



Policy Perspective

School Choice Delivers High Marks for Students, Parents, Teachers, and Taxpayers

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FINDINGS

School choice has been proven to:

- raise test scores and graduation rates,
- improve parental satisfaction and involvement,
- increase teacher salaries and job satisfaction, and
- save taxpayer dollars.

Those who believe in free markets understand why the government education system is not meeting the needs of all children. With approximately 86 percent of school-aged children enrolled in public schools, the government system resembles a monopoly on education.¹ As a result, children, parents, and taxpayers get an inferior service at an inflated price. Some parents can afford to home school their children or pay private school tuition, but most must operate within the current system. Public schools with their captive consumers are not truly held accountable by parents and taxpayers, and the public school “accountability system” is a misnomer.

Some of those concerned about the high number of dropouts, poor educational results, and lack of accountability in public schools have proposed a system instituting charter or private schools that would offer parents choices on where to spend their allocated tax dollars. Though some—including many public school employees—fear that school choice will harm public schools, the primary goal of school choice programs is to improve student performance. Some proponents focus on rescuing individual students from academically harmful situations by giving them the option to transfer to a school that is better suited for them. Others emphasize the longer-term “rising tide” aspect—that facilitating competition between different types of schools and districts will increase the overall quality of schools.

Whether one’s focus is on individual students or improving the system as a whole, it is important to examine the effects of school choice on student performance for both the students who choose a new school as well as those who remain in their assigned public school. This paper explores the benefits that

existing school choice situations—including private school choice, charter schools, and public school transfers—hold for students in public and private schools, parents, teachers, and taxpayers.

School choice benefits students who choose a new school

Most school choice research has focused on the students who take advantage of choice, be it through vouchers, tax credits, charter schools, or even public school transfers. Nationwide, 22 school choice programs enroll approximately 130,000 students in private schools.² Hundreds of studies have looked at student performance in these programs, with varying degrees of depth and quality.

One challenge researchers run into when examining school choice is the possibility of self-selection. For instance, students who take advantage of school choice programs may have savvy parents or come from more privileged backgrounds. Even controlling for demographics such as income, race, and parents’ education levels may not address the innate differences between parents who choose alternative schools for their children and those who do not. This challenge can be overcome, however, by using a method known as “random assignment”—the gold standard of research.³

Random assignment solves the problem of self-selection bias by randomly dividing the subjects into treatment and control groups. In school choice programs, these two groups represent children who were part of the school choice program and students who wanted to be part of the program but were denied participation. If the number of applications exceeds the program’s capacity and students are accepted based on a lottery (or randomized)

process, this creates the two groups necessary for a random assignment study. In school choice, as in any subject studied by social scientists, conclusions from random assignment studies should be held in higher regard than findings from studies using inferior research methods.

No random assignment study has ever found lower test scores for students who take advantage of school choice. Ten random assignment studies have examined the impact of school choice programs on the academic performance of participating students as measured by standardized test scores. Of these ten, all had positive results, although two had positive results that were not statistically significant. In other words, these studies found that students who used vouchers to attend a private school had higher performance than students who applied for vouchers, but did not receive them. Of the two studies that failed to achieve statistical significance, one was extremely close and has been described as “moderately significant.” The other has been criticized for its use of inappropriate research methods.⁴

While test scores can provide an excellent comparison of performance between choosing and non-choosing students, it is also helpful to look at the effect of school choice programs on high school graduation or dropout rates. At least two studies have compared the graduation/dropout rates of Milwaukee public schools with rates in private schools participating in the Milwaukee voucher program. In a 2004 study, researcher Jay Greene looked at the dropout rates in participating Milwaukee private schools. He found that private high schools had a dropout rate of 36 percent, compared to Milwaukee’s public high schools with 64 percent. Even the city’s six selective public high schools—most comparable to private schools in terms of selectivity—had a dropout rate of 59 percent. This is more than 20 points higher than the private schools.⁵ More recently, John Warren of the University of Minnesota found that over four years, graduation rates for Milwaukee school choice students were higher than those in Milwaukee public schools, with only one exception. Had the public school graduation rates equaled those of the choice students, the number of Milwaukee Public School graduates would have been 14 percent higher over the four years.⁶

