

Jay P. Greene's Blog

Penny Wise, Pound Foolish in Louisiana

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Supporters of Louisiana's school voucher program are attacking Gov. John Bel Edwards for breaking his promise not to take vouchers away from students who are already using them to attend the school of their choice.

Edwards has proposed slashing \$6 million from voucher funding, but there's a disagreement about whether that means children currently receiving vouchers might be at risk from being booted from the program next fall.

Edwards has said the proposed funding cut doesn't have to result in children leaving the program. Yet Louisiana Education Superintendent John White hasn't ruled out that possibility in public statements and recent interviews.

I'm all for cutting government spending generally, but cutting the voucher program doesn't make financial sense. Any sound financial analysis will evaluate both the costs and the savings associated with a change in policy. As a new white paper by Prof. Julie Trivitt and doctoral student Corey DeAngelis of the University of Arkansas details, Louisiana's voucher program saves money so eliminating or cutting it would be costly:

Trivitt and DeAngelis said Louisiana lawmakers have proposed eliminating the school voucher program as a way of saving money. By using Louisiana's education funding formulas, they determined the overall effect of removing the program will be to increase state education expenditures.

"It is true that the state would avoid \$41.6 million of spending if the voucher program is eliminated," they said. "However, each current voucher student who returns to a public school increases the local district's necessary education expenditures without increasing the local tax revenue for schools, obligating the state to provide increased funding to the district."

Additional funding would be needed unless at least 13.5 percent of current voucher users stay in private schools and pay tuition out of pocket or through other private means. Trivitt and DeAngelis said this is unlikely because most of the students using the vouchers come from low-income families.

As I've detailed here previously, Louisiana's voucher program is far from perfect. Two random-assignment studies show that it reduced the test scores of participating students in the first two years of the program, although there was some improvement in the second year and there will likely be further improvements as students adjust to changing schools and schools align their

curriculum with the state test (though I'm not persuaded that the latter is necessarily a good thing — it would be better for the voucher program to allow schools to administer whatever nationally norm-referenced assessment works best with their preferred curriculum, but I digress). Moreover, research also shows that the voucher program improved racial integration and the increased competition appeared to improve the performance of district school students.

We need more time to research the program to see what long-term effects it produces. In the meantime, legislators might want to consider reducing or eliminating obstacles to private school participation (such as the open admissions requirement, the ban on “topping off” tuition, and the mandatory state test), but cutting or eliminating it would be a costly mistake.

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