

## Guest column: Look deeper into school voucher outcomes

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The fourth-year results of the experimental evaluation of the Louisiana Scholarship Program (LSP) just came out — and the effects on math test scores are negative once again. So what went wrong in Louisiana?

Regulations are likely responsible. Here's why.

Private schools decide whether to participate in voucher programs each year. Lower-quality private schools are more likely to accept heavy packages of voucher program regulations because they are the most in need of additional revenues.

The unintended consequence of attaching onerous regulations to school choice programs is that the best private schools will be more likely to turn down the voucher offer. The bad news for Louisiana is that the LSP has several burdensome regulations.

The LSP requires schools to admit students at random, administer the state's standardized tests, and maintain what the state considers a "quality curriculum." Participating private schools must also accept the voucher amount as full payment.

This hefty package of regulations could unintentionally reduce the average quality of participating private schools — which could compromise the effectiveness of the program. And there's plenty of evidence for this theory.

Negative effects from the voucher program were largely driven by lower-quality private schools. Students who won the lottery to go to private schools with the highest levels of tuition and enrollment — two proxies for school quality — did not experience reductions in academic achievement. In fact, the researchers found that private schools in the top tercile of enrollment actually increased math test scores by 68 percent of a standard deviation in the third year.

Heavy regulations also mean fewer options for families in Louisiana. Only a third of the private schools in Louisiana chose to participate in the program in the first year, while over twice that proportion of private schools choose to participate in programs with fewer regulations.

A study by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute also found that private school participation rates tend to be lower in programs with higher regulatory burdens. And two survey experiments have

found that randomly assigned regulations substantially reduce private school leaders' reported willingness to participate in hypothetical voucher programs.

But the news isn't all bad in Louisiana. Competition from the program led to higher test scores for the kids left behind in public schools, and giving children the option to exit segregated neighborhood schools led to racial integration overall. And the program saved taxpayer money.

What have we learned from vouchers in Louisiana after four years? It certainly doesn't look like Louisiana's regulation-heavy approach has produced its desired results. On the contrary, the evidence suggests it is more likely that the burdensome regulations have unintentionally led to fewer high-quality options for families. The experts in Louisiana haven't been able to engineer a high-quality program — maybe it's time they give families real choices?

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