

Evolving Evidence on School Voucher Effects

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School vouchers have been embraced largely due to their potential to help students trapped in underperforming public schools, who would then have access to higher performing educational options. Indeed, many voucher programs are targeted at economically challenged students in under-performing urban schools who would otherwise be unable to afford tuition for presumably more effective private schools. So, how are voucher programs performing in producing positive student learning outcomes? A more sophisticated analysis shows that whether or not voucher programs outperform their public school counterparts is highly dependent on the size and scope of those programs—and increasing programs' size and scope, as policymakers who wish to generate the benefit expected from voucher programs, may instead result in negative impacts for students.

“Vote Counting” Methodology and Voucher Data Representation

Researchers have been studying the question of whether children actually learn more since the first voucher program began in Milwaukee in the early 1990s. For the most part, proponents of voucher programs have highlighted findings from a set of studies that appear to show positive impacts for students whose families use vouchers. For example, in [testimony to the U.S. Congress](#), one exhibit touted the findings from 12 small-scale studies, noting positive results for 13 subgroups, with no results showing voucher students falling behind. The pro-voucher group EdChoice regularly updates a list of studies on voucher impacts to indicate the efficacy of these programs, with the [most recent](#) showing that positive impacts on learning were far more frequent than any negative findings.

However, such simplistic representations of the research evidence obscure important factors in understanding the effectiveness and potential of such programs. This “vote-counting” methodology compares the numbers of positive, null or negative findings with little regard for key factors, including:

- Study size
- Program characteristics (eligibility, caps, voucher amount)
- Effect sizes overall, or for different subgroups
- Trends in findings

Factors such as these are useful in understanding the analytical strength of different sets of studies, interpreting their usefulness, and illuminating patterns in the research.

Larger-Scale Studies Indicate More Nuanced—and More Negative—Effects of Voucher Programs

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demand, take-up and more, while the studies also differed by design, time-spans analyzed, and so forth. Still, this more nuanced view of voucher effects highlights clear concerns about the detrimental impacts of these programs on student learning as policymakers seek to expand these policies.

Information and data in this brief are drawn from the authors' in-process research.