The Horizon Program, a privately-funded voucher program in San Antonio, provides interesting anecdotal evidence on the effects of school choice. Because every student who applied was accepted to the program, there is no control group for researchers to study. In addition, the

program’s administrators were unable to track students who left the program, making graduation data unavailable. However, they did track the whereabouts of Horizon graduates. In 2006, an impressive 93 percent of Horizon graduates, most of whom were low-income Hispanic students, enrolled in college. Nationwide estimates put college-going rates for Hispanic high school graduates at only 62 percent, and this number is likely much lower in the disadvantaged Edgewood neighborhoods from which Horizon students came.⁷ This anecdotal evidence suggests that Horizon graduates, who were given the opportunity of school choice, attended college at a rate at least 50 percent higher than their Edgewood ISD peers.

In summary, no study has ever found lower student achievement, measured by both test scores and graduation rates, for students participating in school choice programs. And anecdotal evidence, such as that from the Horizon program in San Antonio, suggests that school choice in Texas could lead to more students pursuing post-secondary education.

School choice benefits students who remain in their assigned public school

The research is clear that school choice benefits the students who enroll in school choice programs. Still, the vast majority of students remain in traditional public schools—even in the presence of well-established voucher programs such as the one in Milwaukee. For this reason it is perhaps more important to examine the effects of school choice on public school performance.

There has never been a study finding that competition from school choice results in lower student performance in public schools. To the contrary, the body of evidence shows that school choice actually improves public schools. Studies in Florida, Milwaukee, Maine, Vermont, and even Texas have found that public schools, when faced with competition from vouchers, made larger gains than public schools not exposed to vouchers.

In a 2002 study, Greene found that San Antonio’s Edgewood school district, when faced with competition from the Horizon scholarship program, outgained 85 percent of Texas school districts when student demographics and resources were considered. While the gains cannot be scientifically attributed to the voucher program, at the very least they indicate that Edgewood did not suffer due to competition.⁸

Even before school choice programs take full effect, the threat of school choice competition may give incentive for public schools to improve. In 1999, Florida implemented a voucher program for students trapped in public schools that received an “F” rating in two out of four years. Reason Foundation’s Lisa Snell writes,

In 1999, there were 78 public schools that received a failing grade based on their FCAT scores. If those schools got the same grades in 2000, they would have been sanctioned with vouchers. Miraculously, by year two of the A-Plus program, every school in Florida (including the 78 schools that had a failing grade the year before) managed to pull test scores up enough to avoid the voucher sanction. Apparently, the public school establishment in Florida sensed an end to their monopoly and reacted accordingly.⁹

Public school test scores improve when faced with competition, subsequently one would expect graduation rates to improve as well. In 1999, the first year of the Horizon scholarship program, the TEA-reported Edgewood ISD graduation rate was 60 percent. By 2005 that number had increased 15 points to 75 percent. Over the same period, the state’s graduation rate increased by only 5 points, from 80 to 85 percent.¹⁰ Edgewood ISD still has room for improvement, but it has greatly outperformed the rest of the state in graduation rate increases since the voucher program began.

Researchers have also examined public school performance in school choice situations that are not typical voucher programs. For example, Thomas Dee found that public high schools in districts with higher concentrations of private schools have higher graduation rates.¹¹ If competition from private schools (even outside traditional voucher programs) improves public school performance, it follows that public schools would react similarly to competition from charter schools or even other traditional public schools. Looking at Michigan and Arizona public schools that faced charter school competition, Carolyn Hoxby found that public schools “began improving at faster rates after they lost significant shares of their enrollment to charter schools.”¹² In a separate study, Hoxby found that metropolitan areas with maximum interdistrict choice (for example, a city with several smaller districts to which families could theoretically move) outperform areas with zero interdistrict choice (such as Miami, where one school district covers the entire metropolitan area).¹³ In 2005, Greene and Winters produced a similar study finding a strong positive relationship between decreasing

school district size and increasing graduation rates. They found that if Florida, a state with unusually large districts, lowered the size of its districts to the national median, its graduation rate could increase from 59 to 64 percent.¹⁴ With smaller districts, parents have more of a choice in where to enroll their children, and public schools must compete with each other for students.

