

## Choice Drives Quality in Education

**School vouchers give families access to an education regardless of income or zip code**

By [BOB BEHNING](#)

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A high-quality education system is imperative for the future of our country. Providing parents with the opportunity to choose the best environment for their children to learn and excel in is not a choice, it is a moral obligation. For the past two decades, I have fought for families to have a choice when it comes to their child's education.

Public schools serve the vast majority of students and are critical to the educational success of our nation. Educational choice doesn't diminish the role public schools play in preparing students for post-academic life. However, if a school – public or private – is not meeting a child's needs, then other options should be accessible. Typically they are, but at a cost.

In fact, they should be available to students regardless of income or zip code.

The Choice Scholarship Program is a tool that allows parents additional options to make sure their children receive the education that fits their needs. Nationally, our educational system has fallen behind countries like China, South Korea, Finland, Singapore and Canada. This should serve as a wake-up call given the global dynamics of the 21st century marketplace. Are we doing enough to prepare American students for future success? Or, is a new model needed to restore gains in achievement and learning?

[\[Read Teresa Meredith: Voucher Schemes Don't Help Students\]](#)

When compared to 34 other industrialized countries, the U.S. ranked 14th in reading, 17th in science and 25th in math, according to scores from the 2009 Program for International Student Assessment. I firmly believe that American students, parents and teachers should have all the resources available to them to be leading the way.

Choice programs and charter schools were designed to inject competition in education systems because competition produces innovation and advancement. I have heard from countless parents who use the Choice Scholarship Program and describe it as a godsend for their child. Their son or daughter may have been a victim of bullying or learned in a different way, or perhaps they needed a school that fit their special needs. Different schools offer different solutions. However, there are thousands of families who are still unable to access the best option for their children.

[\[See a collection of political cartoons on the budget and deficit.\]](#)

Both, the Indiana Supreme Court and the U.S. Supreme Court, have ruled that vouchers are constitutional. The Indiana Supreme Court unanimously found that vouchers do not violate the state's prohibition against public funding of religious institutions because parents and children are the primary beneficiaries. Just as a college student can use public funds to attend a private university, a K-12 student should be able to use public funds to attend a private school.

Currently, 255,000 students nationwide attend private schools of their parents' choice through a voucher or tax-credit program, in addition to 2.3 million students who are enrolled at public charter schools, according to the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice. Indiana currently has 30,000 students in charter schools and approximately 9,400 students receiving vouchers.

Our goal is to have all schools achieve excellence. All children deserve to have the same opportunities to excel academically regardless of their family's financial circumstances. Indiana's program provides students from low- and middle-income environments additional options, so their academic needs can be met. The power of parents to choose and to be engaged in their children's education is critical to the long-term success of our state and country.

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# OPPOSE SCHOOL VOUCHERS

## The Government Should Not Spend Taxpayer Money on Private Schools

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Open and non-discriminatory in their acceptance of all students, American public schools are a unifying factor among the diverse range of ethnic and religious communities in our society. Public schools are the only schools that must meet the needs of all students. They do not turn children or families away. They serve children with physical, emotional, and mental disabilities, those who are extremely gifted and those who are learning challenged. Vouchers undermine these goals by taking taxpayer money out of the public school system and funneling it to private schools.

### Vouchers Do Not Improve Academic Achievement

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According to multiple studies of the District of Columbia,<sup>1</sup> Milwaukee,<sup>2</sup> and Cleveland<sup>3</sup> school voucher programs, students offered vouchers do not perform better in reading and math than students in public schools. In 2011, the Wisconsin Legislative Audit Bureau released a five-year longitudinal study,<sup>4</sup> which concluded that students in Milwaukee using vouchers to attend private and religious schools perform no better on standardized tests than their counterparts in public schools. Similarly, the U.S. Department of Education studied the D.C. voucher program for five years and found the program produced no statistically significant improvements overall in educational achievement. Voucher programs also fail to offer participating students greater educational resources. In fact, the Department of Education studies of the D.C. voucher show that students participating in the program are actually *less* likely to have access to ESL programs, learning support and special needs programs, tutors, counselors, cafeterias, and nurse's offices than students not in the program.

