



Watching the Education Policy Watchmen

Jason Bedrick

February 25, 2016

Earlier this week, respected researchers from two universities released a four-part study on the effects of Louisiana's school voucher program. Yet even though the researchers provided a layman's summary of their findings, media coverage of their study varied significantly.

What makes for better or worse coverage of new research? Well, first the reporter needs to tell us what the study found and why it's important. She should also provide context for those findings. Are they consistent with or divergent from the findings of previous research? Particularly in the latter case, good reporting will also explore the underlying causes of the findings, especially as the study's authors understand them. And since reporters rarely have a background in policy research, they should consult with multiple experts who have different views about how to interpret the study's findings or what their implications are. This being the 21st century, online reporting should contain a direct link to the study so that readers can easily access it to learn more. Finally, because the "tl;dr" crowd often sees only the headline, the headline should be accurate. (Note: editors usually choose the headline, not the reporters.)

Based on those criteria, I came up with the following, quick-and-dirty rating system to determine the quality of reporting on new research. As with other rating systems, results will vary depending on the weight given each criterion. But like speed limits, although the precise levels of points assigned are ultimately arbitrary (why not 67.5 miles per hour?), I nevertheless believe they reasonably reflect the relative importance of each criterion.

- Reporting on findings (25 points): Accurately describing all the study's major findings, positive and negative.
- Reporting on previous research (25 points): Accurately describing the previous research to provide proper context for understanding these findings.

- Reporting on causes of results (20 points): Accurately describing the authors' understanding of what caused the results they found.
- Consulting experts (15 points): Quoting at least two different education policy experts with differing views.
- Linked to study (10 points): Linking to study so readers can easily access it.
- Headline (5 points): Using a headline that accurately captures the study's main finding or importance.

If you like my rating system: great! You are clearly a wise and discriminating reader, and probably quite good looking too. If not, you're encouraged to come up with your own weights and/or criteria in the comments section. While you work on that, the rest of us will get to the grading.

What's needed to earn full credit on the last three criteria is obvious, but here's what I'm looking for on the first three:

- The study had four main findings: the vouchers had a negative impact on students' performance on tests (particularly math) although there was some improvement in the second year of the program; there's suggestive evidence that the competitive pressure from the voucher program improved the performance of public schools; the voucher program reduced racial segregation; and there was no difference between voucher and non-voucher students on several measures of non-cognitive skills. Since the last one was a null finding, I won't deduct points for its omission.
- Previous research has overwhelmingly found small but statistically significant positive effects on both voucher student performance and on the performance of students remaining at their district schools. Some studies have found no discernible difference, but no voucher study found any harm until a study on the first year of Louisiana's voucher program was released last month.
- The study's authors provide four possible causes for the negative impact on test scores: 1) private schools' curricula were not aligned to the state test, so they are still undergoing a period of adjustment; 2) private schools were not prepared to take in so many students switching from low-performing district schools who were already far behind; 3) the success of recent reforms of the public schools made private schools look relatively worse; 4) due to the high level of regulations, most private schools opted not to participate in the program, leaving only those lower-performing schools that were the most desperate for funding.

For comparison, see the tone and substance of the two universities press releases:

- University of Arkansas: "[Reports Show Positive, Negative Effects of Louisiana School Vouchers](#)"
- Tulane University: "[Studies weigh impact of Louisiana's voucher program](#)"

[The Times-Picayune of Greater New Orleans \(Danielle Dreilinger\)](#): 70 / 100 points, Grade C-

- Reporting on findings (15/25): Covers all major findings, but with some errors. For example, the article says “the private schools that took vouchers became more racially segregated.” Actually, that’s true for only slightly more than half of the private school transfers. Moreover, the article does not make it clear that there was improvement in the second year, stating only “the scholarship students hadn’t recovered even to where they began in mathematics.”
- Reporting on previous research (15/25): The article did note that “most studies have found mildly positive results for small voucher programs” but also claimed that “Louisiana’s program is much larger.” That is not accurate. Louisiana has about 7,000 voucher students today, but during the study there were fewer than 1,200. Several previous studies examined the impact on students participating in comparable or larger voucher programs.
- Reporting on causes of results (10/20): The article cites the authors’ explanations for the causes of their findings, but with some errors. For example, the article says, “The more prestigious and expensive private schools generally do not take vouchers.” Actually, the study says nothing about the relative tuition at participating or non-participating schools. Moreover, the article omits the possibility raised in the study that “extensive regulations placed on the program by the state” drove away private schools.
- Consulting experts (15/15): Numerous experts cited.
- Linked to study (10/10): Check.
- Headline (5/5): Accurate.

U.S. News & World Report (Lauren Camera): 33 / 100 points, Grade F-

- Reporting on findings (15/25): The article noted two of the three significant findings (no mention was made of segregation), but it did not clearly explain that the test scores improved in the second year, stating only: “During their second year in private school, the downward trend continued in math, but rebounded some in reading.” That’s not quite accurate. The trend was upward in both math and reading, albeit still negative relative to the control group (and not statistically significant for reading).
- Reporting on previous research (10/25): Besides the other study on Louisiana’s voucher program, the article made no mention of the prior research on the impact of school vouchers on participants. The article did note that “existing research generally has found modestly positive or insignificant competitive effects of school voucher programs on student achievement in public schools,” though it was quick to note that opponents “counter that they harm public education by diverting funds from public to private schools.” In other words, the article countered *evidence of a positive impact* with a *mere assertion of a negative impact*. In reality, it is the evidence that contradicts the assertion.
- Reporting on causes of results (0/20): There was no discussion at all concerning the causes of the negative impact on voucher students’ test scores.
- Consulting experts (0/15): No outside experts cited.

- Linked to study (8/10): Linked to researcher’s website, but not the study itself.
- Headline (0/5): The headline “Evidence Mounts Against Louisiana Voucher Program” is editorializing masquerading as reporting. The studies showed a positive impact on racial integration and public school performance, and although still negative, the results improved in year two. This is hardly evidence “mounting against” the program, though certainly school choice supporters should be troubled by the results.

The Associated Press (Kevin McGill): 30 / 100 points, Grade F-

- Reporting on findings (25/25): The article accurately discussed the three main findings, including the improved performance in the second year.
- Reporting on previous research (0/25): The article made no mention of the prior research on the impact of school vouchers on participants or public schools.
- Reporting on causes of results (0/20): There was no discussion at all concerning the causes of the negative impact on voucher students’ test scores.
- Consulting experts (0/15): No outside experts cited.
- Linked to study (0/10): No links to the original study. This may not be totally fair to the AP, which does not appear to include links in its articles. It is a wire service after all. But again, this being the 21st century, there’s really no excuse. No points for you!
- Headline (5/5): The media outlets that run AP stories generally pick their own headlines, so it’s not totally fair to grade them on this, but a quick survey of headlines found on Google shows the media outlets tended to summarize what was written in the first paragraph, which was accurate.

As you can see from the above, several major media outlets covering the study left much to be desired. Without the proper context, readers will have no idea that the Louisiana voucher program had both positive and negative effects, no idea that the negative effect were an anomaly among the large number of voucher studies, and no idea what might have caused that anomaly. In other words, when journalists fail to provide the proper context, their readers come away misinformed.

And thanks to the Gell-Mann Amnesia effect, most of us don’t even realize it.

Jason Bedrick is a policy analyst with the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom.