



October 16, 2010

Voucher students' test scores lag

By Denise Smith Amos
damos@enquirer.com

Several thousand Ohio students who used Education Choice scholarships to attend private schools are doing no better than students at the public schools they left behind, state test data show.

Ohio for the first time released simultaneous proficiency-rate data on state achievement tests and graduation tests to allow comparisons between students who received Ed Choice scholarships - called vouchers - and students in the public schools they would have attended.

Ed Choice is a 5-year-old program that pays \$4,250 to \$5,000 in tuition at private schools. To be eligible, students must have attended or lived near a public school rated Academic Watch or Emergency for at least two of the last three years.

This year, 34 districts had students eligible for Ed Choice vouchers. So far, 13,240 students are using vouchers at private schools. In Cincinnati, more than 2,650 students are using vouchers.

Although many people assume private schools would help Ed Choice students excel, proficiency rates in the last two years show that's not automatic.

In math, science and reading tests, in most grades public school kids at the 34 Ed Choice-affected districts still passed state tests at higher rates than Ed Choice kids.

Only in seventh- and eighth-grade reading tests did Ed Choice students outperform public school students in the 34 districts, including Cincinnati Public Schools and Mount Healthy.

In Cincinnati, students at the public schools affected by Ed Choice also had higher math and science passage rates than Ed Choice students. But in reading tests for grades 5-8, Ed Choice students prevailed.

In Columbus the situation was opposite; most Ed Choice students outpaced public school peers, in some tests by a large margin.

"Reading proves to be an area of strength for students using vouchers in these two cities," noted Bianca Speranza, a research assistant in Thomas B. Fordham Institute's Columbus office.

"While this is interesting, perhaps a better question to ask is why voucher students are performing so poorly in math. Is their performance a reflection of their time in the private school or of the teaching they received in the public school from which they fled?"

No one can tell because the state's data do not break out the numbers based on how long Ed Choice students have attended private schools, said Chad Aldis, executive director of School Choice Ohio, a pro-voucher group in Columbus.

He said that Ohio law requires and his group wants the state to show Ed Choice student scores by length of time in private schools. Presumably those in private schools longer are more likely to outperform public school peers on the state tests, Aldis said.

Also, the state can and should provide "value added" student data, he said.

Value-added tracks student progress, measuring whether a student makes a year's worth of progress or more or less.

The data are gathered and reported on public school report cards, but not included in the Ed Choice

data.

"To me this data is not yet mature," he said. "There isn't enough for us to tell exactly what student performance has been."

Some of the private school officials say that their own tests, rather than state tests, do reveal marked improvement for Ed Choice students.

State, local comparisons

Ohio requires all public school and private school students who receive Ohio Ed Choice scholarships to take Ohio Achievement Assessments in grades 3-8.

All students, public and private, also must take and pass the Ohio Graduation Test, beginning in their sophomore year, to qualify for a diploma. They can re-take OGT tests they fail.

Ohio's reports show the percentage of students proficient throughout the state and in the individual districts that have Ed Choice students.

For this analysis, the Ed Choice students from throughout the state are compared to students in the public school districts they would have attended. In addition, local Ed Choice students were compared to the Cincinnati Public schools they would have attended.

For most of the tests, the Ed Choice students passed at lower rates than the public school students, statewide and locally, although Ed Choice students showed greater proficiency in some reading grades than their public school peers.

Percent proficient in reading:

Grade	Ed Choice	Public*	Local Ed Choice	CPS
3	26.1	66.07	NA	
4	61.7	67.86	49	52.6
5	48.7	55.07	38.9	34.5
6	67.2	71.76	60.4	53.7
7	68	65.12	58.7	45.4
8	68.2	66.66	53.2	50.8
OGT**	10.1	73.44	16.7	62.6

Percent proficient in math:

Grade	Ed Choice	Public*	Local Ed Choice	CPS
3	17.4	63.03	NA	
4	30.2	61.15	21.6	42.8
5	26.5	49.55	14.4	28.2
6	40.9	63.08	28.6	46.3
7	35.7	52.32	30.7	31
8	42.2	50.39	27.4	29.7
OGT**	14.6	68.62	33.3	56.6

Percent proficient in science:

Grade	Ed Choice	Public*	Local Ed Choice	CPS
3	NA	NA		
4	NA	NA		
5	29.1	48.47	18.9	27.7
6	NA	NA		
7	NA	NA		
8	35.2	43.72	17.7	20.8
OGT**	18	56.32	33.3	39.2

[end chart]

Source: Ohio Department of Education school report card data and Ed Choice reports

OGT is the Ohio Graduation Test.

* Public school districts and buildings in Academic Watch or Emergency for at least two of last three years.

NA: Score not available because the subject was not tested that year or because too few Ed Choice students took the test.

**2010 OGT data reflects fewer Ed Choice students than public students; only sophomores and students who've failed an OGT test and are retaking it are counted.

Additional Facts

What is Ed Choice?

Ohio's Ed Choice scholarships provide additional choices for students attending struggling schools.

To qualify, students must:

Attend public schools in Academic Watch or Emergency for at least two of the last three years.

Be incoming kindergartners living near those schools.

Be heading toward middle or high schools with those designations.

Private school students and home-school students do not qualify.
