

A COMMENTARY

SCHOOL PRIVATIZATION – NO ACCOUNTABILITY, NO TRANSPARENCY

By Rod Gramer

Those who want to use taxpayer dollars to fund private and religious schools have two significant issues that stand in their way of selling this bad idea to doubting Idahoans. Research shows that neither their promise of improved academic achievement nor their claim of better accountability is true.

The first voucher program in the country was sold to the Wisconsin Legislature as a way of helping low-income students get out of so-called “failing” public schools and into private schools. The promise was they would excel once they left the public schools.

Trouble is that pledge never materialized. Not only does the Wisconsin voucher program not help low-income students thrive academically, but it also mainly benefits students who have never stepped foot in a public school nor are low income.

The results are the same in other voucher-friendly states like Indiana where so-called “choice” has mainly benefited families that already chose to send their kids to private schools. This makes the voucher programs basically a taxpayer subsidy to parents who have already chosen private and religious school options for their students – not for students fleeing public schools for private schools.

But what about that original promise? Do students who transfer from public schools to private schools perform better academically?

Or, as Amber Gunn, senior policy analyst at the pro-choice Mountain States Policy Center, recently asked in a commentary published by *Idaho Ed News*: “Can we improve outcomes for students and families by offering more education options?”

Let’s find out.

THE STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT QUESTION

National Public Radio (NPR) put the question of improved student achievement to Josh Cunningham, senior education policy specialist at the National Conference of State Legislatures. “Maybe, a little bit,” he answered. “But there's not a lot of evidence that they'll have any substantial academic gains.”

Micah Ann Wixom, a policy analyst with the non-partisan Education Commission of the States, told NPR that “most studies find modestly positive or neutral impact on student scores, and that's generally limited to African-American students in large urban centers.”

A 2011 study by the Center on Education Policy concluded: “Achievement gains for voucher students are similar to those of their public-school peers.”

“Evidence of the effectiveness of vouchers has been mixed, with largely null to negative results overall, particularly in student learning outcomes as measured by test scores,” the National Education Policy Center said in a 2021 report on the real cost of voucher programs.

How bad are school vouchers for those students who transfer from public to private schools? “Far worse than most people imagine,” according to a 2018 report by the Center for American Progress called “The Highly Negative Impacts of Vouchers.”

The study concluded: “Indeed, according to the analysis conducted by the authors of this report, the use of school vouchers. . . is equivalent to missing out on more than one-third of a year of classroom learning.”

Additional studies over the years, even by pro-voucher think tanks, come to the same conclusion: public school students who transfer from public schools to private schools do not do better academically than their peers who stay in the public-school systems and often do worse.

A study by the pro-voucher American Enterprise Institute of the Milwaukee school choice program found that the “program had a negative significant impact on English language arts (ELA), a negative but insignificant impact on math scores, and a positive but insignificant effect on high school graduation rates.”

And, if you require additional evidence that vouchers do not improve student achievement, just read a 2021 study commissioned by the pro-voucher Manhattan Institute called “Accountability and Private-School Choice.”

The study, conducted by Nicole Stelle Garnett of the Notre Dame Law School, noted that the country’s first privatization champion, Howard Fuller, called the school choice program “more of a rescue mission (for students) than a fight for broad societal change.”

Garnett wrote in her report that “if the goal of parental choice is to ‘rescue children,’ it becomes natural to ask: Are these programs working? Do participants learn more or better? Are the participating private schools actually superior to the public-school alternatives available to participating students?”

The answer to that question, Garnett wrote is no in many cases. “Unfortunately, parental choice alone has proved ineffective in weeding poorly performing schools out of private-school choice programs. And in some cases, hoped-for academic gains have failed to materialize among program participants. Most studies of private-school-choice programs find modest positive effects on academic performance over time, as well as more significant longer-term effects on noncognitive variables, including high school graduation rates, college matriculation

and persistence, and a reduced likelihood of involvement in the criminal-justice system. Some studies have found that participants actually lose ground, at least in the short term, when they transfer from public to private schools (at least as measured on standardized tests), prompting commentators to announce that school choice does not ‘work.’”

