

**The Upshot**  
SCHOOL CHOICE

# Dismal Voucher Results Surprise Researchers as DeVos Era Begins

Kevin Carey FEB. 23, 2017

The confirmation of Betsy DeVos as secretary of education was a signal moment for the school choice movement. For the first time, the nation's highest education official is someone fully committed to making school vouchers and other market-oriented policies the centerpiece of education reform.

But even as school choice is poised to go national, a wave of new research has emerged suggesting that private school vouchers may harm students who receive them. The results are startling — the worst in the history of the field, researchers say.

While many policy ideas have murky origins, vouchers emerged fully formed from a single, brilliant essay published in 1955 by Milton Friedman, the free-market godfather later to be awarded a Nobel Prize in Economics. Because “a stable and democratic society is impossible without widespread acceptance of some common set of values and without a minimum degree of literacy and knowledge on the part of most citizens,” Mr. Friedman wrote, the government should pay for all children to go to school.

But, he argued, that doesn't mean the government should *run* all the schools. Instead, it could give parents vouchers to pay for "approved educational services" provided by private schools, with the government's role limited to "ensuring that the schools met certain minimum standards."

The voucher idea sat dormant for years before taking root in a few places, most notably Milwaukee. Yet even as many of Mr. Friedman's other ideas became Republican Party orthodoxy, most national G.O.P. leaders committed themselves to a different theory of educational improvement: standards, testing and accountability. That movement reached an apex when the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 brought a new focus on tests and standards to nearly every public school nationwide. The law left voucher supporters with crumbs: a small demonstration project in Washington, D.C.

But broad political support for No Child Left Behind proved short-lived. Teachers unions opposed the reforms from the left, while libertarians and states-rights conservatives denounced it from the right. When Republicans took control of more governor's mansions and state legislatures in the 2000s, they expanded vouchers to an unprecedented degree. Three of the largest programs sprang up in Indiana, Louisiana and Ohio, which collectively enroll more than a third of the 178,000 voucher students nationwide.

Most of the new programs heeded Mr. Friedman's original call for the government to enforce "minimum standards" by requiring private schools that accept vouchers to administer standardized state tests. Researchers have used this data to compare voucher students with similar children who took the same tests in public school. Many of the results were released over the last 18 months, while Donald J. Trump was advocating school choice on the campaign trail.

The first results came in late 2015. Researchers examined an Indiana voucher program that had quickly grown to serve tens of thousands of students under Mike Pence, then the state's governor. "In mathematics," they found, "voucher students who transfer to private schools experienced significant losses in achievement." They also saw no improvement in reading.

The next results came a few months later, in February, when researchers published a **major study** of Louisiana's voucher program. Students in the program were predominantly black and from low-income families, and they came from public schools that had received poor ratings from the state department of education, based on test scores. For private schools receiving more applicants than they could enroll, the law required that they admit students via lottery, which allowed the researchers to compare lottery winners with those who stayed in public school.

They found large negative results in both reading and math. Public elementary school students who started at the 50th percentile in math and then used a voucher to transfer to a private school dropped to the 26th percentile in a single year. Results were somewhat better in the second year, but were still well below the starting point.

This is very unusual. When people try to improve education, sometimes they succeed and sometimes they fail. The successes usually register as modest improvements, while the failures generally have no effect at all. It's rare to see efforts to improve test scores having the opposite result. Martin West, a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, calls the negative effects in Louisiana "as large as any I've seen in the literature" — not just compared with other voucher studies, but in the history of American education research.

There's always the chance that a single study, no matter how well designed, is an outlier. Studies of older voucher programs in Milwaukee and elsewhere have generally produced mixed results, sometimes finding modest improvements in test scores, but only for some subjects and student groups. Until about a year ago, however, few if any studies had shown vouchers causing test scores to decline drastically.

In June, a third voucher study was released by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a conservative think tank and proponent of school choice. The study, which was financed by the pro-voucher Walton Family Foundation, focused on a large voucher program in Ohio. "Students who use vouchers to attend private schools have fared worse academically compared to their closely matched peers attending public schools," the researchers found. Once again, results were worse in math.

Three consecutive reports, each studying one of the largest new state voucher programs, found that vouchers hurt student learning. Researchers and advocates began a spirited debate about what, exactly, was going on.

Mark Dynarski of the Brookings Institution noted that the performance gap between private and public school students had narrowed significantly over time. He argued that the standards, testing and accountability movement, for all its political shortcomings, was effective. The assumed superiority of private schools may no longer hold.

Some voucher supporters observed that many private schools in Louisiana chose not to accept voucher students, and those that did had recently experienced declining enrollment. Perhaps the participating schools were unusually bad and eager for revenue. But this is another way of saying that exposing young children to the vagaries of private-sector competition is inherently risky. The free market often does a terrible job of providing basic services to the poor — see, for instance, the lack of grocery stores and banks in many low-income neighborhoods. This may also hold for education.

Others have argued that standardized test scores are the wrong measure of school success. It's true that voucher programs in Washington and some others elsewhere, which produced no improvements in test scores, increased the likelihood of students' advancement and graduation from high school. One study of a privately financed voucher program in New York found positive results for college attendance among African-Americans.

But research has also linked higher test scores to a host of positive outcomes later in life. And voucher advocates often cite poor test scores in public schools to justify creating private school vouchers in the first place.

The new voucher studies stand in marked contrast to research findings that well-regulated charter schools in Massachusetts and elsewhere have a strong, positive impact on test scores. But while vouchers and charters are often grouped under the umbrella of "school choice," the best charters tend to be nonprofit public schools, open to all and accountable to public authorities. The less "private" that school choice programs are, the better they seem to work.

The new evidence on vouchers does not seem to have deterred the Trump administration, which has proposed a new \$20 billion voucher program. Secretary DeVos's enthusiasm for vouchers, which have been the primary focus of her philanthropic spending and advocacy, appears to be undiminished.

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