

Vouchers Vs. Small Class Size

Comparing Effects, Costs, and Public Support

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Improving academic achievement, particularly of poor children, is a high national priority. The question is: what approaches work best? Given limited resources, citizens and policymakers need to make wise choices.

In recent years, vouchers have been touted as a solution, especially for poor children in troubled public schools. Currently, the nation has two publicly funded voucher programs: one in Milwaukee and the other in Cleveland. Both are under litigation. Congress and some state legislatures also are considering establishing voucher programs in other cities, including the District of Columbia.

More recently, there has been revived interest in reducing class size, particularly in the early grades. In his State of the Union address, President Clinton proposed "the first ever national effort...to reduce class size in the first, second, and third grades... ." And a number of states, including California, Wisconsin, and Tennessee, have passed class-size reduction initiatives, while as many as 20 other states are considering the same.

Which approach--vouchers or lower class size--represents the wiser use of scarce taxpayer dollars? We already know that programs embodying high standards, like Success for All, trump vouchers in student achievement results, cost effectiveness, and public support. **But does small class size also trump vouchers? The research is unequivocal: Yes.**

Vouchers: Effects and Costs

Would a voucher system be good for children? A recent paper by Stanford University Professor Henry Levin (1998) addresses this question by asking: 1) Who will "choose" and what will be the impact on educational equity? 2) Will vouchers improve student achievement? 3) How much do vouchers cost?

Levin's evidence comes from choice programs both here and abroad and from reviews of both theory and practice. Contrary to some claims, much is known about how vouchers and related policies would work--and the weight of the evidence is against them.

Who Chooses?

- "Evidence is consistent that educational choice leads to greater socioeconomic (SES) and racial segregation of students."
- "Choosers will be more advantaged both educationally and economically than non-choosers...."
- "Inequalities in educational outcomes are likely to be exacerbated by vouchers."

Student Achievement

- "Results among numerous studies suggest no difference or only a slight advantage for private schools over public schools in student achievement for a given student...."
- "When differences are found in such public-private achievement studies, they are often questionable."
- "More recent statistical studies have found no differences in achievement or only minimal differences."

Many other researchers have echoed Levin's conclusion that private and public schools perform about the same, once student background characteristics or, at the secondary level, academic course-taking, are taken into account. See, for example, Goldhaber (1996), Gamoran (1996), Cookson (1997), and Molnar (1998).

Costs

Voucher advocates like to compare private school tuition to average per pupil public school expenditure and then argue that vouchers will cost almost half as much. But Levin warns that this is a shaky argument:

- "Evidence does not support the contention that costs of private schools are considerably lower than those of public schools," once the different "finance and service mix of public and private schools" is taken into account.
- On the finance side, "...Tuition charges cover only a portion of the overall costs of private education....Most private schools rely heavily on supplementing tuition with fund-raising events, special student fees for extra activities, financial contributions, and in-kind contributions."

- On the service side, "the service mix is very different between public and private schools." Most public school districts provide special education, bilingual education, vocational education, and free transportation, food, and health services, while most private schools do not.

Moreover, such a comparison says nothing about the costs of a full-scale voucher system. Levin estimates that, on top of the cost of the vouchers themselves, it would cost "almost \$73 billion...or an additional 25 percent of the public education budget nationally" to put in place a nationwide voucher system that serves existing private school students and fulfills minimal requirements for record-keeping and monitoring; transportation; information dissemination; and a means for adjudicating disputes.

Case Studies: The Milwaukee and Cleveland Voucher Programs

When it comes to assessing vouchers, Levin writes, nothing "can be as instructive as the direct evaluation of a voucher intervention." Currently, there are two publicly funded voucher programs in the nation: the Milwaukee program, which began in 1990-91; and the Cleveland program, which began in 1996-97. Taken together, these "experiments" are textbook illustrations of the soundness of Levin's conclusions about the effects of vouchers and their costs.

Who Chooses?

Milwaukee

Since its start, the Milwaukee voucher program has enrolled between 300-1,600 students per year. Although up to 20 private schools have participated in the program at one time, the majority of students have been concentrated in just a handful of private schools. This was especially true in the first four years of the program, during which about 80% of all voucher students attended just three private schools. There are presently about 1,500 students in the program.

To avoid private school "skimming," participation in the program was limited to low-income families. Nonetheless, the results after five years of evaluation underscore Levin's and others' warning that vouchers benefit the more advantaged. The parents of children accepted by voucher schools were in fact poor. But compared to parents of children in the Milwaukee public schools (MPS)¹:

- Milwaukee voucher parents are better educated.
- Milwaukee voucher parents were more involved in their children's education, including when their children attended public schools.

