

The Effects of School Choice on the Edgewood Independent School District

by
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Introduction

A collaborative evaluation by independent researchers at Mathematica Policy Research and the Harvard University Program on Education Policy and Governance has revealed a breakthrough success in the education reform and school choice movement.¹ The 1999 research centered on the Horizon Scholarship program implemented at the Edgewood Independent School District, located in a socio-economically disadvantaged area of San Antonio, Texas. The privately funded program is sponsored by the Children's Educational Opportunity Foundation of San Antonio (CEO) and began at the start of the 1998-99 school year. The CEO Horizon program is the most ambitious and focused school choice and child-centered funding program in the United States involving an entire school district.²

Early results of this choice experiment in the Edgewood Independent School District are encouraging.³ Research on the Horizon scholarship program indicates that: (1) students benefit academically from school choice; (2) students who avail themselves of school choice have the same academic and socio-economic characteristics as those students who stay in government schools; (3) parents are more satisfied with schools they choose; and (4) choice does not harm, financially or otherwise, the government schools that lose students to choice.

In fact, students who remain in the government schools enjoy new programs the school institutes in response to choice, potentially smaller class sizes, more funding per pupil, and a greater sensitivity on the part of the school to the needs and desires of parents.

¹ An Evaluation of the Horizon Scholarship Program in the Edgewood Independent School District, San Antonio, Texas: The First Year. Mathematica Policy Research and Harvard University Program on Education Policy and Governance. September 1999. <http://data.fas.harvard.edu/pepg/>

² CEO America Press Release Edgewood — Horizon Project Early findings prove critics of school choice wrong. February 9, 1999 <http://www.childrenfirstamerica.org/horizon-news.html>

³ Ibid.

The Edgewood Independent School District and the Horizon Choice Population

Horizon program sponsors at Edgewood sought to equalize education opportunities for children from low-income families in San Antonio -- opportunities that are commonly denied to them due to the prohibitive cost of private education. Horizon scholarships are available to any school age child residing within the Edgewood district who qualifies for the federal free or reduced price lunch program. During the first year of the program (1998-99), 837 students received Horizon scholarships. Of these, 566 used their scholarship to leave an Edgewood school and attend a private school. An additional 105 of the 837 students receiving a scholarship had been misrepresenting their true address to public school officials so they could attend a public school in another district. Students from this group subsequently used their scholarship to attend a private school. Some 116 students were entering Kindergarten for the first time and 50 students received scholarships who were already exercising school choice.⁴ The scholarships were used to pay tuition at private schools, either secular or religious, or to any public school outside the Edgewood school district. Elementary students (K-8) received scholarships worth up to \$3,600, while secondary students (9-12) were granted scholarships worth up to \$4,000.⁵

| CHART 1 HORIZON ENROLLMENT BREAKDOWN* | | |
|--|------------|-------------|
| | Number | Percentage |
| Students who were already exercising school choice | 50 | 6.0% |
| Students who were previously in an Edgewood school | 566** | 67.6% |
| Students who resided in the district but were misrepresenting their address so they could attend public school in another school district | 105 | 12.5% |
| Students just starting Kindergarten | 116 | 13.9% |
| Total Enrollment | 837 | 100% |
| * A Report on the First Semester of the HORIZON Voucher Program. Robert B. Aguirre, Managing Director, Children's Educational Opportunity Foundation, 8122 Datapoint Drive, Suite 804, San Antonio, TX 78229. January 1999, p. 10. | | |
| ** This equated to 3.7% of the students enrolled in the Edgewood district. | | |

⁴ A Report on the First Semester of the HORIZON Voucher Program. Robert B. Aguirre, Managing Director, Children's Educational Opportunity Foundation, 8122 Datapoint Drive, Suite 804, San Antonio, TX 78229. January 1999. p10.

