



Do School Vouchers Increase School Choice and Student Achievement?



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Introduction

Historically, studies on vouchers have found mixed results at best (Erickson, Mills & Wolf, 2021; Jabbar, Fong, Germain, Li, Sanchez, Sun, & Devall, 2019). The purpose of this review is to synthesize the most recent and relevant research on the impact of voucher programs to best inform the work of Raise Your Hand Texas for the upcoming legislative session.

This review addresses the following research questions:

1. Who accesses vouchers and who does not?
2. What is the impact of voucher programs on student outcomes?
3. Do voucher programs exert a competitive effect that results in improved outcomes for surrounding public schools?

Research Methodology

A scan of academic literature was done within the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) research database for the most recent voucher-related studies between 2015-2021. Studies found were then narrowed down to comprehensive, primarily peer-reviewed articles that addressed specific voucher-related arguments such as impact on student outcomes, accessibility, and voucher impact on public schools.

A total of 20 studies were found that applied to this criteria, and eight recent studies published between 2019-2021 were selected for inclusion in this review. The studies were chosen if they met one or more of the following criteria:

1. Examined statewide voucher programs;
2. Investigated longitudinal effects of voucher programs;
3. Systematically reviewed academic voucher studies.

Overview of Recent Research

The following table summarizes the research findings.

	Topic	Findings
Austin & Pardo (2021)	Student and family experience, College and career readiness	Mixed associations. The study does not establish causality, rather identifies associations between types of high school enrollment and student outcomes.
Canbolat (2021)	Competitive effect	Short-term positive impact and long-term negative impact.
Cheng & Peterson (2020)	Voucher accessibility, College and career readiness	No difference across the population; however, heterogeneous treatment shows substantial positive impact for moderately disadvantaged students.
Chingos et al. (2019)	College and career readiness	No difference to slightly positive impact.
Egalite et al. (2020)	Voucher accessibility	Identified four primary barriers to enrollment in voucher programs.
Erickson et al. (2021)	Student academic achievement, College and career readiness	No difference to negative impact.
Jabbar et al. (2019)	Competitive effect	No difference to slightly positive impact.
Webber et al. (2019)	Student and family experience, Student academic achievement	Mixed findings: positive to negative impact.

Findings

Overall, findings from the most recent voucher research suggest voucher programs do not necessarily serve students from disadvantaged or marginalized backgrounds, and that the impact of vouchers on student achievement is either insignificant or mixed.

This review will focus on the following three research areas:

1. The accessibility of vouchers;
2. Voucher impact on student outcomes; and
3. The competitive effect of vouchers on student outcomes in surrounding public schools.

The Accessibility of Vouchers

Voucher and school choice programs claim to provide educational opportunities to disadvantaged students (Jabbar et al., 2019). However, recent studies in this research review show voucher programs do not always reach the populations of students they claim to reach, nor are they accessible and maintainable for the students whom proponents argue are in most need.

Cheng & Peterson (2020) found an overall insignificant impact of voucher programs on students' college enrollment and degree attainment; however, when disaggregating results by student socioeconomic status, race or ethnicity, and mothers' educational level, they found disparate results indicating that, contrary to what voucher proponents claim, voucher programs did not help students who were in most need of support. Cheng & Peterson (2020) separated participants into two categories, which they named moderately disadvantaged and severely disadvantaged. Unlike the moderately disadvantaged students, who experienced disadvantage from one background characteristic (low-income, marginalized race or ethnicity, or first-generation college student), students

experiencing multiple intersections of societal disadvantage, the severely disadvantaged, did not experience increased likelihood of enrolling in or finishing college.

In addition to the fact that vouchers have not supported students with the highest need, researchers have also identified specific barriers that prevent families from participating in vouchers or continuing to participate in voucher programs. Egalite, Fusarelli, Barriga, Antoszyk, and Stallings (2020) found that students and their families faced significant financial, social, and academic barriers when either enrolling or staying enrolled in voucher programs.

