



Friedman Foundation

*For Educational
Choice*

Friday Freakout Mailbag: Tennessee Edition

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Lawmakers in Tennessee are currently considering legislation to create a modest school voucher program. Students from low-income families assigned to the “lowest-performing” district schools who had been enrolled in that school or were entering a Tennessee school for the first time would be eligible for scholarships worth up to the amount of per-pupil spending at their assigned district school. The program would make 5,000 scholarships available in the first year, and that amount would grow to 20,000 in the fourth year.

The legislation is far from Milton Friedman’s ideal, but holds great promise for low-income students who lack access to learning options outside their assigned districts.

However, several citizens expressed concerns about the proposal in letters to the editor of *The Tennessean* last week. Fortunately, all of their stated concerns have been addressed at considerable length in previous Friday Freakouts, Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice studies, and elsewhere. I have briefly addressed the key concerns and provided links to lengthier discussions of the relevant topics below. Enjoy!

School Choice: The Impact on Participating Students

In our first letter today, Jon Frere of Nashville addresses the most important question: the impact of school choice on children:

Let's be honest here. There is very little research indicating that vouchers have a positive impact on student achievement.

Actually, if we're being honest, there's a considerable amount of research indicating that school choice has a positive impact on student achievement. Moreover, research indicates that the increased competition resulting from school choice policies have a positive impact on the students who remain in their assigned district schools.

In his last *Win-Win Solution* report, a synthesis of existing research on school choice programs, Dr. Greg Forster identified 12 gold-standard studies on school choice, 11 of which found a statistically significant positive impact for some or all categories of participating students, including such measures as performance on standardized tests, high school graduation, and college matriculation. One study found no visible impact.

Academic Outcomes of Choice Participants

Location	Author	Year	Positive Effect (All Students)	Positive Effect (Some Students)	No Visible Effect	Negative Effect
New York	Chingos & Peterson	2012		X		
New York	Jin et. al.	2010		X		
D.C.	Wold et. al.	2010	X			
Charlotte	Cowen	2008	X			
New York	Krueger & Zhu	2004			X	
New York	Barnard et. al.	2003		X		
New York	Howell & Peterson	2002		X		
D.C.	Howell & Peterson	2002	X			

Location	Author	Year	Positive Effect (All Students)	Positive Effect (Some Students)	No Visible Effect	Negative Effect
Dayton	Howell & Peterson	2002		X		
Charlotte	Greene	2001	X			
Milwaukee	Greene et. al.	1998	X			
Milwaukee	Rouse	1998	X			

Note: This table shows all empirical studies using random-assignment methods.

Source: *A Win-Win Solution: The Empirical Evidence on School Choice*

Since that report was released, one random-assignment study of the first year of Louisiana’s school voucher program found a negative impact on participating students’ test scores. However, there is good reason to believe that the negative results stemmed from poor program design. Unlike Milton Friedman’s proposed voucher design, Louisiana’s voucher program created price ceilings, prohibited schools from using their own admissions standards, and mandated the use of the state test. As a result of their concerns over regulations, two-thirds of private schools chose not to participate in the voucher program, and those that did were much more likely to have been facing significantly declining enrollment. In short, it may well be that regulations intended to guarantee quality had the opposite effect.

In any case, the overwhelming majority of gold-standard studies make clear that a well-designed school choice program is likely to improve participating student outcomes.

School Choice: The Impact on District School Students

The research shows participating students benefit, but what about nonparticipating students? If they are left in district schools that have “fewer resources,” won’t they be worse off? Mr. Frere continues:

There is no question that vouchers will take money from public schools, generally the ones that need it the most.

Not only that, but school choice might mean that the parents who are most concerned with education take their kids elsewhere. That's the central concern Harry Marsh of Gallatin raises in his letter to the editor:

Vouchers allow concerned parents to move their children away from troubled schools, a trend that denies the troubled school the support of those concerned parents it most needs.

The effort to improve a school builds a stronger community and stronger more active citizens. Vouchers are a cop out.

So, does school choice benefit the few at the expense of the many?

Actually, the research literature shows that school choice benefits district school students as well. As discussed at greater length in the last *Win-Win Solution* report, 22 of 23 studies have found that increased competition among schools produces a modest but statistically significant *positive* impact on district school student performance. One found no visible impact, and none found any harm.