⁵ An Evaluation of the Horizon Scholarship Program in the Edgewood Independent School District, San Antonio, Texas: The First Year. Mathematica Policy Research and Harvard University Program on Education Policy and Governance. September 1999. <http://data.fas.harvard.edu/pepg/>

Ethnicity and Socio-economics

The ethnic and socio-economic makeup of the Horizon scholarship recipients is similar to all other Edgewood students. Both student population groups are socio-economically disadvantaged and consist primarily of minority children. The Mathematica study reported an average family income of \$15,990 for Horizon families and \$15,939 for Edgewood public school families. More than 96% of Horizon students were of Latino heritage, as compared to 93% of Edgewood public school students. Neither difference is statistically significant.⁶

Family Characteristics

Additional demographic metrics reported in the study highlight the closeness of the two student populations. For example, mothers of Horizon students had completed, on average, 12 years of education, as compared to 11 years for mothers of the Edgewood public school students. Four percent of Horizon students were receiving welfare, as compared to 5 percent of the public school mothers. Forty-five percent of the Horizon parents were living together versus 43 percent of public school families. Neither difference is statistically significant.⁷



No Loss of Academically Superior Children

Contrary to scholarship opponent's claims from the outset, the Horizon program has not resulted in any "creaming" or "skimming" of the most academically talented children from the Edgewood school district.⁸ The Mathematica Policy report contradicts claims of Edgewood school officials that the district's "best and brightest" students would depart, or have departed, under the Horizon program.⁹ On October 2, 1998, Edgewood Superintendent Dr. Delores Munoz conceded that the district had been unable to identify which students had left the district, thus making it impossible to perform an analysis of a hypothetical academic slippage from the district.¹⁰

⁶ An Evaluation of the Horizon Scholarship Program in the Edgewood Independent School District, San Antonio, Texas: The First Year. Mathematica Policy Research and Harvard University Program on Education Policy and Governance. September 1999. <http://data.fas.harvard.edu/pepg/>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ CEO America Press Release Edgewood — Horizon Project Early findings prove critics of school choice wrong. February 9, 1999. <http://www.childrenfirstamerica.org/horizon-news.html>

⁹ Evaluation of the Horizon Scholarship Program in the Edgewood Independent School District, San Antonio, Texas: The First Year. Mathematica Policy Research and Harvard University Program on Education Policy and Governance. September 1999. <http://data.fas.harvard.edu/pepg/>

¹⁰ Edgewood the Focus of Public Forum, San Antonio Express-News October 3, 1998.

Academic Scores

Academic scores are improving among Horizon students relative to their public counterparts. Horizon students scored in the 37th percentile on the mathematics test after a year in their school of choice; Edgewood public school students scored in the 34th percentile. This difference, while not statistically significant, nevertheless demonstrates improvement among the Horizon students. On the standardized reading test, Horizon students scored in the 35th percentile, whereas public school students scored in the 28th percentile. This difference is statistically significant and demonstrates real improvement in the Horizon student population relative to their public school counterparts.¹¹

Financial Impact

The Horizon program also disproves a key claim of school choice opponents – that the choice process would result in a mass exodus of students that would prove costly to public schools. The enrollment data at Edgewood demonstrate otherwise. During the most recent three-year period for which data are available, enrollment across the Edgewood district ranged from 14,180 students in 1996-97 to 13,323 during 1998-99. Some 566 students left the school district entirely due to a Horizon scholarship; another 500 students were lost when a public housing project closed down within the district boundaries. Additional students were gained and lost during this period given the transitory socio-economic and ethnic population in the Edgewood school district. Though 566 students left the school district entirely, the financial loss for subsequent school years was minimal. In year one, the Edgewood school district lost no funds as a result of the Horizon program since per-student funding from the state is based upon the prior year's enrollment. Therefore, the district continued to receive funding for students who were no longer in the district (reported by the district to be over 1,200 students when other student departures were considered). As a result, the district was paid an additional \$5.8 million for students not attending any public school in Edgewood.¹²



Of the 566 students who left Edgewood schools entirely, the resultant financial loss to Edgewood in the 1999-2000 school year was approximately \$2.66 million, or only 3% of the school district's budget, a budget that reflects the reduced costs associated with teaching 566 fewer students. In 1997, Edgewood had a fund balance of \$23,925,297 -- 32% of their total budget. Moreover, subsequent to the announcement of the Horizon program, Edgewood officials responded in a way that will benefit more children. For the first time, Edgewood agreed to take students from other school districts. As a result, some 200 students are believed to have transferred into Edgewood from other districts, thus benefitting the Edgewood budget by an estimated \$919,000.¹³

¹¹ Evaluation of the Horizon Scholarship Program in the Edgewood Independent School District, San Antonio, Texas: The First Year. Mathematica Policy Research and Harvard University Program on Education Policy and Governance. September 1999. <http://data.fas.harvard.edu/pepg/>

¹² Ibid.

