

The Label You Give School Choice Programs Doesn't Change the Facts

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May 13, 2016

Are school vouchers really a form of “welfare?”

Recently, Mike McCabe of the Wisconsin Democracy Campaign argued in the Beloit Daily News that “truth in labeling” requires labeling the Wisconsin Parental Choice Program the “nation’s first scholastic welfare program” because the taxpayers are “picking up the tab.”

Of course, following this logic, the Parental Choice Program can’t be the first “scholastic welfare program” because it was long predated by our taxpayer-funded district school system. Taxpayers subsidize attendance in district schools in the same way they subsidize students in the school voucher program.

Are we all welfare recipients now?

For that matter, we can see that “voucherization” of other government welfare programs has generally been a positive force. Although not without their flaws and unintended consequences, welfare programs that provide recipients access to greater choices in the market are superior to the government-provision programs that they replaced.

For example, housing vouchers allow people to decide where they live rather than forcing them into notoriously run-down and dangerous “projects.” Food vouchers allow recipients to shop in the same grocery stores as everyone else rather than waiting in line for barely edible “government cheese.” And unlike our shamefully broken VA system, where veterans frequently suffer and die on wait lists to get care from government-run hospitals, Medicaid vouchers allow recipients to choose where to receive their healthcare.

Though imperfect, these programs introduce market forces into places where they were previously absent, and they are generally seen as an improvement.

Likewise, school choice programs give parents more control over where to send their children based on their particular needs. It’s no wonder that so many parents are embracing the ability to choose schools that have been shown to be safer and higher performing.

That’s right. Contrary to McCabe’s claim that voucher students are “doing somewhat worse” than their district school peers in Wisconsin and elsewhere, the near-consensus of high-quality

research finds that school choice programs improve student outcomes, including improving performance on standardized tests, increasing rates of high school graduation and college matriculation and even reducing rates of criminality.

A five-year longitudinal study of Milwaukee's school voucher program found that voucher students performed as well or better on standardized tests than students from similar backgrounds attending district schools. More important, Milwaukee voucher students enrolled and persisted in four-year colleges at a rate 4 to 7 percentage points higher than similar district school students. And earlier this year, researchers found students who exercised choice through the voucher program for a sustained period of time—especially young males—were about 42% less likely to be convicted of any crime than their district school peers.

Moreover—again contrary to McCabe's assertion—the voucher program produces these results at a lower cost per pupil than district school students.

For example, the state provides Beloit more than \$9,300 per district school student, according to the most recent figures from the Department of Public Instruction. Taking local revenue into account, the average expenditure per student in Beloit is \$12,880. This exceeds the cost of a voucher by more than \$5,000 per student.

Beloit is not unique. Statewide, vouchers cost \$7,200 per pupil for K–8 and \$7,856 for high school, while the average per-pupil expenditure at Wisconsin district schools is \$12,705. Once local, state and federal revenue is taken into account, there is not a single district in the state where vouchers cost more per pupil than district school students. Indeed, a recent Friedman Foundation study determined that the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program saved taxpayers more than \$238 million from its inception through the 2010–11 academic year.

Simply put, Wisconsin taxpayers save money when students accept a voucher rather than attend their assigned district school. In fact, the funds saved could be reinvested into the state's public schools, but that same Friedman Foundation study found the state of Wisconsin actually does not track where those savings go.

District school students benefit from choice as well. When students have the option to leave, district schools are more responsive to their needs.

Five studies of the competitive effects of Milwaukee's voucher program found that the increased choice and competition had positive effects on district school performance. A 2009 study by Dr. Jay Greene and Ryan Marsh of the University of Arkansas concluded, "It appears that Milwaukee public schools are more attentive to the academic needs of students when those students have more opportunities to leave those schools."

As shown in a recent literature review by Dr. Patrick Wolf and Dr. Anna Egalite, these findings are in line with the results of numerous studies on the effect of school choice programs on district-school student performance:

Thirty of the 42 evaluations of the effects of school-choice competition on the performance of affected public schools report that the test scores of all or some public school students increase when schools are faced with competition. Improvement in the performance of district

schools appear to be especially large when competition spikes but otherwise, is quite modest in scale.

School choice is about expanding opportunities for our children to receive the best education that they can. We should not let half-truths and silly rhetoric destroy a program that helps the kids who need and want it most.

Call it a basic human right. Call it welfare. Call it what you like—school choice works.

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