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### Vouchers don't do much for students

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Ever since the Obama administration filed suit to freeze Louisiana's school voucher program, high-ranking Republicans have pummeled the president for trapping poor kids in failing public schools. The entire House leadership sent a letter of protest. Majority Leader Eric Cantor blistered the president for denying poor kids "a way into a brighter future."

And Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal accused the president of "ripping low-income minority students out of good schools" that could "help them achieve their dreams."

But behind the outrage is an inconvenient truth: Taxpayers across the U.S. will soon be spending \$1 billion a year to help families pay private school tuition — and there's little evidence that the investment yields academic gains.

[\(POLITICO's Morning Education\)](#)

In Milwaukee, just 13 percent of voucher students scored proficient in math and 11 percent made the bar in reading this spring. That's worse on both counts than students in the city's public schools. In Cleveland, voucher students in most grades performed worse than their peers in public schools in math, though they did better in reading.

In New Orleans, voucher students who struggle academically haven't advanced to grade-level work any faster over the past two years than students in the public schools, many of which are rated D or F, state data show.

And across Louisiana, many of the most popular private schools for voucher students posted miserable scores in math, reading, science and social studies this spring, with fewer than half their voucher students achieving even basic proficiency and fewer than 2 percent demonstrating mastery. Seven schools did so badly, state Superintendent John White barred them from accepting new voucher students — though the state agreed to keep paying tuition for the more than 200 voucher students already enrolled, if they chose to stay.

Nationwide, many schools participating in voucher programs infuse religion through their curriculum. Zack Kopplin, a student activist who favors rigorous science education, has found more than 300 voucher schools across the U.S. that teach the Biblical story of creation as science; some also instruct children that the world is just several thousand years old and use textbooks describing the Loch Ness Monster as a living dinosaur. Parents at one such school in Louisiana received a newsletter calling secular scientists "sinful men."

[\(Also on POLITICO: Jindal: School vouchers fight still on\)](#)

Asked whether he was confident that the private schools funded by vouchers are better than the public schools students would otherwise attend, Jindal told POLITICO that parents, not government officials, should make that decision. "We make no apologies for giving parents the option to determine the best educational path for their children," he said. "President Obama has the means to send his children to the school of his choice. Parents in Louisiana should have the same opportunity."

His rationale resonates widely these days.

Vouchers are booming in popularity; a record 245,000 students in 16 states plus D.C. are paying for private school with public subsidies, according to the [Alliance for School Choice](#). Nine states added or broadened voucher programs this year and new initiatives are on the table in states including New Jersey and Tennessee.

By 2014, states will be spending \$1 billion a year to send children to private schools through vouchers, tax credits and similar programs, according to Robert C. Enlow, president of the Friedman Foundation, an advocacy group for school choice.

[\(Also on POLITICO: TFA founder: 'We're boring our kids'\)](#)

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These programs are expanding, and they're not going away," said Robin Charess, executive counsel for the American Federation for Children, a school choice advocacy group that just released an emotional campaign-style [video](#) promoting vouchers.

The expansions are stretching voucher programs far beyond the stated intent of rescuing poor families from failing public schools.

For one thing, participants don't always have to be poor. In Milwaukee, a family of four with an annual income as high as \$71,000 can get a voucher. In Louisiana, a family of four earning nearly \$59,000 a year is eligible. The [federal poverty guideline](#) for a family of four is \$23,550.

Also, voucher recipients aren't always trapped in failing public schools; in fact, some have never even tried the public system. Fully two-thirds of students in Wisconsin's Parental Choice Program were already enrolled in private schools before they received the tuition subsidy — and another 5 percent were home schooled, state data show.

As for academic gains, voucher backers often point to two studies, in [D.C.](#) and [New York City](#), for hopeful signs. The research in D.C. found that giving vouchers to low-income students didn't raise their test scores. But it did boost their high school graduation rate, according to their parents. In New York, meanwhile, African-American students who received vouchers were more likely than their peers to enroll in college, but the effect didn't hold true for other groups, including Hispanic students.