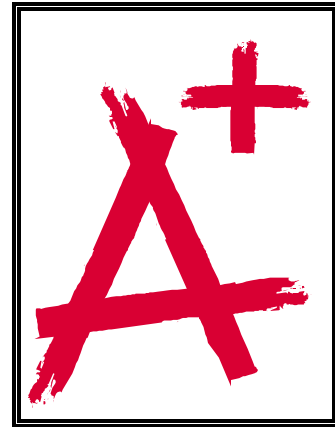
¹³ Evaluation of the Horizon Scholarship Program in the Edgewood Independent School District, San Antonio, Texas: The First Year. Mathematica Policy Research and Harvard University Program on Education Policy and Governance. September 1999. <http://data.fas.harvard.edu/pepg/>

The Horizon Program, in fact, helps reduce overcrowding while increasing per pupil spending. The Edgewood district actually increased their per pupil spending because it still receives the local funding but has fewer students in its classrooms. Since a primary goal of many teacher advocates and union groups is more money and smaller classroom sizes, these scholarships are a "win-win" situation for the parents and the schools.

Safety & Parental Satisfaction

Perhaps the most significant, positive findings of the Mathematica Policy study have been that of measures of school climate, safety, and parental satisfaction under the Horizon scholarship program. Key findings were as follows:

- Ninety-two percent of Horizon families said their child was in a school the family wants the child to attend, as compared to 75 percent of public school families. This difference is statistically significant.¹⁴
- Parents of Horizon students volunteered at a higher rate than did parents of the Edgewood district. Parental satisfaction with their child's education was also substantially higher.¹⁵
- Thirty-nine percent of Edgewood public school parents report that guns and other dangerous weapons are a very serious problem at their school, as compared to 28 percent of Horizon parents. This difference is significant.¹⁶
- Fifty-two percent of Edgewood public school parents report fighting as a serious problem at their school, as compared to 28 percent of Horizon parents. This difference is significant.¹⁷
- Sixty-one percent of Horizon parents are very satisfied with the academic quality of their school, as compared to 35 percent of public school parents. This difference is significant.¹⁸



Summary

The results of the independent Harvard University study of the innovative Horizon scholarship program demonstrate that school choice and education scholarships can be successfully applied to socio-economically disadvantaged communities on a district-wide basis. While it is not yet possible to measure long-term results, the initial findings are encouraging. Academic scores among Horizon students are rising; public school overcrowding is falling; and parental satisfaction among scholarship students is soaring. The Horizon program also demonstrates the extent to which some parents will go

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.



to obtain a good education for their children. Some 105 Horizon scholarship recipients resided within the Edgewood district but were misrepresenting their address so they could attend public school in another school district prior to receiving their Horizon scholarship.

Positive change breeds more positive change. The Horizon program is now proving to be a positive element in private housing expansion within the Edgewood district boundaries. The CEO Foundation has been contacted by housing developers who wish to understand how the program works in order to ensure the residents of any new housing that they build within the district would be eligible for participation in the program. A new apartment complex located within Edgewood ISD boundaries that opened in 1999 is promoting the scholarship program as a benefit to potential residents.

Additional Notes on the Mathematica Study:

The independent evaluation by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. of Princeton, New Jersey of the Horizon program was not conducted by the CEO program. In order to assure independence of effort and validity of results, the researchers accepted total responsibility of all aspects of the examination including its funding. The evaluation was funded by the David and Lucille Packard Foundation. The Edgewood School Board voted not to cooperate in this independent evaluation.¹⁹ The Edgewood superintendent Dolores Munoz further stated that she was “concerned that we can't control conclusions drawn by outside organizations.”²⁰ The full report is available on the Internet at <http://data.fas.harvard.edu/pepg/.i>

¹⁹ CEO America Press Release Edgewood — Horizon Project Early findings prove critics of school choice wrong. February 9, 1999. <http://www.childrenfirstamerica.org/horizon-news.html>

²⁰ Edgewood voices opposition to study, San Antonio Express-News. November 18, 1999.