- Milwaukee voucher parents have higher academic expectations for their children.

Cleveland

Early evidence from the Cleveland voucher program also reinforces the finding that **vouchers do not benefit the most disadvantaged**. By law, the Cleveland voucher program is supposed to target the most disadvantaged students. But, in fact:

- State enrollment records indicate that existing private school students and students starting kindergarten--that is, children who are not "escaping" public schools-- have had greater success than public school students at getting vouchers and getting accepted by the private school of their choice.² In fact, of the 3,000 students enrolled in the program this year, only 25% were attending a public school the year before they entered the program; the rest were either in a private school already or starting kindergarten.³
- Although public school transfers only make up a small portion (25%) of all voucher recipients, early evidence suggests that these students were among the best and brightest when they attended the public schools. According to the official state evaluation (Metcalf 1998) released in March 1998: "Scholarship students who accepted a scholarship to move from the Cleveland public schools to a private school were achieving at higher levels of achievement than their public school peers before they entered the program... Thus, it appears that the scholarship program attracted better achieving students away from Cleveland public schools."
- There is no reliable evidence that the program is reaching the lowest-income students in Cleveland, as it was designed to do. According to an independent audit of the program (Deloitte and Touche, 1997): "Sufficient documentation was generally not available in the Program's files to support that the household income of students who were awarded scholarships had been verified." Moreover, according to data from another survey (Peterson et. al., 1997), voucher recipients reported an average income to researchers that was 64% greater than the average income they reported to the state when they applied to the program.⁴ This discrepancy suggests that voucher recipients may have underreported their income to the state in order to qualify for a voucher. As even Peterson observes: "Respondents had an incentive to give a downwardly biased estimate of their income when reporting to an official government agency allocating benefits based on income."⁵

Costs

Milwaukee

In 1997-98, the cost per voucher in Milwaukee was \$4,696 (plus the cost of transportation, which is paid for by MPS). How does this amount compare to per-pupil spending in MPS, once the different services provided by private and public schools are accounted for? According to Levin, who conducted such an analysis:

- **"The most reasonable conclusion is that voucher schools in Milwaukee are receiving at least comparable allocations per student to those of the Milwaukee Public Schools..." and that if anything, "the costs of similar services at the school site may favor slightly the Milwaukee voucher schools."**

Cleveland

- In 1997-98, the program went 41% over budget, forcing the state to take \$2.9 million from public education funds to cover the overruns.⁶ The state expects overruns next year as well.
- A recent independent audit (Deloitte and Touche 1997) reported that the program may have misspent \$1.9 million in state tax dollars during its first year. The bulk of these questionable expenditures came from using taxis instead of school buses to get voucher recipients to school. As a result of poor record-keeping and monitoring, the state may also have given vouchers to ineligible recipients.
- Analyses similar to Levin's (above) also show that the cost per Cleveland voucher is comparable to per-pupil public school costs once the different services of private and public schools are accounted for.⁷ Moreover, when private schools do provide the same services as public schools, the costs can be exorbitant. For example, the state audit found that at least three voucher students with special needs received payments worth \$9,000, a considerably higher amount than that spent on the average Cleveland public school student.

Student Achievement

Cleveland

In March 1998, the Ohio Department of Education released the first-year evaluation of the Cleveland voucher program (Metcalf 1998). The evaluation compared the characteristics and achievement of third-grade voucher students

to a random sample of third-graders in the Cleveland public schools. The report concludes:

- **"There are no significant differences in third-grade achievement between [Cleveland] scholarship students and their [public school] peers. This finding is consistent across each of the five subtests and for the total battery. Thus, it appears that students' academic achievement was not significantly affected after approximately eight months in the scholarship program."**

Milwaukee

Achievement results from the Milwaukee voucher program have been a source of heated debate but also support the notion that vouchers are not the answer to our educational challenges. The Milwaukee program underwent state evaluation for five years, and other researchers also examined the data. The most generous conclusion to draw, based on the most solid of the studies (Rouse, 1997), is that voucher students performed no better than Milwaukee public school students in reading and slightly outperformed MPS students in math.⁸ **However, when Rouse (1998) compares small class size public school students to regular public school students and voucher students, the small class size public school students outperform everyone.**

What follows is a brief review of the three major studies of the Milwaukee voucher program to date.

