

The Myth about "No Evidence" for School Choice that Won't die

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The myth that there's no evidence that school choice works has more lives than Dracula.

Worse, it's often repeated by people who should know better, like the education wonks at Third Way or the ranking Democrat on the U.S. Senate education committee.

In a particularly egregious recent example, a professor of educational leadership and the dean of the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Education wrote an op-ed repeating the "no evidence" canard, among others:

"The committee also expands the statewide voucher program. There is no evidence privatization [sic] results in better outcomes for kids. The result will be to pay the tuition for students who currently attend private school and who will continue to attend private school — their tuition will become the taxpayers' bill rather than a private one."

Additionally, the funds for the expansion would siphon an estimated \$48 million away from public schools, decreasing the amount of money available for each and every school district in the state.

It is astounding that a professor and a dean at a school of education in Wisconsin would be unfamiliar with the research on the Milwaukee voucher program, never mind the numerous gold standard studies on school choice programs elsewhere. Fortunately, Professor James Shuls of the University of Missouri-St. Louis and Martin Lueken of the Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty set the record straight:

The Wisconsin Legislature commissioned a comprehensive five-year study by researchers at the University of Arkansas. The research team matched and compared children at private schools in the choice program to similar students at Milwaukee Public Schools.

The study concluded that children in Milwaukee who used vouchers were more likely to graduate from high school, enroll in four-year colleges and persist in college.

These findings are very similar to those of "gold-standard" studies done nationwide. Among 13 peer-reviewed studies on voucher programs that use research methods based on random assignment, all but one study concluded that vouchers benefit students (the other was unable to detect an impact).

In addition, recent work by a Harvard economist demonstrates that giving low-income families better educational options can help improve social mobility for children.

Just a year and a half ago — in response to yet another school choice denier who should know better — the coauthors of the Milwaukee study clarified that their research found school choice produced “a modest but clearly positive effect on student outcomes.”

First, students participating in the Milwaukee Parental Choice (“voucher”) Program graduated from high school and both enrolled and persisted in four-year colleges at rates that were four to seven percentage points higher than a carefully matched set of students in Milwaukee Public Schools.

Using the most conservative 4% voucher advantage from our study, that means that the 801 students in ninth grade in the voucher program in 2006 included 32 extra graduates who wouldn’t have completed high school and gone to college if they had instead been required to attend MPS.

Second, the addition of a high-stakes accountability testing requirement to the voucher program in 2010 resulted in a solid increase in voucher student test scores, leaving the voucher students with significantly higher achievement gains in reading than their matched MPS peers.

Moreover, as Shuls and Lueken note, “private schools in the choice program obtain these results when the government funding for a voucher is 60 percent less than what public schools receive.”

The final two claims by the UW-Madison faculty — that the voucher program benefits students who would attend private school anyway and siphons money from the district school system — also fail to withstand scrutiny.

A conservative analysis of the Milwaukee voucher program by Prof. Robert Costrell of the University of Arkansas found that only “about 10 percent of low-income voucher users would have attended private school anyway.” The 2009 study also found that the voucher program produced significant savings to the state taxpayers, as shown in the figure below:

A Friedman Foundation study released last year found that the Milwaukee voucher program saved the state more than \$238 million since its inception in 1990.

Moreover, as the Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty notes in a recent report, Wisconsin gives a “school choice bonus” to district schools that lose students to the voucher program. Although a district’s total revenue decreases when a student leaves (along with the variable costs associated with that student), the “school districts will actually have more revenue per pupil because the district can continue to count students it no longer educates for equalization aid and revenue limit purposes.”

Sadly, opponents of school choice are likely to continue resurrecting the “no evidence” canard. But when they do, Van Helsings like Shuls and Lueken will be there to put a stake in its heart.

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