

School Choice Programs: If They are So “Great”, Why the Hesitation?

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The way in which public education has evolved over time is striking. The Constitution is silent on the role government should play in education. However, the Tenth Amendment was put in place in 1791 and reserved all powers not explicitly stated in the Constitution to the states. Because of this, many would argue that the Framers intended to leave the responsibility of providing public education up to state and local governments. However, in a hegemonic nation like the United States, public education has become a concern for the federal government due to the issues and implications underlying competition with foreign powers. Additionally, due to the fact that the federal government provides a great amount of funding to public education, it generally can gain a large amount of decision-making authority, while sometimes even taking decision-making authority away from the states.

School choice describes a variety of programs, which offer students and their families alternatives to publicly provided schools, which they are usually assigned based upon where they live. Further, school voucher programs are a type of school choice program that are government funded and may be redeemable for tuition and fees at a school other than the one the student could

attend for free. The popularity and existence of school choice and voucher programs gained traction after 1955 when Dr. Milton Friedman emphasized the ideas of liberty, freedom, and competition within public education in *The Role of Government in Education*. In doing so, Friedman argued that tax dollars should follow the child by allowing parents to choose the school that they believed would best fit their child's education and social needs. Friedman's idea of tax dollars following the child developed into what is now referred to as "school voucher" programs (Friedman 1955, 123-144).

In 1990, the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP) became the nation's first publicly financed school choice program. Since then, school choice programs have been experimented with in eleven different states and the District of Columbia (Fowler 2009, 183). Although publicly funded school choice programs have been utilized by some states, this current work examines which factors are associated with the limited adoption and hesitation to implement school choice/voucher programs.

This work suggests several factors that play a role in the hesitancy of states to experiment with and implement school voucher programs. I hypothesize that these programs are not widely used, due to a lack of evidence showing higher achievement among low-income students that participate in voucher programs, as compared to comparable students who do not participate in voucher programs. This research provides support for this hypothesis. In addition, this research is important and intriguing because although school voucher programs have been around for some time, there still seems to be much hesitancy associated with these programs, as well as a limited amount of studies evaluating success/failure.

The following work first discusses the relevant literature surrounding education policy in the United States. After this discussion, I will discuss the methods used in collecting the data. I then present analysis before offering concluding comments. Overall, this research suggests that the lack of evidence showing the effectiveness of school voucher programs leads policymakers to either oppose these programs or be apprehensive about implementing them.

Literature Review

History of Education Policy in the United States

Although not considered a “fundamental right” by the United States Supreme Court (*San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez*, 1973), the Founding Fathers, notably Thomas Jefferson recognized the importance of education to the well-being of a nation. Jefferson argued that education was essential in order for Americans to understand complex issues and be well-informed citizens (*A Nation at Risk* 1983, 9). As a result, since the start of our Nation, there have been vast changes to the way education is administered and how it is viewed by the citizenry, as well as by those holding elected and non-elected offices.

Frances Fowler describes the four eras of education policy in the United States as the “Young Republic” (1783-1830), the “Rise of the Common School” (1831-1900), the “Scientific Sorting Machine” (1900-1982), and the “Search of a New Paradigm” (1983-present). During the Common School era, the federal government essentially allowed each state to create its own policies and institutions for

education. As expected, the result was a great deal of diversity among the states due to the fact that there was no federal guideline as to what schools should like or be structured like (Fowler 2009, 337-339). The "Rise of the Common School" followed the Industrial Revolution and the immigration movement that was brought along with it. Horace Mann envisioned a school system that would unify the diverse population and hopefully prevent or reduce societal ills seen during this time. Mann advocated for a basic elementary education for all white children (African Americans were still slaves) of both sexes, regardless of their socioeconomic status, religious backgrounds, etc. As education became a major responsibility of the government during this time, parents lost some of the autonomy they had once experienced in decisions affecting their children's education (Fowler 2009, 339-343).