School choice proponents assert that competition will result in increased achievement for public school students—and the available evidence supports this claim. Whether school choice competition comes in the form of private school vouchers, charter schools, or public school transfers, research has demonstrated that school choice improves public schools.

School choice benefits parents

While student achievement is the most important consideration in any school choice program, the benefits to parents should also be considered.

In a traditional public school setting, the school is virtually guaranteed a group of students. If there are no available charter schools or public school transfer opportunities, and if parents are unable to afford to home school their children or send them to private schools, then the assigned public school is the only option. A public school will retain this “captive” group of students no matter how well or poorly the school is managed, simply because some parents have no other option.

Private schools, however, must compete for students. In order to succeed, private schools must view parents and students as customers. If a private school parent is unsatisfied, he may enroll his child in another private school, or return to the public school where his child was originally assigned. Since public schools are free, private schools must not only satisfy parents, but must provide enough additional value to justify the cost of tuition.

It is no surprise, then, that parents report higher satisfaction in school choice programs—first, because they have chosen the school themselves, and second, because the school has an incentive to respond to them as a customer rather than a captive consumer. In fact, researcher Paul Peterson writes,

All evaluations of vouchers have found higher levels of satisfaction among parents receiving vouchers than among comparison groups of parents with students in public schools. In Cleveland, voucher parents were

much more satisfied with their school than parents who had applied for but did not use the voucher offered to them. For example, 63 percent of the parents with vouchers said they were very satisfied with the academic quality of the school, compared to 29 percent of those who had not used them. Similar differences in satisfaction levels were observed for school safety, school discipline, class size, and parental involvement.¹⁵

School choice parents in Texas are no exception. A survey of participants in San Antonio’s Horizon Scholarship Program reported that 61 percent of voucher parents were satisfied with the quality of their child’s school relative to 35 percent of public school programs.¹⁶ Studies in Milwaukee and Indianapolis have also found higher parental satisfaction in choice schools, and surveys from Washington, D.C., and Dayton, Ohio have found higher satisfaction among private school parents than public school parents.¹⁷

Most recently, a 2008 audit of Utah’s Carson Smith Scholarship for Students with Special Needs program again found that parents were more satisfied with their chosen private school than with their student’s previous public school. Notably, this study interviewed both parents of students who were currently in the program, as well as parents of students who had participated in the program for some time before returning to their previous public school. While opinions

of the parents of active students differed from the parents of withdrawn students, both groups reported higher satisfaction with the private schools. Specifically, all parents of active students agreed that they were satisfied with their child’s private school, while only 73 percent of parents of withdrawn students agreed.¹⁸ All parents—including those who withdrew their children from the program—agreed that the scholarship program should continue to exist.¹⁹ Similarly, a 2003 evaluation of the McKay Scholarship Program for Students with Disabilities found that more than 90 percent of parents who have withdrawn from the program believe it should continue to exist for other parents.²⁰

In addition to parental satisfaction, one might expect parent involvement to increase in school choice programs, since parents may be viewed more as “stakeholders” by schools competing for students. In an early review of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, researchers found that participating parents were not only more active at the school in terms of volunteering and contact with teachers and administrators, but were also more likely than the typical Milwaukee parent to work with their child at home on reading, writing, math, and other learning activities.²¹ Results from San Antonio’s Horizon Program also found that participating parents were more involved at their child’s school than Edgewood public school parents, as seen in **Figure 1**.²²