Even a 2016 study by the pro-voucher Thomas B. Fordham Institute found that there was no improved student academic achievement for students who moved from public schools to private schools through the taxpayer-supported Ohio EdChoice program.

The Fordham authors wrote, “And though EdChoice eligibility apparently improves student test scores in general, this is not the case for those who actually use their vouchers to attend private schools, having previously attended relatively high-performing public schools among the Ed Choice eligible schools. Those eligible students (coming from these relatively high-performing public schools) who attend private schools appear to fare considerably worse than we predict that they would have performed had they remained in the public schools.”

Six years later Fordham found that nothing had really changed. In a study released in December, Fordham came to the same conclusion: Students who move from public to private schools don’t necessarily do better academically.

The report said: “Although there is significant public support for publicly funded vouchers, rigorous evidence of their impact is mixed. Evaluations of the early implementation of urban voucher programs in Milwaukee and Washington, D.C., indicate small positive effects on program participants’ achievement (i.e., test scores) and attainment (i.e., level of education, such as graduation from high school or college attendance). On the other hand, more recent evaluations of expanded voucher programs in Indiana, Louisiana, Ohio, and Washington, D.C., indicate significant negative impacts on participants’ test scores. Beyond academic impacts on program participants, studies almost always indicate that parents who use vouchers report greater satisfaction with the quality and safety of their children’s schools.”

So, to restate the Mountain States Policy Center’s Amber Gunn’s question: “Can we improve outcomes for students and families by offering more education options?”

The answer is no, at least academically, which was the original argument for so-called school choice.

VOUCHER ADVOCATES ARE MOVING THE GOAL POSTS

Even though pro-privatization advocates originally sold the idea of school choice on the promise that students would excel academically (an argument you still hear in Idaho from privatization advocates like the Idaho Freedom Foundation), now advocates in other parts of the country argue that choice improves other things like high school graduation, enrollment in postsecondary education, and parental satisfaction. Standardized test scores don't seem to matter that much to them anymore.

Instead of talking about student achievement, their arguments center on "parental choice" and "empowering parents." They have essentially moved the goal posts because the improved student academic success argument inconveniently doesn't hold water.

By contrast, our public schools do not have the luxury of changing the definition of success like private school advocates do. State and federal laws require our public schools to conduct standardized tests that measure student achievement in reading, math and English Language Arts. And those test scores, unlike the ones private schools administer, are always made public to parents, patrons, and taxpayers.

Despite minimizing the importance of test scores for private schools, advocates of vouchers continue to claim that public schools are "failing" students based on the very standardized tests they now reject. Public school educators find that kind of hypocrisy hard to swallow.

Which brings us to the question of what does transparency and accountability look like for private schools that receive taxpayers' hard-earned money?

THE ACCOUNTABILITY AND TRANSPARENCY PARADOX

In November, Chris Cargill, president of the Mountain States Policy Center based in Coeur d'Alene, wrote in the *Idaho Statesman* that one way to restore "faith" in public schools was for them to increase their "transparency." He argued that public schools lack transparency because their publicly released budgets are hard for parents and patrons to decipher.

What Cargill didn't say is that public schools are required to make their budgets public. Private schools that receive taxpayer funds don't have to report back to the taxpayers about how their

money is being spent. Nor do they provide “transparency” as to whether taxpayers’ dollars are being spent effectively, or even legally.

Furthermore, private schools are not required to give students the same assessments that public school students receive. And even if those who may choose to give such assessments, they are not required to make the results public.

In other words, public schools get criticized by private school advocates over student test scores which they release to the public in the name of accountability and transparency. But the private schools duck any criticism from the public or the media because they lack accountability and transparency. It is a baffling paradox that advocates for privatization always miss or ignore out of convenience.

And there is nothing democratic about private schools. Public schools are governed by locally elected trustees accountable to voters. These trustees decide what curriculum teachers will use and determine which policies the schools adhere to. If the parents or taxpayers don’t like what these elected trustees do, they can show up at publicly open meetings to protest or vote them out of office.