### Vouchers Do Not Improve Opportunities for Kids from Low Income Families

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Voucher payments often do not cover the entire cost of tuition or other mandatory fees for private schools. Thus, only families with the money to cover the cost of the rest of the tuition, uniforms, transportation, books, and other supplies can use the vouchers. In Cleveland, the majority of families who were granted a voucher but did not use it cited the additional costs as the reason they could not use the voucher. A 2003 study of the Ohio program concluded: "For many families, the financial burden of paying even the relatively small portion of their children's private school tuition is more than they can bear."<sup>5</sup> In the end, the families most likely to use a voucher are the ones who could already afford to send their kids to private schools.

### Students Who Accept Vouchers Lose Important Rights and Protections

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Vouchers deprive students of the rights and protections they are awarded at public schools. Despite receiving public money, private schools that participate in voucher programs are not subject to all federal civil rights laws, and do not face the same public accountability standards that all public schools must meet, including those in Title VI, Title IX, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Private voucher schools usually do not have to comply with the same teacher standards, curriculum, and testing requirements as the public schools. And, students who attend private schools with vouchers are stripped of their First Amendment, due process, and other constitutional and statutory rights offered to them in public schools. Unfortunately, many parents and students are not even aware that they will lose rights and protections when they accept a voucher.

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<sup>1</sup>U.S. Dep't of Ed., *Evaluation of the D.C. Scholarship Program: Final Report* (June 2010) (Though the 2009 study showed a marginal gain for some students in reading (but notably, not for the program's targeted group, students from schools in need of improvement), the 2010 Final Report said "[t]here is no conclusive evidence that the [program] affected student achievement" and earlier findings of modest gains "could be due to chance" and were no longer statistically significant.); U.S. Dep't of Ed., *Evaluation of the D.C. Scholarship Program: Impact After 3 Years* (Apr. 2009); U.S. Dep't of Ed., *Evaluation of the D.C. Scholarship Program: Impact After 2 Years* (June 2008); U.S. Dep't of Ed., *Evaluation of the D.C. Scholarship Program: Impact After 1 Year* (June 2007).

<sup>2</sup>Witte, Wolf, et al., *MPCP Longitudinal Educational Growth Study Third Year Report* (Apr. 2010); Witte, Wolf, et al., *MPCP Longitudinal Educational Growth Study Second Year Report* (Mar. 2009); Witte, Wolf, et al., *MPCP Longitudinal Educational Growth Study Baseline Report* (Feb. 2008); Witte, *Achievement Effects of Milwaukee Voucher Program* (Feb. 1997); Witte, et al., *Fifth Year Report Milwaukee Parental Choice Program* (Dec. 1995).

<sup>3</sup>Plucker, et al., *Evaluation of the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program, Summary Report 1998-2004* (Feb. 2006); *Evaluation of the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program, Executive Report 1998-2002* (Feb. 2006).

<sup>4</sup>Legislative Audit Bureau, *Test Score Data for Pupils in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (Report 4 of 5)*, 17 (Aug. 2011) ("The project's five-year longitudinal study shows no significant difference in the performance of Choice and similar MPS pupils after four years of participation.")

<sup>5</sup>Metcalfe, *Evaluation of the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program: Exploring Families' & Educational Choices: Technical Report*, 162 (Dec. 2003).

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**The National Coalition  
for  
Public Education**

The **National Coalition for Public Education** is comprised of more than 50 education, civic, civil rights, and religious organizations devoted to the support of public schools. Founded in 1978, NCPE opposes the funneling of public money to private and religious schools through such mechanisms as tuition tax credits and vouchers.

## Vouchers Do Not Allow Parents to Make Better Education Choices

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Under most voucher bills, a private school could take taxpayer money and also deny admission to any student it chooses. Depending on the enacting law, private voucher schools may discriminate against a student based on his or her gender, disability, religion, national origin, economic background, academic record, English language ability, or disciplinary history. Also, voucher programs often do not provide parents with the necessary or accurate data needed to make informed educational choices. Though parents would have the power to remove students from the private school, the school is not required to give parents the information necessary to determine that the school would meet the needs of their child, such as standardized test scores (which the schools may not even administer to all their students), curriculum used by the schools, or teacher qualifications. But, even where legislatures have tried to set up accountability standards for parents, it has not worked. According to a 2008 U.S. Government Accountability Office study, the D.C. voucher program “did not collect or omitted or incorrectly reported some information that would have helped parents evaluate the quality of participating schools.”<sup>6</sup> The “misleading,” “inaccurate,” and “incomplete” information was provided in spite of an explicit statutory requirement that the District provide certain information to parents.<sup>7</sup>