Academic Outcomes of Public Schools

Location	Author	Year	Positive Effect	No Visible Effect	Negative Effect
Florida	Chakrabarti	2013	X		
Florida	Winters & Greene	2011	X		
Ohio	Carr	2011	X		

Location	Author	Year	Positive Effect	No Visible Effect	Negative Effect
Florida	Figlio & Hart	2011	X		
Milwaukee	Greene & Marsh	2009	X		
Ohio	Forster	2008	X		
Florida	Forster	2008	X		
Milwaukee	Chakrabarti	2008	X		
Florida	Chakrabarti	2008	X		
Milwaukee	Chakrabarti	2007	X		
Florida	Rouse et. al.	2007	X		
Milwaukee	Carnoy et. al.	2007	X		
D.C.	Greene & Winters	2006		X	
Florida	Figlio & Rouse	2006	X		
Florida	West & Peterson	2005	X		
Florida	Greene & Winters	2004	X		
Florida	Chakrabarti	2004	X		

Location	Author	Year	Positive Effect	No Visible Effect	Negative Effect
Milwaukee	Greene & Forster	2002	X		
San Antonio	Greene & Forster	2002	X		
Maine	Hammons	2002	X		
Vermont	Hammons	2002	X		
Milwaukee	Hoxby	2001	X		
Florida	Greene	2001	X		

Note: This table shows all empirical studies using random-assignment methods.

Source: *A Win-Win Solution: The Empirical Evidence on School Choice*

As I explained in a [previous Friday Freakout](#), school choice policies force district schools to be more responsive to the needs of students and their families:

“District schools often operate as monopolies, particularly those serving low-income populations that have no other financially viable options. And sadly, a monopoly has little incentive to be responsive to the needs of its captive audience. Thankfully, the evidence suggests that when those families are empowered to “vote with their feet,” the district schools become more responsive to their needs, and student performance improves.

School Choice and Accountability

The last two letters in today’s mailbag concern accountability. Feroza Freeland of Memphis writes:

By voting to create a school voucher program in Tennessee, they have effectively abandoned our public schools and our most vulnerable students and families.

This is a blatant divestment from our public schools, as taxpayer dollars will be sent to private schools with no public accountability.

In a similar vein, Andrew Seidel of the Freedom from Religion Foundation writes:

Voucher supporters are salivating over the chance to pillage public schools in the name of choice for this very reason: They can get in, get the public money and then not actually provide an education. There is no accountability.

The Tennessee legislature wants to give millions to private schools that are simply not accountable to students or taxpayers.

These comments are packed with faulty assumptions that have been addressed elsewhere. The purpose of state education policy should be to educate individual children not merely to prop up existing institutions.

Research shows that school choice policies do not drain district schools' funding. School choice policies are intended to expand educational opportunities, especially for the most vulnerable students, not undermine district schools. And as noted above, school choice makes both choice students and district-school students better off.

But getting to the main issue: is it true the district schools are more accountable than private schools?

Those who are tempted to answer in the affirmative are confusing “accountability” with “government rules and regulations,” but they are not the same. As it happens, school choice programs often entail a number of government regulations, but that’s not what makes them so accountable. States impose a great deal more regulation on the district schools and yet, as the gold-standard research described above makes clear, voucher students attending less-regulated private schools outperform their peers. Why?

Dictionary.com defines “accountable” as being “subject to the obligation to report, explain, or justify something; responsible; answerable.” The most desirable form of accountability would be making schools accountable directly to parents. However, district schools are only indirectly accountable to parents at best. In addition to state and federal bureaucrats, district schools generally answer to elected school boards, that, in turn, are answerable to voters, particularly the

voting blocs that get them elected. And even where the majority of parents prevail over any special interests in the school board elections, some parents inevitably find themselves in the minority.

By contrast, private schools are directly accountable to parents, who have the prerogative to take their children—and their money—and leave if the school isn't meeting their needs. *That* is real accountability.

Unfortunately, only families wealthy enough to move districts or afford private school tuition can express their dissatisfaction by “voting with their feet,” leaving behind many more families who only wish they could do the same. And since

Mr. Freeland and Mr. Seidel are right to want accountability in our schools, but they're going about it the wrong way. If we want schools to be more accountable, the solution is not imposing government regulations on private schools, but rather making district schools more directly accountable to parents. The way to do that is to empower parents with the ability to leave a school that isn't working for their child, and having the money follow that child out the door.

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