

# NATIONAL REVIEW

## School-Voucher Rules Trip Up Student Success in Louisiana

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All parents want their children to have the chance at a bright future. Just ask Mitzi Dillon of Louisiana. “My kids always come home talking about something fun, something new they learned, something positive,” Dillon said in a recent interview.

Dillon’s two sons attend a private school, thanks to the Louisiana Scholarship Program (LSP), which offers school vouchers to low-income families. These vouchers were meant to help disadvantaged students find a quality education.

Yet a new study from the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) finds that participating students are performing worse than their peers in district public schools. In math, reading, science, and social studies, students using vouchers are falling behind.

The NBER study used “random assignment,” considered the most rigorous research method available, to show that students choosing to attend a private school using a scholarship have lower achievement levels compared with their peers in traditional schools. Yet it is the first random-assignment study to do so. More than a dozen other studies from around the country using the same method have found positive impacts on student achievement, lasting even into college in some places.

Several factors probably contributed to the subpar performance of students in the LSP, but we should note how the policies governing the program are uniquely strict. For years, policymakers in Washington, D.C., and Louisiana have besieged the LSP with a litany of rules and regulations that threaten the scholarships’ very existence.

The Obama administration’s Department of Justice tried to force participating private schools to abide by federal desegregation orders dating back some 40 years. The department filed these charges despite research demonstrating that the program has positive effects on racial integration. Judge Edith Jones of the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals recently ruled in favor of the school vouchers and called the Department of Justice’s case “disingenuous.”

And before the administration’s efforts to litigate the option out of existence, Louisiana policymakers had already mired the program in regulations.

Louisiana students using a school voucher to attend a private school must annually take the same state test that district school students use every year. The state has the authority to conduct

school visits — to private schools — during testing periods. Schools risk losing access to the Louisiana Scholarship Program if results on state tests “don’t meet expectations,” according to a letter from John White, Louisiana’s state superintendent of education. And, he adds, schools “are not permitted to accept new Scholarship students until their results align with program requirements.”

Rules such as these have a direct relationship to students’ access to quality schools. A survey of Louisiana private-school leaders who chose not to enroll students using vouchers revealed that “fear of future regulations” was their No. 1 reason for not participating. Forty-five percent of private schools in the survey that enroll voucher students reported that the amount of administrative work associated with the voucher program was a major concern.

Consequently, just 31 out of 84 private schools in the Archdiocese of New Orleans enroll voucher students. Having few schools to choose from means that students have limited options — and survey evidence traces the cause back to the regulations imposed on private schools.

Moreover, the recent evaluation finding poor performance among scholarship students suggests as much:

*Survey data show that LSP-eligible private schools experience rapid enrollment declines prior to entering the program, indicating that the LSP may attract private schools struggling to maintain enrollment. These results suggest caution in the design of voucher systems aimed at expanding school choice for disadvantaged students.” (emphasis added)*

In other words, the schools that chose to enroll in the LSP — and incur the litany of state regulations in the process — were those schools that were already struggling, as evidenced by declining enrollment before program entry.

In total, when the LSP was established, the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) promulgated 16 regulations in nine categories, more than half of which involved student eligibility, admissions, enrollment, and tuition. The department also maintains an internal review system to determine school eligibility, which could include school audits and site visits. Participating schools must include in their annual notice of intent to enroll voucher students any information requested by the department.”

Researchers and advocates for students predicted such rules would be detrimental to parents’ ability to find a quality education for their children. In 2014, a team of researchers wrote, in an article at NATIONAL REVIEW ONLINE: “True accountability comes not from top-down regulations but from parents financially empowered to exit schools that fail to meet their child’s needs.” And writing at *National Affairs*, Jason Bedrick and Lindsey Burke noted that top-down regulations on school-choice options “beyond basic health and safety regulations . . . are generally unnecessary at best and harmful at worst.”

As policymakers around the country consider school vouchers and scholarships and education savings accounts, Louisiana serves as a warning on the negative impact that regulations have on families’ freedom to choose where and how their children learn.