## Vouchers Fail Students with Special Needs

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Programs tailored to students with disabilities also do not work. Students using vouchers lose many rights granted by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and may not have the protection of an individualized education plan (IEP) in private schools. Furthermore, a 2008 study of the Ohio Autism Scholarship concluded that vouchers are “a poor model” that “should not be emulated in other states.” The study explained that the voucher is not “sound education policy” and that it “exacerbates inequality.”<sup>8</sup> Likewise, a 2007 study of Florida’s McKay Scholarships for Students with Disabilities similarly found that the McKay voucher was “seriously flawed” and created “[m]ore [p]roblems [t]han [s]olutions.”<sup>9</sup> Students with special needs often cannot even find a private school that can serve them: The final Department of Education report on the D.C. voucher showed that a significant number of students had to reject their vouchers because they were unable to find a participating school that offered services for their learning or physical disability or other special needs.<sup>10</sup> In Milwaukee, researchers’ observations during site visits to voucher schools confirmed findings in the policy literature that “most private schools lack the incentives, personnel, protocols, and organizational culture that lead public school systems to label students with disabilities as requiring special education services.”<sup>11</sup>

## Vouchers Harm Religious Liberty

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One of the most dearly held principles of religious liberty is that government should not compel any citizen to furnish funds in support of a religion with which he or she *disagrees*, or even a religion with which he or she *does agree*. Voucher programs, however, violate that central tenet: they use taxpayer money to fund primarily religious education. Indeed, approximately 80% of the students participating in the D.C. voucher program attend religious schools. Parents certainly may choose such an education for their children, but no taxpayer should be required to pay for another’s religious education.

## Vouchers Cost, Rather than Save, Taxpayer Money

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Vouchers do not decrease education costs. Rather, tax money that would ordinarily go to public schools would instead pay for vouchers, thus limiting the capacity of public schools. A 1999 study of Cleveland’s program showed the public schools from which students left for private voucher schools were spread throughout the district. The reduction in students, therefore, was negligible at the individual schools. Thus, the public school district lost state funding to pay for vouchers without being able to cut overall operating costs.<sup>12</sup> In Milwaukee, which has been disproportionately burdened in a statewide voucher funding scheme, the city has had to raise property taxes several times in order to ensure adequate funding for the city’s schools.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> U.S. Gov’t Accountability Office, GAO-08-09, *District of Columbia Opportunity Scholarship Program: Additional Policies and Procedures Would Improve Internal Controls and Program Operations*, 36 (Nov. 2007).

<sup>7</sup> *Id.* at 21, 36, 44.

<sup>8</sup> Policy Matters Ohio, *Analyzing Autism Vouchers in Ohio* (Mar. 2008).

<sup>9</sup> Sara Mead, *Information Underload: Florida’s Flawed Special-Ed Voucher Program*, Education Sector 1 (June 2007).

<sup>10</sup> U.S. Dep’t of Ed., *Evaluation of the D.C. Scholarship Program: Final Report* (June 2010).

<sup>11</sup> Wolf, et. al., *Special Education and the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (Report #35) (2012)*.

<sup>12</sup> KPMG, LLP, *Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program: Final Management Study* (Sept. 1999).

<sup>13</sup> Borsuk, “MPS Property Tax Levy Expected to Rise 14.9%,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, July 4, 2008.; Richards, “MPS blames voucher program for tax levy increase,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, October 31, 2012.

## Americans United

### Legislative

#### Choice Charade: Senators Host Pro-Voucher Event On Capitol Hill

Jul 31, 2013 by [Vanessa Wolbrink](#) in [Legislative](#) |

With no one on any of the panels there to offer opposing views, the panelists cited several misleading facts and only told one side of the story about private school vouchers.

On Tuesday, U.S. Sens. Rand Paul (R-Ky.), Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.), Lamar Alexander (R-Tenn.) and Tim Scott (R-S.C.) hosted an event called "Success for Our Children: A Roundtable Forum on School Choice."

The forum included three one-sided panels in favor of so-called "school choice." Although the discussion did include a lot of talk about charter schools, the senators and panelists also strongly pushed private school vouchers.