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Financial Barriers

While some voucher programs require participating private schools to accept the voucher as full tuition, many do not, resulting in families' financial obligation to co-pay the remaining private school tuition that exceeds the voucher value (Chingos, Kuehn, Monarrez, Wolf, Witte, & Kisida, 2019; Egalite et al., 2020). When Egalite et al. (2020) surveyed and conducted focus groups with voucher applicant parents, they found that many parents could not afford

tuition even with the voucher, and they faced social stigma when asking schools for additional financial help. If parents attempted to take on additional employment to pay the remaining tuition balance, the additional income would sometimes put them over the income eligibility limit, therefore removing their original voucher eligibility. If parents were to accept the vouchers and pay the remaining tuition, they then struggled to keep up with increasing tuition costs as their child aged up, but the voucher amount remained the same. Finally, parents faced unforeseen and hidden expenses from private schools not covered or considered by vouchers, such as uniforms, transportation to school, meals, field trips, and other fees.

Social Network/Capital Barriers

Egalite et al. (2020) also identified barriers that parents faced when simply trying to enroll and apply for the voucher program, suggesting that social capital and networks play a role in families' ability to access voucher programs. Parents reported having difficulty getting information about voucher applications, due to small or inadequate staffing supporting voucher programs. Many times, applications had to be completed online, creating technological barriers for families without access to broadband internet or devices. Applications also had to be completed in English, which then excluded parents who were not fluent in English.

Student Academic Barriers

Finally, Egalite et al. (2020) found that, after overcoming both the financial and social barriers outlined earlier, students themselves faced academic barriers that either prevented them from accessing the vouchers or pushed them out of the program. Even if students were eligible for vouchers, they would still need to be admitted into private schools. Consequently, students

who may not have received adequate academic preparation and had low test scores were not admitted into schools to begin with. For students who were admitted, they faced inadequate academic preparation and support to succeed within their new school.

Voucher Impact on Student Outcomes

Most of the existing voucher literature focuses on voucher impact on student outcomes; consequently, the majority of literature reviewed in this synthesis will focus on a variety of student-level metrics. Researchers measured the impact of vouchers on a variety of student outcomes, which will be grouped into the following subcategories for this review: student and family experience; student academic achievement; and college and career readiness. Across these measurements, impacts were mixed.

Student and Family Experience

The impacts of vouchers on non-academic student and family outcomes range from having no impact to a positive impact. An experimental study of the District of Columbia's Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP) examined the effect of being offered an OSP voucher on chronic absenteeism, parent and student satisfaction, parent and student perceptions of school safety, and parent involvement (Webber, Rui, Garrison-Mogren, Olsen, & Gutmann, 2019). Researchers found that the voucher program had no statistically significant impact on parent satisfaction with their child's school, parent perceptions of school safety, or parent involvement.

Three years after applying to the program, however, students who were offered or used an OSP scholarship were less likely to be chronically absent, were more satisfied with their school, and

had a more positive perception of school safety (Webber et al., 2019). Additionally, researchers found that students in private voucher schools, regardless of whether they received a voucher, were less likely than students in traditional and charter public schools to be suspended in high school, after adjusting for student characteristics. There was a 24% probability that traditional public school students would be suspended and 30% probability for charter school students, compared to 5% of non-voucher private school students and 8% of private voucher students (Austin & Pardo, 2021).

Student Academic Achievement

Studies focusing on the impact of vouchers on student academic achievement used standardized tests as a student achievement measure. Overall, findings were mixed.

Austin & Pardo (2021) examined associations between student achievement and school type, finding that a higher percentage of private voucher and non-voucher students than traditional public school students had 8th grade achievement scores that met or exceeded standards. They found that 72% of traditional public school students met or exceeded 8th grade math standards, compared to 79% of private voucher students and 83% of private non-voucher students. Also, 67% of traditional public school students met or exceeded 8th grade English language arts standards, compared to 76% of private voucher students and 83% of private non-voucher students.

In studies with more robust research methodologies that directly examined the impact, rather than association, of vouchers on student achievement, researchers found that vouchers made either no difference or had negative longitudinal effects on student achievement. Webber et al. (2019) found no

statistically significant impacts of the Washington, D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program on students' reading or mathematics achievement three years after applying to the program. Furthermore, a study examining the impact of the Louisiana Scholarship Program (LSP) found large negative effects of ever using an LSP voucher by the fourth year of the program, with the largest negative effects on math (Erickson et al., 2021). Previous research on the LSP voucher program had found initial large negative test scores decline over time; however, this recent study found the voucher impact was negative in all subject areas and persisted over the full four-year period of the program.