The Official State Evaluation

The official state evaluation, commissioned by the state of Wisconsin and conducted over five years by Professor John Witte (1995) of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, found no achievement differences between voucher and comparable public school students.

The Paul Peterson et al. (so-called Harvard) Study

This study is the only basis of the "success stories" about the Milwaukee voucher program. Conducted by Harvard Professor Paul Peterson and colleagues (1996), the study found a big advantage for voucher students in both math and reading in years three and four of the program.

In a highly unorthodox move, Peterson et al. released their paper directly to the press and voucher advocacy groups before subjecting their study to critical review by other researchers (to date, the paper has yet to appear in a peer-reviewed research journal). For example, in an August 1996 *Wall Street Journal*

op-ed, they declared: "If similar success could be achieved for all minority students nationwide, it could close the gap between white and minority test scores by at least a third, possibly more than one-half."⁹ [Note: There were no white students in the study.] The media, unfamiliar with statistics, picked up on these claims, creating the impression that vouchers had worked wonders in Milwaukee and could do so elsewhere, as well.

Since the study was released, the following facts have come to light:

- **Paul Peterson is not a "neutral" social scientist but a long-time voucher and privatization advocate.** For example, in a 1990 article, Peterson approvingly likened voucher supporters to "a small band of Jedi attackers, using their intellectual powers to fight the unified Death Star forces led by Darth Vader, whose intellectual capacity has been corrupted by the urge for complete hegemony."¹⁰
- **The study was funded by the Olin Foundation, which funds a variety of pro-voucher groups, including the Institute for Justice.** The Institute for Justice is an intervening party on the pro-voucher side of the pending lawsuit involving the Milwaukee and Cleveland voucher programs.
- **The study suffers from severe methodological flaws.** Virtually every researcher who has looked at the study has concluded that Peterson et. al. compare a small and select group of voucher students to a tiny and disproportionately disadvantaged group of public school students, biasing results in favor of voucher students. The following is a sample criticism from Professor Bruce Fuller of the University of California, Berkeley: Peterson's study "is based on the less than 80 students who lasted four years in just three choice schools. Complete data are not available on the other 2,900 children who spent less than four years or who could not be tracked. Would we believe a scientist who claimed that smoking has no harmful health effects based on a study that simply tracked smokers who were still alive?"¹¹

For a full recounting of the numerous criticisms levied against the Peterson study, see also Fuller (1996), Cookson (1996), Witte (1997), Rouse (1997), Rouse (1998), Levin (1997), and Molnar (1998).

The Rouse Study

Conducted by Princeton Professor Cecilia Rouse (1997 and 1998), this analysis found no reading differences and a modest voucher student advantage in math. Rouse does not have an ideological ax to grind about vouchers. Both Rouse and Witte use far sounder research methodologies than Peterson et al., and Rouse notes that her findings differ from Witte's because of a highly technical difference in the statistical models used.¹² Rouse also makes some observations

about the limits of her work that, while not explicitly directed at the Peterson study, are nonetheless applicable.

- **Don't over-claim.** "Data are not ideal and problems threaten the validity of any evaluation of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program...Because [my] techniques cannot substitute for better data, these data deficiencies should be kept in mind when interpreting results." For a full explanation of Rouse's techniques, including their limitations, see Rouse (1998), Levin (1997), and Molnar (1998).
- **Don't generalize.** At best, the Milwaukee voucher program can "indicate whether the private schools participating in the program are 'better' than the public schools in Milwaukee."
- **Vouchers are no magic bullet.** "...Not all public schools are created equal. In addition, not all private schools are created equal...If we really want to 'fix' our educational system, we need a better understanding of what makes a school successful, and not simply assume that market forces explain sectoral differences and are therefore the magic solution for public education."

And in the follow-up analysis discussed below, Rouse does just that--shifting the education debate away from quick-fix schemes like vouchers and towards the factors (such as small class size) that make a real difference for kids.

Small Class Size Trumps Vouchers In Terms of Results, Costs, and Public Support

Rouse could not be more right: "If we really want to 'fix' our educational system, we need a better understanding of what makes a school successful, and not simply assume that market forces explain sectoral differences and are therefore the magic solution for public education."

It is striking that good schools--be they public or private--have a lot in common. We've probably all been inside a successful school at some point, and we know what makes these schools work: high academic standards and a challenging curriculum for all children; a safe and orderly environment; qualified teachers; and parent involvement.

Now, we can add another ingredient to that list. A spate of recent research backs up what parents, teachers and the public have known all along: small class size makes a big difference.