Figure 1: Parent Participation Comparison

	Horizon Schools	N	Edgewood Public Schools	N
Percentage of parents who participated in the following activities with child at least once in past week				
Helped with homework	84.0%***	208	61.8%	106
Helped with reading/math lessons that were not part of child's homework	66.3**	208	51.1	107
Talked about experiences in school	97.6	210	97.3	107
Percentage of parents who participated in the following activities with child at least once in past month				
Attended school activities	59.5***	204	34.5	107
Worked on homework or school projects	84.2***	208	62.1	106
Attended religious services	78.1***	206	48.2	103
Attended family social gatherings	78	207	78	107
Went to a library	64.8	211	57.4	105

Note: Figures may not sum due to rounding.

* = differences significant at $p < .10$; ** = significant at $p < .05$; *** = significant at $p < .01$

Educators often bemoan the fact that parents are not more involved in their child's education, both at school and at home. In fact, research shows that parental involvement is associated with higher student outcomes.²³ Programs that result in parents voluntarily increasing their involvement, which school choice programs do, are an important component of efforts to raise student achievement. Researcher Phillip Vassallo summarizes this well:

The ultimate key to school reform is the parent. Once parents assume the responsibility of advocating for and supporting their children's education, they will become partners with educators to create the schools their children need.²⁴

School choice benefits teachers

Students and parents currently have limited choice in school attendance, thus the appeal of school choice is natural. Teachers, however, are able to choose at which school they will work and so the benefits, though many, are less obvious.

The Manhattan Institute reports that public school teachers are paid on average 61 percent more than private school teachers.²⁵ School choice opponents often use this fact to assert that school choice will lower teacher pay because more teachers will be employed by private schools. However, this logic is inherently flawed. Today's private schools do not operate under a free market, and they must keep tuition prices low enough to attract parents who are also paying public school property taxes. Teacher pay is a primary cost-driver, so lower teacher pay means lower tuition prices for parents.

Under school choice, however, parents would no longer be paying twice for their child's education, since property taxes could be used at either public or private schools. In addition, school choice would create competition between private schools and public schools for teachers, breaking up the near-monopoly that suppresses teacher salaries today. By introducing competition between public schools and private schools, both types of educational providers would compete with higher salaries to lure better teachers. Public and private schools would have an incentive to commit as many resources to teaching personnel as possible. As the demand for quality teachers goes up, the best and the brightest will be offered better pay and better benefits.

In reality, this story plays out. In a nationwide study designed primarily to measure the impact of competition on

public school quality, researcher Caroline Hoxby found that teachers benefit as well: "Public schools that face more private school competition react by reallocating their given per-pupil spending towards teacher salaries."²⁶ In an examination of more than 600 Ohio school districts, researchers Richard Vedder and Joshua Hall found that when viable private school alternatives exist, competition increases the salaries of public school teachers by as much as 5 percent.²⁷ Anecdotally, it is interesting to note that during the first eight years of the Horizon school choice program in San Antonio, Edgewood ISD teacher salaries increased by 30 percent while teacher salaries in neighboring districts increased by 22 percent.²⁸

One may wonder why teachers under the current system would choose to work at a private school despite significantly lower pay in many cases. If salary were the only consideration in choosing an employer, this question would be difficult to answer. However, studies suggest that working conditions are just as important, if not more important, than pay in retaining teachers.²⁹ Among public and private schools, working conditions and job satisfaction vary widely.

For example, job satisfaction for teachers is higher at charter and private schools than it is at public schools. A study from the Independent Women's Forum found that overall satisfaction rates among charter-school teachers are twice as high as their private school counterparts and more than three times as high as traditional public school teachers.³⁰ The National Center for Education Statistics measures job satisfaction for teachers on six different standards: "student motivation to learn, the school learning environment, student discipline and behavior, class size, parent support, and society's esteem for the teaching profession."³¹ Other elements that contribute to a teacher's satisfaction are a high morale,³² a cooperative effort, and a collective enthusiasm for the school mission among fellow teachers.³³ NCES found that no matter which "aspects one examines, public school teachers were less likely than private school teachers to report that they were very satisfied."³⁴ Private school teachers may feel that lower pay is a fair trade-off for more satisfying working conditions (see **Figure 2** on next page).

