



Louisiana voucher results fuel regulation debate

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Louisiana's voucher program is unique. It has more, and more comprehensive, regulations than most private school choice programs. It has fewer schools participating. And it's the first program of its kind to show such strong, negative academic results.

During a Friday forum on school vouchers and regulation hosted by the libertarian Cato Institute, Patrick Wolf, a University of Arkansas researcher who helped author a series of recent studies on private school choice in Louisiana, said there's not yet enough evidence to tell whether the Louisiana Scholarship Program's unique design helps explain the unprecedented finding that it harmed student achievement in its first two years.

Those results renewed a major philosophical debate in school choice circles. Does regulation of private schools that accept vouchers hamstring their performance and keep the best schools from participating? Or can it spur private schools to serve disadvantaged students, and to get substantially better over time?

A number of factors cloud the findings in Louisiana. Its voucher program is fairly new, first expanded statewide during the 2012-13 school year. Some students might have seen their academic performance drop as they adjusted to new schools. Some schools might have needed more time to adjust their curriculum and instruction to the state standardized tests, which voucher students are required to take. There are signs of improvement in Louisiana public schools, which served as a comparison for voucher schools.

But Wolf said those factors together explain less than half of the negative results. Some of the participating private schools may be low-quality, or unequipped to educate low-income students who use vouchers.

The bad results in year one looked a bit better in year two, and John White, Louisiana's state schools superintendent, has told lawmakers that as the lowest-performing schools face sanctions

and others get better at serving disadvantaged students, results will keep improving. He has also issued a challenge to those who criticize his state's approach to regulating school vouchers: Come up with a model for ensuring private schools can serve all students well, at scale.

During Friday's event, Cato's Jason Bedrick said the free market could be such a model, if it were given a chance to work in education. Right now, he said, public schools get more funding per student and enjoy other structural advantages over private schools that accept vouchers.

If funding were equitable and regulations curtailed, the education system could be transformed by the same forces that have made cars cheaper and safer or computers smaller and faster. "Over time, like in other markets, those better schools are going to attract more students. There's going to be room for them to grow," Bedrick said.

Mike Petrilli of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute said there still needs to be a way to thwart the hypothetical "Trump High School" — an operation that lures students with snappy marketing, takes their scholarship money, and then fails to educate them.

Some oversight is needed to stop "con artists," he said. The question is not whether schools of choice should be regulated, but which regulations are effective.

Surveys by both Fordham and the American Enterprise Institute suggested some aspects of Louisiana's regulatory scheme, like requiring voucher students to take state tests, did not keep a majority of schools from participating. Others, like requiring schools to accept voucher students regardless of their admissions policies, seemed to drive many of them away. School leaders said they worried about losing their institutions' identities.

Questions about admissions standards can be thorny too, though. Doug Harris, who leads the Tulane University Education Research Alliance that's examining education reforms in New Orleans and beyond, said some Louisiana private schools had histories as segregation academies, and were neither willing nor equipped to accept low-income voucher students, more than 80 percent of whom are black.

"This is not a regulation question," he said of the low private-school participation in Louisiana's program. "This is about who they want to serve."

Petrilli and Harris, then, highlighted two areas where regulation might be needed in even the lightest-touch school choice environment: Stopping fraud and preventing discrimination.

Harris also raised a deeper question. Can a market for schools work like markets for other goods and services, or is education fundamentally different? The answer to that question has not yet been tested in the real world, though some would like to try.

As for the debate over Louisiana vouchers, Wolf, the University of Arkansas researcher, said his team now has data in hand for the program's third year, and plans to release a new study in the

coming months. “I really think that the year three results are going to go a long way toward resolving this debate” over the program’s results, he said.