Student Achievement

Rouse urges us to avoid the empty "public-private" debate and uncover the school-level factors that really explain student achievement. In a recent paper (1998), she explores the effects of class size.

Rouse compares the achievement of Milwaukee voucher students and students in *three* types of Milwaukee public schools: regular schools, magnet schools, and schools participating in the Preschool to Grade 5 Grant Program ("P-5" schools). P-5 schools, which enroll about 25 percent of all MPS elementary students, serve "predominantly minority and extremely disadvantaged" children and receive supplemental state funds that have enabled them to cut their pupil-teacher ratio, on average, to 17 to 1.¹³

Rouse reports that:

- Students in the P-5 (small class size) public schools made "substantially faster gains in reading" than those in the regular public schools, the public magnet schools, and the voucher schools.
- Students in the P-5 (small class size) public schools made faster math gains than students in the regular public schools and the public magnet schools and the same math gains as the voucher schools.
- Although average class size in the P-5 (small class size) public schools was larger than the voucher schools -- 17:1 vs. 15.3:1 -- P-5 schools outperformed voucher schools in reading and were even in math.

Rouse's findings suggest that small class size plays a big role in raising student achievement. And she's not alone. Her study is just one of several demonstrating the major benefits of lower class size, especially for low-income minority children. (For a full run-down of these studies, please contact the American Federation of Teachers and request the publication, "What Works: Recent Research Demonstrates the Major Benefits of Small Class Size."). They include:

- **The Tennessee STAR study and follow-ups (1990-1997).** In what many consider to be the "gold standard" of class-size studies because of its large scope and rigorous design, researchers (Word et al., 1990) found that Tennessee K-3 students in small classes significantly outperformed students in larger classes in both math and reading every year, at all grade levels, across all geographic areas. A follow-up study (Nye et al., 1995) showed that these benefits lasted through at least eighth grade, with achievement advantages especially large for minority students. A study conducted last year by Princeton University economist Alan Krueger validated the original STAR findings.
- **The Wisconsin SAGE evaluation (1998).** In this first-year study of the Wisconsin Student Achievement Guarantee in Education (SAGE)

initiative, a statewide effort to reduce K-3 class size to 15 in high-poverty schools, researchers (Maier et al.) found that SAGE (small class) students "enjoyed significantly greater improvements in test scores in reading, language arts, and math" than their non-SAGE peers, with the largest gains for African-American boys. So far, results "are consistent with the Tennessee experience."

- **National Evidence (1997).** In his study of more than 200 school districts, Harold Wenglinsky at the Educational Testing Service concludes that increased teacher-student ratios (smaller class size) raise average math achievement: "Fourth graders in smaller-than-average classes are about a half a year ahead of fourth graders in larger-than-average classes," with the "largest effects" (three-fourths of a year ahead) for low-income students in urban areas.

As researcher Alex Molnar (1998) wrote in a recent summary of voucher and class size research: "No strong evidence exists that participation in a voucher program increases student achievement." On the other hand, "There is no longer any argument about whether or not reducing class size in the primary grades increases student achievement. The research evidence is quite clear: It does." **Small class size trumps vouchers.** It's that simple.

(For a list of other research-backed programs that also improve student achievement, contact the American Federation of Teachers. Ask for: "What Works: Four Promising Schoolwide Academic Programs" and "What Works: Seven Promising Reading and English Language Arts Programs," as well as additional information.)

Costs

- **Milwaukee's P-5 (small class) program reaches 13 times more students than the voucher program--with superior results at the same cost.** In 1996-97, Wisconsin allocated \$4.3 million to 21 P-5 schools serving 12,593 students (at a cost of \$341 per student). Most schools used their funds to reduce class size. In contrast, in 1996-97, Wisconsin spent more than \$7 million on vouchers for only 1,650 children (at a cost of \$4,400 per student)
- **Research-backed academic programs also offer a bigger academic bang than vouchers for the same buck.** For the \$10 million spent on Cleveland vouchers this year, a proven reading program called Success for All could have been implemented in all 80 of Cleveland's public elementary schools--with \$6 million to spare.

In 1997-98, Ohio taxpayers spent \$10 million (including an emergency \$3 million bail-out from public school funds) on vouchers for 3,000 students (at a cost of \$3,300 per student).¹⁴ How could this money have otherwise been spent?

