.

² Note that the combined number of positive, negative and neutral outcomes may not add up to the total, as some studies may produce multiple different findings.

³ Greene, Jay P., Paul E. Peterson, and Jiangtao Du (1999), “Effectiveness of School Choice: The Milwaukee Experiment,” <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0013124599031002005>.

⁴ Chingos, Matthew M., Daniel Kuehn, Tomas Monarrez, Patrick J. Wolf, John F. Witte, and Brian Kisida (2019), “The Effects of Means-Tested Private School Choice Programs on College Enrollment and Graduation,”

https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/100665/the_effects_of_means-tested_private_school_choice_programs_on_college_enrollment_and_graduation_2.pdf.

⁵ Catt, Andrew D. and Evan Rhinesmith (2017). “Why Indiana Parents Choose: A Cross-Sector Survey of Parents’ Views in a Robust School Choice Environment,” <https://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Why-Indiana-Parents-Choose-1.pdf>.

⁶ Winters, Marcus and Jay Greene. “Competition Passes the Test.” <http://educationnext.org/competition-passes-the-test/>

⁷ Egalite, Anna J. “The Effect of Louisiana’s Voucher Program on School Integration: A Response to The Century Foundation.”

<http://educationnext.org/effect-louisianas-voucher-program-school-integration-response-century-foundation/>

⁸ Wolf, Patrick J. “Civics Exam: Schools of Choice Boost Civic Values.” <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED498124.pdf>.

⁹ Lueken, Martin F (2021). “Fiscal Effects of School Choice: Analyzing the costs and savings of private school choice programs in America,” <https://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/The-Fiscal-Effects-of-School-Choice-WEB-reduced.pdf>.

¹⁰ Dynarski, Mark, Ning Rui, Ann Webber, Babette Gutmann. “Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Impacts Two Years After Students Applied.” <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/20184010/pdf/20184010.pdf>.

¹¹ Wolf, Patrick J., Brian Kisida, Babette Gutmann, Michael Puma, Nada Eissa, and Lou Rizzo. “School Vouchers and Student Outcomes: Experimental Evidence from Washington, DC.” <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/20104018/pdf/20104018.pdf>.

¹² DeAngelis, Corey A., Patrick J. Wolf, Larry D. Maloney, and Jay F. May (2020), “Charter School Funding: Inequity Surges in the Cities,” <https://cpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/wordpressua.uark.edu/dist/9/544/files/2018/10/charter-school-funding-inequity-surges-in-the-cities.pdf>.

¹³ Waddington, R. Joseph and Mark Berends. “Impact of the Indiana Choice Scholarship Program: Achievement Effects for Students in Upper Elementary and Middle School.”

http://creo.nd.edu/images/people/Waddington_Berends_Indiana_Voucher_Impacts_06.24.17.pdf.

¹⁴ Figlio, David and Krzysztof Karbownik. “Evaluation of Ohio’s EdChoice Scholarship Program: Selection, Competition, and Performance Effects.” [http://edex.s3-us-west-](http://edex.s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/publication/pdfs/FORDHAM%20Ed%20Choice%20Evaluation%20Report_online%20edition.pdf)

[2.amazonaws.com/publication/pdfs/FORDHAM%20Ed%20Choice%20Evaluation%20Report_online%20edition.pdf](http://edex.s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/publication/pdfs/FORDHAM%20Ed%20Choice%20Evaluation%20Report_online%20edition.pdf).