

State tests deter private schools from participating in voucher programs

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The State Board of Education recently held [a rule-making hearing](#) for Tennessee's new [education savings account program](#). The goal of one rule, requiring private schools participating in the program to show students' academic growth, is clear: ensure that private schools are providing high-quality educations. One way to do that is to require private schools to administer the state standardized test. The only problem is that the existing evidence suggests this well-meaning regulation could have the opposite of its intended effect. Here's why.

Private schools decide whether to participate in [school choice programs](#) each year. Because additional regulations are the primary costs associated with participation, they reduce the quantity of private schools available to families. And because the lower-quality private schools are the most strapped for cash, these regulations are more likely to deter the higher-quality schools. Two random assignment studies exist on this topic. In the first study, published in *Social Science Quarterly*, Patrick J. Wolf, Lindsey M. Burke and I used surveys to randomly assign various regulations to private school leaders in Florida and asked them whether they would participate in a hypothetical voucher program the following year.

Autonomy matters to private schools

We found that the state testing mandate reduced the likelihood that private school leaders were certain to participate by 46 percent. Our second study similarly found that the state testing mandate reduced participation by 29 percent in California and New York. However, we found no evidence that nationally norm-referenced testing mandates affected program participation.

The takeaway? Private schools really care about their autonomy. And if you are going to have a testing mandate, at least allow private schools to choose a nationally norm-referenced test to prevent discouraging program participation. Both studies also found some evidence to suggest that the state testing regulation disproportionately deterred the higher-quality private schools from participating. In other words, the state testing regulation can have the opposite of its desired effect. Non-experimental studies on the subject tend to find that same result. My study at the *Journal of School Choice*, for example, suggests that the state testing regulation reduces program participation by 8 percentage points.

State testing mandates have the opposite of desired effect

Only a third of the private schools in Louisiana chose to participate in their heavily regulated school choice program, whereas more than double that proportion tend to participate in less regulated programs. The heavily regulated Louisiana program, which requires private schools to administer the state test, also had large negative effects on students' test scores. Regulations can also essentially turn private schools into public schools. My peer-reviewed evaluation on the subject, coauthored with Lindsey Burke, finds that school choice regulations can also reduce specialization in private schools. And my Journal of School Choice study similarly finds that state testing mandates are more likely to deter specialized private schools from participating in choice programs than non-specialized private schools.

Pressuring private schools to focus on state tests also incentivizes “teaching to the test.” But two recent reviews of the evidence suggest that standardized test scores are weak proxies for long-term success. A study presented at Harvard University in 2018 concluded that “our meta-analysis shows that, at least for school choice programs, there is at best a weak relationship between impacts on test scores and attainment outcomes.” My separate review of the evidence, peer-reviewed and published at Educational Review, similarly found several divergences between effects of schools on test scores and longer-term outcomes such as crime, safety and earnings. Put differently, pressuring schools to “teach to the test” could actually harm students in the long run.

Proponents of the state testing requirement in Tennessee have good intentions. They want the best for students. But the evidence suggests this particular regulation could have the opposite of its intended effect by reducing the amount of meaningful education options for families.

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