Success for All, designed at Johns Hopkins University, is an intensive reading program now used in more than 750 schools throughout the nation. Extensive long-term research shows that Success for All fifth graders read a full grade level higher than their non-Success for All counterparts, with results even more dramatic for low-income, minority children. Program designer Robert Slavin (1997) estimates that it costs about \$50,000 annually to cover the total costs of materials and training for a Success for All school of 500 students. What this means is that the \$10 million spent on Cleveland vouchers could have been used to put Success for All in all 80 of Cleveland's public elementary schools serving 40,000 predominantly low-income children--with about \$6 million to spare.

In turn, the extra \$6 million could have been used to reduce class size in those same schools. Such a "one-two punch" would most likely generate student achievement results considerably larger than either strategy alone. And either strategy is far more successful than vouchers.

Public Support

Polls overwhelmingly show that Americans want to fix their public schools, not abandon them. Additionally, both the public and teachers believe that classroom overcrowding is a serious problem--and that reducing class size is not only desirable, but a far more cost-effective strategy than vouchers. Americans expect their elected representatives to share their priorities. Consider the following poll results:

- **Don't give up on our public schools.** According a Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll on education (1997), when asked which of two approaches was preferable, 71% said reforming the existing public school system was preferable, while only 23% favored finding an alternative to the existing public school system.
- **Classroom overcrowding is a problem.** According two Public Agenda surveys (1994 and 1995), 50% of Americans, including 63% of African-American parents, report that overcrowded classes are a "serious" or "somewhat serious" problem in their local public schools. Teachers agree: 65% report that overcrowding is a serious or somewhat serious problem.
- **Spend money on lower class size and other proven reforms, not vouchers.** According to a poll by Peter Hart Associates (1998), when respondents were asked how their state should spend additional education dollars, 39% said the money should be used to reduce class size, while only 6% said it should be used to give out vouchers. The remaining respondents favored spending the money on successful reading programs (29%) or computers (19%). Similarly--when asked to

prioritize seven different education reforms--lower class size, intensive reading programs, and computers topped the list, while vouchers came in dead last, far below the other six options.

- **Listen. We mean it!** According to the same poll by Peter Hart poll, 58% of Americans said they would be less likely to vote for a candidate who "favors an education voucher system that transfers taxpayer funds from public schools to private and religious schools," compared to only 19% who would be more likely to vote for such a candidate. According to a *U.S. News and World Report* poll, 60 percent of parents say they would be more likely to vote for a political candidate who wants to raise taxes if the money went to pay for smaller classes in kindergarten through third grade.¹⁵

Can the public, parents, teachers-and the research-all be wrong? Vouchers don't work. Smaller class size and proven academic programs do, and they are doable-tomorrow. Given a choice between serving ideology and maybe helping a relative handful of children-at the expense of the rest-or responding to the legitimate demands of the vast majority of Americans and serving the needs of all children, the choice is clear. Let's do what's right and what works.

Endnotes

- ¹ Information from John Witte et al. (1995) and Paul Peterson et al. (1996).
- ² For more, see the American Federation of Teachers (1997).
- ³ See voucher program enrollment records for 1996-97 and 97-98. Available by contacting Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Office.
- ⁴ Peterson (1997), p. 30.
- ⁵ Peterson (1997), p. 30.
- ⁶ Doug Oplinger and Dennis J. Willard, "Vouchers Costing Ohio," *Acron-Beacon Journal*, March 27, 1998.
- ⁷ See AFT (July 1997), p. 17, and Ronald Marec, "School vouchers offer a choice, not a bargain," Letter to Editor, *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, March 13, 1998.
- ⁸ Levin (1997) considers Rouse's study the "most sophisticated analysis" of the Milwaukee data and her findings to be "the most reasonable conclusions."
- ⁹ Paul Peterson and Jay Greene, "School Choice Data Rescued from Bad Science," *Wall Street Journal*, August 14, 1996.
- ¹⁰ Paul Peterson (1990), p. 73.
- ¹¹ Bruce Fuller, Letter to Editor, *New York Times*, May 17, 1997.
- ¹² See Molnar (1998), page 20, for a good explanation of this difference.
- ¹³ Pupil-teacher ratio and class size are technically not the same thing. Pupil-teacher ratio refers to the number of students divided by the number of staff classified as teachers. Class size refers to the actual number of students in a classroom with a teacher. Pupil-teacher ratio is typically lower than average class size but often used as an approximate measure.
- ¹⁴ Actual per-pupil voucher costs may be higher than \$3,300 when one considers that voucher schools also benefit from two additional state programs that transfer public dollars to private schools (about \$600 per pupil), as well as federal education programs and tax-deductible outside contributions. Moreover, whereas the Cleveland public schools are required to offer special education and other important costly services, voucher schools are not and generally do not.

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