

Surprise: In Indiana, Parental Choice Increases Parental Satisfaction

By Jason Bedrick
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Sometimes a study's findings are so obvious that it's almost embarrassing to report them. Drivers [react slower](#) when distracted, prolonged sitting [increases fat](#), and yes, parents prefer choosing their children's school to having the government choose for them. But when even the president of the United States is [spreading misinformation](#) about the research on school choice, a high-quality study confirming what we already know (or should know) is a healthy contribution to the public discourse.

On Tuesday, the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice released the results of the first-ever [survey](#) of parents of students participating in Indiana's [school voucher](#) and [scholarship tax credit](#) (STC) programs. Indiana's voucher program is the fastest growing in the nation, up from approximately 4,000 students two years ago to nearly 20,000 students in the 2013–14 academic year. Over the same period, the STC program grew from nearly 1,000 to nearly 3,000 students.

Participants in Indiana's voucher program are overwhelmingly low-income: 81 percent qualified for the federal free- and reduced-price-lunch program (meaning their incomes were under \$43,568 for a family of four in 2013). And in a state that's more than 86 percent white, nearly half of participants are minorities. Additionally, 11 percent of participating students have special needs.

The Friedman survey found that over 99 percent of respondents reported being satisfied with their chosen school and 78 percent selected the school for its "better academics." By contrast, 57 percent of parents were dissatisfied with their child's previous public school and 62 percent left because of "academic quality."

The survey makes it even clearer that public schools are failing to meet the needs of a certain segment of the student population and that the market does a better job meeting those needs.

The findings are in line with a growing body of surveys of school-choice-program participants. Parents of students participating in school choice programs have reported tremendously high levels of satisfaction with their chosen schools, including nearly 97 percent in [New Hampshire](#) and nearly 99 percent in [Georgia](#) in 2013. Likewise, a [2010 survey](#) commissioned by the Florida Department of Education showed 95 percent of families receiving scholarships through Florida's STC program rated their school of choice "excellent" (75 percent) or "good" (20 percent). Last year, fully 100 percent of families [surveyed](#) about their participation in Arizona's education savings account program reported being satisfied.

The Indiana survey also found that a plurality (43 percent) of public and charter schools supported the parents' decision to switch schools. This suggests that school-choice programs can provide relief to public schools when they are unable to meet a given child's needs.

Moreover, Indiana's school-choice programs benefit students and satisfy parents while saving money for taxpayers. When the recipient qualifies for the free and reduced-price lunch program, vouchers are worth up to 90 percent of what the state would have spent on a recipient to attend a public school. Students from families earning up to 150 percent of that threshold can receive vouchers worth up to 50 percent of the state's per-pupil spending. According to the Indiana Department of Education, the school voucher program [saved nearly \\$5 million last year](#).

While there has been no formal study of the fiscal impact of the state's STC program, which uses tax credits to pay for scholarships, it is even more likely to produce savings since the average scholarship size is even smaller and the tax credits are worth only 50 percent of the donations to scholarship organizations.

It's rare that a program can simultaneously improve the lives of citizens while saving money. At a time when student performance is [dismal](#) and state budgets are bloated, state legislators have an obvious solution: Expand school choice.

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