The third era is the "Scientific Sorting Machine" (1900-1982). During this time, numerous scientific discoveries and inventions had been made, which increased health, life expectancy, and enhanced overall daily life. Furthermore, the 1982 "Committee of Ten" argued for secondary education for all. Additionally, there was an increase in IQ testing of students (Fowler 2009, 343-348). The fourth era is the "Search of a New Paradigm" (1983-present). Following the report *A Nation at Risk* published in 1983, the federal government began involving itself more in the area of education, taking much autonomy away from state and local governments by trying to control education through testing and curriculum requirements. This highly influential report emphasized the argument of some that education in the United States was lagging behind that of its' competitors and needed to be improved in order to ensure our

competitiveness in the national market (Fowler 2009, 348-352, *A Nation at Risk* 1983, 7-12).

Since the 1983 report, presidents have been influential actors in increasing the federal government's role in the public education system. President Reagan advocated for greater accountability and school choice. President George H.W. Bush introduced *America 2000*, which called for the creation of voluntary national standards and testing of students in five core areas—English, math, science, history, and geography. Clinton's reform, titled *Goals 2000*, was similar to President Bush's in that it pushed states to enact higher standards and create testing regimes to help meet those standards (Fusarelli and Fusarelli 2014, 190-194).

With the election of George W. Bush, who ran on a domestic policy platform of improving education, the federal government gained much more autonomy than it had previously had in education policy. *No Child Left Behind* (2002) brought about the creation and implementation of many new mandates and directives such as statewide testing in grades 3-8, school report cards, and greater accountability for student performance by teachers and school leaders. (Fusarelli and Fusarelli 2014, 194-195).

With the election of President Barack Obama, came the *Race to the Top Initiative* (2009). This program allowed states to compete for funding by adopting new standards. Race to the Top (RTT) is targeted at reforms in four specific areas: adopting standards and assessments that prepare students to succeed in college, the workplace, and to compete in the global economy; building data systems that measure student growth and success, and inform

teachers and principals about how they can improve instruction; recruiting, developing, rewarding, and retaining effective teachers and principals, especially where they are needed most; and finally, to turn around the lowest-achieving schools (Department of Education 2015). As a result of such a competitive program, many critics believed the Race to the Top Initiative gave the federal government too much control over an area historically left up to state governments (Fusarelli and Fusarelli 2014, 196-199).

Types of Programs

During these times of education reform in the United States, two types of school choice programs emerged: limited and full. Limited programs are confined to public schools and simply remove the barriers in allowing parents to choose to send their child to a public school other than the school they are assigned based upon where they live. These programs give parents and students options, such as charter schools, open enrollment, and magnet schools (Witte 2000, 32-33).

Full choice programs, on the other hand, remove all restrictions, allowing parents to send their children to any school, regardless if it is a public or private institution. This can be done through vouchers, private scholarship, and tax credits. As previously mentioned, vouchers are direct payments from the government to an individual allowing he/she to purchase their education in an open market. Notable voucher programs have been implemented in Milwaukee and Cleveland, which will be further discussed later. A private scholarship is one that is funded by a private source and provides tuition assistance so parents and

children can choose the best school to meet their needs. Lastly, tax credits provide tax reliefs to parents who choose to send their children to private schools (Witte 2000, 33-34).

The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program was the first voucher program to be implemented in the United States. The city and district underwent dramatic changes in regards to demographics between the 1970s and late 1990s. In 1970, 28 percent of students within Milwaukee Public Schools were of racial minority. In 1997, over 80 percent of students within the district were of racial minority, with nearly 20 percent of the population being neither white, nor African American (Witte 2000, 37). Changing demographics led to racial concentrations in neighborhoods, further limiting the educational opportunities of low-income and minority children. The segregation that came as a result of the dramatic change in demographics forced policymakers to consider solutions to the pressing problems of equity among schools in the city. The Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program (CSTP) also targeted low-income students and is similar to the Milwaukee program. One main difference, however, is that Cleveland's program included religious schools from the beginning (Witte 2000, 170-171). This led to the program being heard by the United States Supreme Court in 2002.

Those who defend school voucher programs argue that low-income students need vouchers in order to receive educational opportunities more affluent families already have. In addition, some use the argument (like Milton Friedman) that school choice allows for more competition within the market—forcing schools to improve and innovate in order to compete for enrollment. Opponents, on the

other hand, have their own strong opinions against school choice and vouchers. Opponents contend that voucher programs simply make private education more affordable to middle and high-income families. They contend that voucher programs, like Cleveland's where \$2,500 is given annually, is not enough to cover all tuition and expenses. For this reason, poor children still will not be able to attend these schools.