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College and Career Readiness

Researchers placed much emphasis on examining how voucher programs impact student college and career readiness measures, such as enrollment in Advanced Placement (AP) courses, high school graduation, college enrollment, and degree attainment. The overall research findings were, yet again, mixed.

Austin & Pardo (2021) found that, across all types of schools examined, students in traditional public schools were more likely than charter, private voucher, and private non-voucher to take an AP exam. When adjusting for student and high school background characteristics, they also found that private voucher students were just as likely as students in traditional public schools to graduate from high school within four years, but private voucher students were less likely than private non-voucher recipients to earn an honors diploma upon high school graduation.

The impact of vouchers on college enrollment is mixed. Some research suggests that voucher programs have no statistically significant effect on student college enrollment (Erickson et al., 2021; Cheng & Peterson, 2020; Chingos et al., 2019).

Chingos et al. (2019) found positive impacts of the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship (FTC) on student college entrance: Students who began participating in FTC in elementary or middle school were 6% more likely to enroll in college, and 4 to 5% more likely to enroll in four-year, two-year, or full-time colleges. Larger effects on FTC participation were found for students who received vouchers for high school: These students were 10% more likely to enroll in college, and 6 to 9% more likely to attend four-year, two-year, or full-time colleges.

In their analysis of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP), researchers found that MPCP 9th grade students were marginally more likely to enroll in college than their matched peers in the Milwaukee Public schools when controlling for student and parent characteristics, but this result was no longer significant when controlling only for student characteristics (Chingos et al., 2019). The rest of the findings on college enrollment among their grades 3 through 8 sample were similar, where statistically significant impacts

varied, with no consistent findings on whether or not the voucher program had a positive or notable impact on college enrollment.

Finally, research findings on college graduation and degree attainment suggest voucher programs have little to no impact. Cheng & Peterson (2020) found no statistically significant impact of vouchers on college degree attainment, while Chingos et al. (2019) found minimally positive impacts. Students using the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship were 1 percentage point more likely to have attained an Associate's or Bachelor's degree (15% vs. 14%); Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP) 9th grade students completed an average of 0.2 more years of college compared to their matched peers; and students enrolled in MPCP for 3rd through 8th grade had higher rates of degree attainment for four-year colleges than matched peers (11% vs. 8%), though not for two-year colleges (Chingos et al., 2019). It's important to note that, despite these statistically significant findings, overall degree attainment was extremely low.

The Competitive Effect of Vouchers on Student Outcomes in Surrounding Public Schools

The final section of this review addresses voucher proponents' claim that vouchers and school choice induce market competition between schools, thus prompting local public schools to improve. Recent research demonstrates, yet again, mixed findings, and examines this competitive effect on student achievement across three domains: district-level, school-level, and student-level.

In a systematic review of the competitive effects of private school choice on student achievement, Jabbar et al. (2019) found small positive

effects. At the district level, the effect of school competition on district student achievement was null when results of all reviewed studies had been aggregated. At the school level, Jabbar et al. (2019) found a small, positive influence of school competition on academic performance, but it was barely significant. Finally, at the student level, researchers found a significant and slightly positive impact of school choice programs on student achievement. When concluding the review, however, Jabbar et al. (2019) emphasize that the positive effects found were a net result of all the voucher-related studies. When examined more closely, prior studies have found more positive effects, while more recent voucher studies have found null or negative effects.

Finally, Canbolat (2021) found an interesting, yet concerning, finding when examining the long-term impact of the Indiana Choice Scholarship Program (ICSP) on public school achievement. The implementation of ICSP initially induced a positive effect in early years, but the positive competitive effect was higher for public schools with a higher concentration of private schools nearby, and weaker for those with fewer private schools in the area. However, despite the initial positive impact, in the long-term, proficiency rates in public schools facing higher competition fell and never increased again. Canbolat (2021) posits that the long-term negative impact of ICSP was driven by the departure of relatively high-achieving students from the local public schools, suggesting that the voucher program resulted in academic sorting between public and private schools.

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