

School reform

A worthy experiment

Vouchers versus the status quo in Texas



Illustration by Caudio Munoz

THE Edgewood independent school district covers an unassuming part of west San Antonio, a district of fast-food joints and car-body shops, with houses that run from modest to ramshackle. It is mostly poor and mostly Hispanic, and in 1968 its government-funded public schools were so bad that a parents' group sued the state, prompting a debate over school funding that lasted for decades. By 1998 the situation had improved. The National Education Association, America's largest teachers' union, said that Edgewood could be a model for other urban school districts.

Then its voucher programme started. In 1998 the Children's Educational Opportunity Foundation, a private group, announced that it would put up \$50m over the next ten years to provide vouchers

for private education to any low-income Edgewood student who wanted one. The "Horizon" plan was meant to show legislators that vouchers could help students and motivate schools through competition.

Critics said the programme would take money from a school district that was poor already. One teacher wrote an angry editorial comparing Horizon to Napoleon's invasion of Russia, destined for "history's trash heap of bad ideas".

But a report published in September by the Texas Public Policy Foundation (TPPF), a conservative think-tank, argues that the programme was a hit over its ten-year span. More than 4,000 students claimed the vouchers; their test scores jumped, and only two dropped out.

And Edgewood's public schools were not crippled. During Horizon's busiest year only 12.8% of students took vouchers. The drop-out rate decreased, teachers' salaries increased and by 2008 the district had graduated from "acceptable" to "recognised", according to the state's education agency. Brooke Dollens Terry of TPPF says that the Edgewood results should embolden future reformers: "I think we've proven that the walls of the school didn't come crumbling in."

But the causes of Edgewood's improvement are up for debate. The TPPF chalks it up to competition. Liz Garza, the district superintendent, thinks it reflects efforts to meet state standards, which were getting tougher over the same period. Paul Kelleher, who chairs the education department at Trinity University, says the TPPF report is inconclusive. He thinks that although vouchers may help some students, a full-scale programme would backfire as resources moved away from inner-city schools.

The issue may be moot. The idea behind Horizon was that a successful private experiment would spur lawmakers to try a public version. But the legislature has declined to do so, and teachers' groups are ready to pounce on any pro-voucher manoeuvres.

So attention is moving to other reforms, such as independent "charter" schools. These keep students in the public system while offering parents a choice and school heads freedom from bureaucracy. But there are only 209 charter schools in all of Texas, and the legislature has capped their number at 215. The last charter will probably be issued soon, says Ms Terry, and there are still at least 16,000 students on waiting lists.