Particularly, the National Education Association (NEA) opposes vouchers and tuition tax credits because they believe vouchers "do nothing to insure that all children are granted this most fundamental right" (of education). The NEA believes that vouchers divert public tax dollars to private schools that are not held accountable by the public. Additionally, the NEA believes that the use of vouchers harms public school students due to budget cuts required in order to fund vouchers. The organization further contends that pro-voucher research has been discredited as methodologically flawed and/or biased. (NEA 1).

It should be noted that the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the voucher program by stating that it was clear that Cleveland's voucher program had a secular purpose to improve educational opportunity and was, therefore, not a violation of the Establishment Clause. While the Supreme Court has now had its' first say in school voucher legislation, there is still a fight over the proposed benefits or lack thereof of school voucher programs in the United States.

Administrative Decision-Making

Due to the complexity of decision-making by bureaucrats, there are several approaches that policy makers can employ when making decisions. The public choice approach rests on the view that public officials are self-interested individuals. This leads them to avoid taking political risks in an effort to further and maintain their positions and careers (Kettl 2012, 338). I hypothesize that the public choice approach to understanding decision-making best explains the issue of school choice programs. In the context of the public choice approach, decision-makers may be hesitant to support school voucher programs in their states, depending on how their constituency feels towards these programs. After all, politicians, as well as bureaucrats operate in an arena that is much different than do private sector decision-makers. This greatly constrains the actions and decisions public sector actors are likely to make.

Because the literature suggests that policy-makers are hesitant to try new programs that may be seen as a political risk or that lack evidence showing success, I hypothesize that school voucher programs have not gained widespread use due to the lack of evidence demonstrating improvement among students who have participated in school voucher programs.

Methods

To test the hypothesis, this research will examine qualitative data derived from scholarly journals, books, and credible websites. In particular, extensive research was conducted over case studies looking specifically at the Cleveland and Milwaukee programs. I

then make an argument based on my findings as to what exactly is causing the hesitancy of experimenting with school choice and voucher programs by policy makers.

Analysis

While Milton Friedman advocated for competition among schools back in 1955, much of his argument has been either ignored or refuted by critics with opposing points of views. Friedman argued that in a nation that considers freedom and liberty to be fundamental, government should only exist to enforce contracts, prevent coercion, and keep markets free. According to Friedman, beyond these reasons, there are only three other circumstances in which government intervention is justified — the existence of a “natural monopoly”, “neighborhood effects”, and “paternalistic concern for children and other irresponsible individuals” (Friedman 1955, 123-144).

Following Friedman’s work, the idea of school choice landed on the institutional agenda. Christopher Jencks and James Coleman advocated school choice as a way to empower low-income parents and provide more equal opportunities for their children (Fowler 2009, 183). Their plan became known as the “Jencks Plan” and received federal funding during the Johnson administration in the early 1970s (Forman 2005, 1311). The Jencks plan was implemented in Alum Rock, California. Five years after the plan was implemented, the results remained inconclusive as to whether or not any success was achieved. For this reason, the Nixon administration did not continue the grant (Fowler 2009, 183).

However, with the election of conservative Ronald Reagan, the movement was revived yet again. Reagan moved the issue of school choice onto the institutional agenda by proposing tuition tax credits for parents sending their children to private schools and school vouchers. Although bills were introduced in Congress, they have been repeatedly defeated. However, some states and cities have chosen to implement school choice and voucher programs of their own (Fowler 2009, 183).

Milwaukee Parental Choice Program

The first voucher bill was introduced by Republican Governor Tommy Thompson in 1988. The bill was to be included in the state's budget. The Democrats in the state legislature at the time blocked the legislation due to the fact that it included all private schools, did not limit the number of students who could receive the vouchers, did not require random selection of students, or require any reporting on results of the program (Witte 2000, 43). In October of 1989, however, state Representative Annette Williams introduced an alternative, which added the necessary restraints, such as random selection of students, annual study of the results/outcomes of the program, and disallowed current private school students from being eligible (Witte 2000, 43-44).

