



Public schools still matter the most

Saturday, April 25, 2015 11:00 pm

Indiana's school voucher program is neither as bad as its critics claim nor as important as its supporters believe — especially in northeast Indiana.

The state's Choice Scholarship program came under fire this month from a study that argues it does nothing to raise educational achievement.

The Center for Tax and Budget Accountability, based in Chicago, released a report that takes a highly skeptical look at vouchers for students attending private schools.

Indiana's voucher program has become the nation's leader, with 29,148 Hoosier students using the scholarships this year. Among the four states with large voucher programs, Indiana has the most lenient rules to qualify for a voucher.

This school year, Indiana awarded nearly \$116 million in Choice Scholarships, an average of just under \$4,000 per student.

The CTBA report cites studies from other states to claim that students attending private schools do no better than those in public schools. But those conclusions don't hold up against the evidence in Indiana.

Statewide last spring, 83 percent of private school students passed Indiana's ISTEP+ achievement test, compared with 74 percent of public school students, reports show. Results in our area are similar.

Public school leaders complain that vouchers take money from their budgets. But supporters of the program point out that it actually saves money for taxpayers. At just under \$4,000, the state is spending less on the average voucher student than if he or she attended a public school. A proposed new state budget calls for spending just over \$6,000 on an average public-school student next year.

“ ... so the state saves money each time a student switches out of a district school to accept a voucher,” the conservative Cato Institute says in a new article defending Indiana’s vouchers against critics.

Still, we should keep a close watch on the effectiveness of Indiana’s voucher program. We’re on the cutting edge of this trend, operating in uncharted territory with a program more bold than any other state.

Already, the percentage of vouchers going to minority students is beginning to drop. In the first year of Indiana’s program, 53 percent of vouchers went to minority students. This year it was only 37 percent.

Reports also show that 84 percent of Hoosier students receiving vouchers live in larger cities or suburbs. That’s why legislators can’t count on vouchers to move the achievement needle very far in our four counties of northeast Indiana.

Across the 13 public school districts that serve our region, only 1.2 percent of students are using vouchers to attend private schools.

The actual numbers show just over 300 students using vouchers in our counties, compared to nearly 26,000 students in public schools. Voucher use is highest in the East Noble school district, but it still amounts to only 3.3 percent of students.

Now in its fifth year, Indiana’s voucher program seems to be succeeding in its goals. But it also commands an oversize share of attention for a program that affects only 1.2 percent of local students and only 2.6 percent statewide.

We hope Indiana education leaders will stay focused on the needs of nearly 99 percent of northeast Indiana young people who still depend on keeping public schools strong.