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Figure 2: Teacher Job Satisfaction in Public vs. Private Schools

	I am satisfied with teaching at this school	I am satisfied with my class size	Most colleagues share school mission	Staff cooperative effort is high	I receive lots of parent support for my work
Public	53.7	35.8	33.2	33.9	15.6
Private	66.4	60	59.9	56	42.4

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, NCES. Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), "Public, Public Charter, and Private School Teacher Surveys," 1999-2000.³⁵

Today’s teachers are able to choose where they wish to work, but must often choose between job satisfaction and higher pay. Under school choice, teachers could receive both. Just as competition for the best teachers raises overall teacher salaries under school choice programs, it would also force schools to improve working conditions in order to attract teachers. Schools may offer perks such as flexible work schedules, overtime pay, smaller class sizes, opportunities for professional development and career advancement, classroom autonomy, and a professional working environment in which teachers are rewarded for innovation and success.³⁶

The education monopoly ties the hands of teachers just as it ties the hands of parents and children. While teachers at least have a choice in where they work, variations among employers are suppressed due to the fact that approximately 85 percent of teachers all work for the same government system. School choice would open the floodgates for schools to compete with higher pay and better working conditions from which good teachers could stand to profit.

School choice benefits taxpayers

Research has shown that there is not a close relationship between the total number of dollars spent and student performance, although the way schools spend money—specifically, money spent directly on instruction—can have an impact.³⁷ Overall per-pupil spending has tripled in Texas since the 1960s, and Texas public schools now employ as many administrative and support staff as classroom teachers.³⁸ Taxpayers are being stretched thin to pay for fancier buildings, superintendent salaries, and non-teaching employees; none of which have a discernable impact on student learning.

Unfortunately, taxpayers have little recourse. Homeowners must pay school property taxes, and even renters pay property taxes embedded in their rent prices. If taxpayers with school-aged children are unsatisfied with their school’s academic or financial practices, it does their pocketbook no benefit to move to a private school. They will have to con-

tinue paying for a public school of which they disapprove. Consequently, schools have little incentive to manage taxpayer dollars in an effective and conservative manner.

Research shows that taxpayers in areas with school choice get more bang for their public education buck. Caroline Hoxby writes,

If every school in the nation were to face a high level of competition both from other districts and from private schools, the productivity of America’s schools, in terms of students’ level of learning at a given level of spending, would be 28 percent higher than it is now.³⁹

In other words, schools facing competition get better results while spending fewer taxpayer dollars.

Taxpayers save money in the long-run when school choice raises student achievement and graduation rates. A 2007 study by the Friedman Foundation found that public school dropouts decrease tax revenue in Texas by \$2 billion per year, while at the same time costing more in welfare and incarceration costs. Over a lifetime, each class of dropouts costs Texans \$19 billion in decreased tax revenues and increased public expenditures. Because school choice programs increase graduation rates for both public and private school students, a modest school choice program that increases private school enrollment by less than 5 percent could save the state \$55 million each year in increased tax revenue and decreased Medicaid and incarceration costs.⁴⁰

CONCLUSION

Opponents of school choice claim that it will harm public schools, end accountability, and leave teachers with lower salaries and undesirable working conditions. But in reality, school choice benefits everyone. Specifically, school choice has been proven to do the following:

- Raise test scores and graduation rates for public and private school students alike.
- Improve parental satisfaction and involvement with their child's school, while increasing accountability to parents.
- Increase teacher salaries and job satisfaction.
- Save taxpayer dollars through more effective financial management and better long-term student outcomes.★

ENDNOTES

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