In the 2010-2011 school year, \$6,442 was given to participating families to choose where to send their child to school. The program awards vouchers to between 15,000 and 22,000 students each year (Center on Education Policy 2011,14). In order to be eligible for the program, families must have incomes equal to 175 percent of the poverty line or less. Private schools were only allowed to join in the

program if they did not have any religious component present in their teachings. Furthermore, admission to the voucher program had to be given through random selection, as opposed to being based on race, gender, religion, etc. (Witte 2000, 44-45). It was clear that Milwaukee's program targeted low-income students.

In studying the outcomes of the Milwaukee and Cleveland voucher programs, research has generally been inconclusive. In his study of the Milwaukee Voucher Program, John Witte suggests that the number of students enrolled in the program made up less than 1 percent of the total district enrollment, therefore not actually contributing much to the concept of competition for students (Witte 2000, 115). In terms of parent satisfaction, each year there continued to be overwhelming support by participating parents for the voucher program to continue (Witte 2000, 118).

In terms of evaluating student outcomes and student performance, achievement test scores have been a main measure of comparison. The issue at the heart of the argument that school voucher programs enable low-income, low-achieving students to become better, is challenged by the fact that studies have shown that students using vouchers to attend private schools do not generally reach higher test scores than their public school counterparts.

The Center on Education Policy conducted a study, which revealed that in general, inner-city, low-income students who have chosen to attend private schools with vouchers, do not show greater gains in academic achievement than the inner-city, low-income students attending public schools (Center on Education Policy 2011, 9). Specifically, a comprehensive study done by the School Choice

Demonstration Project at the University of Arkansas found that students in grades 3-8 who participated in the Milwaukee Voucher Program had rates of achievement over three years that were similar to those of a random sample of Milwaukee Public School Students with similar characteristics (Center on Education Policy 2011, 9).

On a positive note, studies have shown that enrolling in a private high school through Milwaukee's voucher program increases the likelihood of a student graduating from high school and then enrolling in a four-year college. The data collected by the School Choice Demonstration Project showed that MPCP students were about 4 percent more likely to have graduated from high school than their Milwaukee Public School counterparts. Further, those that participated in the MPCP were 7 percent more likely to go to college and finish in four years (Wolf 2012, 6).

Additionally, when comparing choice students with similar students who are not participating in the program, the achievement of choice students appears to be higher for reading, but about the same in math (tracked over a four year period, Wolf 2012, 4). This report was concluded by the researchers stating, "Our findings include several 'no significant difference' results but also some evidence that participation in MPCP or enrollment in an independent public charter school has produced better student outcomes than those experienced by similar students in MPS" (Wolf 2012, 12).

Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program

Cleveland had initially created their voucher program in 1996 in an effort to increase the educational opportunities for poor children attending Cleveland's low-achieving schools. In 2007, the Cleveland voucher program enrolled over 6,000 students at a cost of \$18 million. Most of the funding for the program has been made through the diverting of funds away from public schools (Keystone Research Center 1). This program allowed parents of students within the district the opportunity to apply for tutoring grant or scholarship (Catt 2013, 1). Most of the recipients came from low-income households (family income at or below federal poverty level) with children who had formerly attended public schools. The voucher program was capped at \$3,450 per student. These vouchers are awarded through a lottery system with priority given to low-income families. As of 2012, over 6,000 students were participating in the program. Although focused on families with the lowest income levels, available scholarships go first to kindergarten students, then to students in grades 1-8, and then to high school students (Catt 2013, 1).

The majority of those who received money through the voucher program used that money to attend private school. Issues quickly arose from this situation due to the Establishment Clause of the Constitution, which holds that there should be a separation between church and state. Although other states had proposed and even used voucher programs before the Cleveland case in 2002, this was the first time the Supreme Court would hear a case involving school voucher programs. Although the Supreme Court case of *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* (2002) was mainly about whether or not

the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program was a violation of the Establishment Clause, the case and program brought about much more debate.

Like the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, parents of Cleveland voucher recipients have reported being more satisfied with their child's education than public school parents. Additionally, according to the Friedman Foundation on Educational Choice (obviously a pro-choice organization), studies show that students who remain in the Cleveland program had levels of achievement across all subject areas as compared to students who left the program. However, the organization does note that when using controls for differences in prior achievement, student mobility, and minority status, there is little difference between the overall achievement scores of students that take advantage of the voucher program as compared to regular public school students (Catt 2013, 1).

