



Politico Distorts Evidence on School Choice

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10/08/2013

Yesterday, Politico ran a story on school choice programs claiming that American taxpayers “will soon be spending \$1 billion a year to help families pay private school tuition — and there’s little evidence that the investment yields academic gains.” In fact, there’s quite a bit of evidence both that school choice works and that it saves money.

On the question of whether school choice results in superior learning, Politico makes the wrong comparisons. For example:

In Milwaukee, just 13 percent of voucher students scored proficient in math and 11 percent made the bar in reading this spring. That’s worse on both counts than students in the city’s public schools. In Cleveland, voucher students in most grades performed worse than their peers in public schools in math, though they did better in reading.

It is not accurate to compare disadvantaged students participating in a school choice program to the general population, which includes children from wealthy families, just as it would be inaccurate to compare all private school students against all public school students (which would show a clear advantage to the former over the latter). That’s comparing apples and orangoutangs. The most accurate comparison is a randomized controlled trial (RCT), the gold standard of social science. As James Pethokoukis and Michael McShane pointed out over at the AEIdeas blog, Politico fails to mention that 11 of 12 RCTs found that choice improves student outcomes. The last study found no statistically significant difference while no study found any harm.

Many of the gains were small, though statistically significant, and often the gains were only for certain subgroups (generally low-income blacks) who had the least schooling options at the outset. However, based on the available evidence, even the most pessimistic reading of the data must conclude that school choice does no harm, on average. Even then, in addition to more satisfied parents, school choice is a great boon to taxpayers as it produces similar (or better) results at a much lower cost.

The “\$1 billion” that Politico cites has no context. The United States spends more than \$600 billion per year on public education at the state, federal, and local levels. Moreover, Politico focuses only on the cost of school choice, not the savings. Six empirical studies on the fiscal impact of school choice found that such programs save money for taxpayers. For example, for

every \$1 in lost revenue resulting from its scholarship tax credit, Florida saves \$1.44 in expenditures. The Washington D.C. and Milwaukee school voucher programs each spend about half as much on voucher students as public school students. The Commonwealth Foundation estimated that Pennsylvania saves \$512 million a year as a result of its STC program, while reducing state tax revenues by only about \$40 million.

Finally, Politico claims that school choice is unpopular, citing a Gallup poll finding that 70% of the public opposes vouchers. The piece fails to mention that the poll was cosponsored by Phi Delta Kappa, which is ideologically opposed to school choice, and that the wording of the question reflects that. Politico also ignored the Harvard University/Education Next poll, which uses multiple question wordings to get a more accurate picture of what the public believes. Harvard found:

*54% of parents favor giving *all* families a “wider choice” to “enroll their children in private schools instead, with government helping to pay the tuition” compared with 21% opposed.

*46% of parents favor giving *low-income* families a “wider choice” to “enroll their children in private schools instead, with government helping to pay the tuition” compared with 21% opposed.

*When not given a neutral option, 50% of parents favor giving *low-income* families a “wider choice” to “enroll their children in private schools instead, with government helping to pay the tuition” compared with 50% opposed.

*When the question omits the words “a wider choice” and only asks about using “government funds to pay the tuition of low-income students who choose to attend private schools,” 44% of parents are in favor with 32% opposed.

Note that while support fluctuates depending on the wording, no matter how Harvard asked the question there was still more support among parents for school choice than opposition.

Moreover, when asking about scholarship tax credits instead of vouchers, the support was even higher:

*57% of parents supported “a tax credit for individual and corporate donations that pay for scholarships to help low-income parents send their children to private schools” compared with 16% opposed.

*When not given a neutral option, 73% of parents supported “a tax credit for individual and corporate donations that pay for scholarships to help low-income parents send their children to private schools” compared with 27% opposed.

In summary, school choice programs raise student achievement, save money, and are supported by the public. But you wouldn't know that if you only read Politico.