The first panel included voucher proponents who claimed that school choice is "raising the standard of education in D.C.," with representatives from several charter schools, the secretary for education for the Catholic Archdiocese of Washington, and a representative from the Alliance for School Choice, a voucher front group. The second and third panels included parents and children who participated in the D.C. voucher program. With no one on any of the panels there to offer opposing views, the panelists cited several misleading facts and only told one side of the story about private school vouchers.

I sat through the whole thing. Here are some pertinent facts that were overlooked:

*Vouchers Are Not True Choice:* In his introductory remarks, Paul emphasized the importance of parents' ability to choose their child's school. With private school vouchers, however, the parents **don't** have the ultimate choice – the schools do. Private voucher schools usually are allowed to discriminate against students (and teachers, for that matter) based on gender, ability, religion or sexual orientation of the students or their parents.

Parents of students with special needs have even less of a choice. Students in private voucher schools forfeit many of the protections that come with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and private schools are typically less equipped to teach students with special needs. A 2010 Department of Education [report](#) on D.C. vouchers showed a significant number of students had to reject their vouchers because they were unable to find a participating school that offered services for their learning or physical disability.

The panels of parents and students included only success cases that were sure to appeal to the emotions of the audience. But these anecdotes can't overcome the studies that show that the experiences these students have had are not the norm in the D.C. program. The panel should have had the disclaimer used by most dieting gimmicks --"results not typical." There were no examples of children with special needs not receiving adequate services or children with behavioral problems, same-sex parents, or low test scores being kicked out of voucher schools on a whim.

the money to [send his two daughters] to Sidwell Friends....It's unfair to tell a poor inner-city kid that he can't choose to go to a suburban school. Preferably, the more choices, the better."

The implication that the D.C. voucher could help most students attend a school like Sidwell Friends – a pricey Quaker school in the D.C. area – is far-fetched, to say the least. The average D.C. school voucher is \$7,500, which is not likely to help a child in poverty afford the \$35,000 the prestigious private school charges. Religious schools are traditionally less expensive than secular private schools, so that's where 80 percent of DC vouchers end up being used.

The Post article also notes that "Paul shrugged off findings by The Washington Post about quality and oversight problems at some of the 52 private schools where D.C. parents have enrolled their children at a cost of \$133 million to the federal government since 2004." The fact that even the administrator of the program said that accountability was a "blind spot" in the program doesn't appear to concern him.

*Vouchers are a serious threat to church-state separation:* The problem with vouchers and church-state separation didn't come up in the panel, but religious schools did. Tom Burnford, the secretary for education of the Catholic Archdiocese of Washington, stated that 824 students are using the D.C. voucher to attend 20 Catholic Schools. A mother on the panel also talked about how she sent her child to a "Christian-based" school with her D.C. voucher.

Yet, when McConnell stated he was perplexed about why anybody would oppose school choice, nobody on the biased panel pointed out the one of the obvious reasons: **taxpayer money paying for religious indoctrination is constitutionally suspect**. The lack of standards in religious schools often leads to bad science lessons including teaching creationism as science and claims that the Loch Ness Monster proves evolution is false.

*Vouchers are a threat to public education:* In June, Paul and Scott proposed an amendment to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act to turn Title I funds into vouchers, diluting Title I funds and hurting the struggling schools and children in poverty it was meant to help. Fortunately this amendment did not pass, but it will likely be proposed again, as Scott hinted at a future hearing on the topic.

Alexander expressed his intent to expand vouchers even further. He actually suggested taking the **entire \$60 billion federal education budget for elementary and secondary education and turning it into a giant voucher, providing \$2,200 for every student in the U.S.**

This destruction of the education system certainly would not help improve public schools, which the vast majority of children (90 percent) in the United States rely on for instruction. Taxpayer money should not be taken away from public schools when they are in such dire need of funding only to be used in schools that promote religious agendas and lack academic accountability, regulation and civil rights protections.

These senators claim they want to improve education of all children, but their propagandistic forum shows otherwise. If they really want to help our children, they'll stop ignoring the plain facts about vouchers.

P.S. Learn more about the problems with vouchers by reading [this Americans United fact sheet](#).

Issues:

[Creationism & Evolution](#), [Other Issues regarding Religion in Schools and Universities](#), [Vouchers](#), [Tuition Tax Credits and Deductions](#), [Outside the Workplace: Discrimination, Exemptions & Religious Practice \(including in the Military, Prisons, Housing, Healthcare, etc.\)](#)