In the late 1990s, Ohio contracted with a group of researchers at Indiana University to evaluate the merits of the Cleveland voucher program. In 1999, the group found that no significant differences were found between third-grade voucher students and their public school counterparts (Metcalf 2004, 16-19). Again in a more recent study done in 2004, the team found no statistically significant differences in overall academic achievement (Metcalf 2004, 16-19). Interestingly, however, the team found that at the beginning of the first grade, students who had been in the voucher program since kindergarten showed higher achievement than their fellow public school students. However, by the end of the first grade, the public

school students had caught up to those in the voucher program (Keystone Research Center 2).

Politics of Vouchers

Proponents and opponents of school vouchers seem to acknowledge that voucher programs go beyond simply affecting education in the United States. The fact that vouchers benefit only some is at the heart of the politics behind school voucher programs. Likewise, incrementalism generally characterizes the politics of school vouchers. Even in states where voucher programs receive overwhelming opposition, political actors who support the programs continue making strides towards trying to get these programs enacted (Witte 2000, 157). As Witte points out, the politics surrounding vouchers has generally been bipartisan, with Republicans supporting them and Democrats opposing. Additionally, the court system has played a role in establishing precedents regarding the constitutionality of aspects of school choice and voucher programs.

Constraints of School Voucher Research

In a 2000 report by the Center on Education Policy, it is suggested that there are six main issues with voucher studies: the evidence is inconclusive, varying findings regarding student achievement, impacts beyond achievement, effects on schools, other countries, and challenges of research (Center on Education Policy 2000, 7). The report notes that no single study can definitively conclude whether school vouchers are effective at improving

education and that studies have reached varying conclusions due to bias.

Further, the report argues that there is a strong need for studies that look at factors beyond achievement in determining how well programs have been implemented, whether schools are complying with the selection requirements, and why some students leave voucher programs. The report also pushes for studies regarding the effects of voucher programs on school curriculums, operations, instruction, etc. Additionally, the report suggests that policy makers in the United States could potentially benefit from looking at voucher programs in other countries for insight. Lastly, the report emphasizes the challenges associated with obtaining good, objective research (Center on Education Policy 2000, 7-8).

The lack of evidence showing improvements in academic achievement could be one reason why policy makers are not willing to experiment with school voucher programs. Due to the fact that school voucher programs are generally controversial, it is likely that policy makers do not want to take the political risk on school vouchers, without the assurance of academic achievement and success. It should be noted however, that despite the tendency of state legislators to look at the Milwaukee and Cleveland programs for guidance, there are other states that currently enroll more students in private school choice programs (Wolf 2012, 2). Arizona is currently leading with over 6 percent of students currently attending private school using vouchers or scholarships (Wolf 2012, 2). However, policy makers still look to Wisconsin when designing or considering school voucher programs due to the fact that the state

has experimented with them in various ways since the early 1990s (Wolf 2012, 2).

Conclusion

When conducting this research, I examined the factors contributing to the limited adoption of school voucher programs. I hypothesized that the lack of evidence indicating success and improvement among participants in the program led policy makers to be hesitant to take the risks associated with implementing a new, sometimes controversial program. In light of the research, policy makers are hesitant to try these types of programs because they are controversial, the evidence on achievement is inconclusive, and it would be a substantial change from the status quo in many states and localities. Moreover, critics of school voucher programs suggest that many studies are biased depending on whether the organization or people conducting the study support the programs or not. The lack of reliable, valid, non-biased data, likely leads policy makers to feelings of confusion about what the outcomes of these programs really are.

Further, the incremental model, combined with the public choice approach explains why state legislatures are hesitant to act on school voucher proposals. Doing so would cause a major shift in the status quo, without ensured results. Just as with any political issue, elected officials do not want to support something, which could result in failure of getting re-elected. Likewise, many policy makers lack the knowledge regarding education policy in general, but also school vouchers. The average state legislator may know very little

about education policy issues within their state and are more likely to vote for incremental changes than for drastic ones.

Although some studies show success, many legislators are likely to conform to the general process that is politics, and therefore shy away from supporting policies without proven records for success. In order for advocates of school vouchers to gain support for their preferred education policies, they will need to first find, then emphasize evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of school choice and voucher programs. While it is true that much more is known about school choice and voucher programs today than was twenty, even ten years ago, the evidence is still not complete and solid enough to garner enough widespread political support.

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