On the other hand, private school boards are appointed by the owners of those schools, whether they are for-profit, non-profit or religiously affiliated. Even when they receive tax money for their operation, they are not accountable to the taxpayers for the curriculum they use or the policies they adopt. No taxpayer has the power to show up at a private school board meeting and protest or vote trustees out of office at the next election.

Taxpayers never know if their money is being used to “indoctrinate” students, to use a phrase repeatedly used by privatization advocates to discredit public schools. At least with public schools taxpayers know what content is being taught in the curriculum and what books students are reading.

Additionally, private, and religious schools do not receive the same scrutiny and oversight from the media as public schools do. Reporters rarely ask private school leaders tough questions and private school leaders are not required to answer their inquiries any way.

There is another myth about so-called school choice that is tied to accountability. Public schools must accept every student no matter who they are. Meanwhile, private, and religious schools only accept the students they choose to enroll.

This means that school vouchers are not fundamentally about parental choice as much as they are about subsidizing the operation of private and religious schools. In short, parents don't **choose** the school they want their children to attend – private schools **choose** the students they want to accept.

Parents wanting vouchers should be aware that it is not a cinch that their children will be the ones who get accepted at the private schools of their so-called choice.

A great example of a report that discusses this lack of voucher-school accountability is the Manhattan Institute's 2021 report.

"Many private schools - and those people who advocate for parental choice on their behalf—mistakenly oppose even minimal accountability requirements," wrote Nicole Stelle Garnett in the Manhattan Institute study. "Proponents of private-school choice would do well to acknowledge that it is not unreasonable to condition the participation in private-school-choice programs on some greater level of oversight and to work with policymakers to craft accountability rules that attend to the pluralistic landscape of American private education."

Garnett goes on to warn that "resistance to even reasonable regulation opens the door to bad-faith regulatory demands by parental-choice opponents."

It's interesting that Garnett blames the resistance to accountability on those who oppose privatization of our public schools and not on private school leaders and advocates. "The reality is that many demands for accountability are not made in good faith," she wrote, adding, "any study of a parental-choice program suggesting tepid or negative results presents an opportunity to bludgeon the very idea of parental choice, and examples of individual school failures inevitably are held up as an exemplar of the folly of parental choice."

Of course, Garnett and the Manhattan Institute miss the irony of this argument. Public schools, which are held to a higher standard of accountability and transparency than private schools are

routinely attacked as “failing” by advocates of privatizing education when the public-school students’ test scores are not as high as the critics think they should be.

This makes the public school vulnerable to criticism because they are accountable and transparent, while the tax-supported private schools have no such worries because they don’t have to reveal their test scores to the public or media.

Garnett even points out that many private schools don’t accept voucher students because they fear the same kind of criticism that public schools face. “While private schools are exempt from most state reporting requirements, the increased transparency required of public and charter schools may, over time, provide an incentive for more private schools to release achievement data voluntarily. That said, private schools’ continued anxieties about transparency may mean that imposing these requirements may dissuade some private schools from participating in private school- choice programs. One survey of private schools in parental-choice states found that 21% of the schools opting not to participate listed mandatory disclosure of test results as a reason for eschewing participation.”

When it comes to the voucher debate, perhaps the old maxim that what is good for the goose (public schools) is also good for the gander (private schools) applies. If we are going to hold public schools accountable, we should also hold private and religious schools that receive taxpayer money accountable.

Furthermore, transparency never hurts anyone except those who don’t want to be transparent.

As Idaho legislators debate the voucher issue, they should be aware that privatization programs do not increase student academic achievement as advocates promised. They should also be aware of the huge gap between the accountability standards that public schools must maintain and the lack of accountability and transparency by private schools.

In the end, we should not use taxpayers’ money to subsidize the operation of private and religious schools. But, if we do, then tax money should not go to schools that cannot tell taxpayers how their money is being used or whether that money is really leading to the academic excellence that they promise.

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