[Longitudinal studies of the Milwaukee voucher program](#) have found mixed results. In one study, voucher students did no better than peers in the public schools for four years, then outpaced them in reading — but not math — in the fifth year. In another, voucher students lagged behind their peers in reading, math and science in fourth grade and continued to lag in eighth- and 10th-grade math, though they did better in reading and science in the upper grades. Another study found voucher students were 3 percentage points more likely to graduate high school and

persist past their freshman year in a four-year college.

Matthew Chingos, an education policy analyst at the Brookings Institution, sums up the research this way: Kids don't make big gains when the state pays their way through private schools — but at least "there's no evidence that people are being harmed."

In his view, that means the programs should continue: "If their children are at least doing no worse ... it seems reasonable that it's OK to let people make these choices," Chingos said.

That logic infuriates voucher opponents, who argue that it would be far wiser to use public money to improve public schools for everyone, rather than to send select families to private schools of uncertain quality.

"The taxpayers are paying for a second, competing school system that doesn't do as well as the one we already have," said Wisconsin state Rep. Sondy Pope, a Democrat. "It's extremely irresponsible stewardship of tax dollars."

Pope points out that taxpayers end up propping up some private schools that would not survive in the free market without vouchers. In Milwaukee, 20 percent of private schools in the program serve only voucher students; they don't bring in a single paying customer. Another 30 percent rely on vouchers for 95 percent of their students, according to the state Department of Education.

In Indianapolis, vouchers even saved two failing public charter schools. At risk of being shut down this summer for poor academic performance, they converted themselves into private Christian schools — and told students to apply for vouchers to pay the tuition.

Gallup regularly polls Americans on the issue and has consistently found that a majority oppose allowing students to attend a private school at public expense; in [this year's poll](#), that opposition hit 70 percent, the highest it's been since 1993.

Still, many politicians see it as a winning issue.

When the Justice Department filed suit to halt the voucher distribution in parts of Louisiana, on the grounds that moving students to private schools might undercut court-ordered desegregation plans, Jindal made a [TV ad](#) blasting the "know-it-alls in Washington" for presuming to usurp parental choice. The tagline: "Louisiana parents know best."

But in Louisiana and other states with voucher programs, parents often have few resources to help them make informed decisions.

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Many states don't require voucher students to take the same tests as students in public schools, so it's impossible to compare academic results. Louisiana does require testing. But to protect children's privacy, the state does not make the scores public if there are fewer than 40 voucher students in tested grades. (The same rule applies to public schools.) This spring's scores were released for just 20 out of 117 private schools in the voucher programs.

The state also [requires audits](#) of private schools. Yet at nearly every private school scrutinized this year, auditors reported that they could not tell how state money was being spent, or whether it was supporting student education. One school didn't even have a bookkeeping system. The state is now requiring private schools to keep track of voucher money separately.

Voucher advocates in Louisiana point to a 93 percent satisfaction rate among participating parents as proof that the program is working well despite hitches like low test scores and inconclusive audits.

Yet when parents say they're pleased with their local public schools — even those with poor test scores — officials on up to Education Secretary Arne Duncan often dismiss the satisfaction rate as meaningless. "That's called cognitive dissonance," Duncan said, explaining that parents often don't want to admit their kids are getting a poor education, so they view their neighborhood schools through rose-colored glasses.

The same phenomenon could well be at work when parents rate their kids' voucher schools highly, said Claire Smrekar, an associate professor of public policy and education at Vanderbilt University. She has studied school choice extensively and says most parents rarely consider academic quality when picking a school. They're far more likely, she said, to choose a school based on its location or a perception that it enforces strict discipline.

New Orleans resident Alicia Bordere can relate. Her 7-year-old daughter got a voucher in kindergarten and has been using it ever since to attend a private Christian school. Its test results have consistently been so awful that the state will no longer let it take in new voucher students. But Bordere has chosen to stay, as long as the state will pay the tuition. She likes the school's Bible study. She believes her daughter is safe there. And she refuses to accept that the rock-bottom test scores signal academic weakness.

"Overall," Bordere said, "it's a good school."

*Nirvi Shah contributed to this story.*

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