



Setting the Record Straight on School Choice and Voucher Programs

Corey A. DeAngelis

March 10, 2020

There is a lot of room for disagreement in the school choice debate. It's healthy to discuss both sides of any issue. But there is no room for getting the basic facts wrong.

Unfortunately, the *Enid News & Eagle* did just that by making several false claims. Let's set the record straight.

First, *Enid News & Eagle* Staff Writer James Neal claimed that private schools receiving voucher funding “are free to discriminate against LGBTQ, minority and disabled students.” That's not entirely true. By federal law, private schools in the U.S. are not allowed to discriminate based on race, even if they do not receive public funding. And although federal law makes it unnecessary in the case of race, some states' private school choice laws additionally include specific anti-discriminatory language. Oklahoma's tax credit scholarship program, for example, says that private schools accepting scholarships must have “a stated policy against discrimination in admissions on the basis of race, color, national origin or disability.”

We also shouldn't forget that students from marginalized groups often feel discriminated against in government-run schools. In fact, the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network's nationwide survey found that LGBTQ students in private schools reported less discrimination and bullying in private schools than in government-run schools overall. And families consistently rank safety as one of the top reasons for choosing private schools.

Neal argued that voucher programs “disproportionately benefit white, Christian, well-to-do children at the expense of minorities and the poor.” Although that is not true, Neal used this claim to say that he is “the perfect demographic for school choice tax credits” because, as Neal said, “My daughter attends a private Christian school. And we are white.”

But, according to his column, “school voucher programs would be anything but beneficial” for “minority families from struggling public schools.” Neal's column is well-intentioned — he wants minority and low-income students to have access to better educations — but that statement is just appalling.

All families should have the option to choose the school that works best for their own children, regardless of their backgrounds. Some families, like Neal's, already have access to private schools. Private school choice programs allow the less fortunate to be able to access private schools as well.

Neal's claims aren't supported by the data either. Nearly every private school voucher program is targeted to disadvantaged students based on income, disability, or whether the student attends a low-performing government-run school. Students using voucher programs in the U.S. are substantially more likely to be racial minorities and low-income than the general population.

For example, 100 percent of the students using the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program are from low-income families and around 70 percent of those students are minorities.

The average student using the program comes from a household earning an income of just \$26,578 per year.

Similarly, in Indiana, 42 percent of students using private school vouchers are non-white, whereas only 21 percent of the state's general population is non-white.

Neal leveraged his false claim about school choice program usage to make another misleading claim: "School vouchers open the door to resegregation." There are eight rigorous studies on this topic. Seven of the eight studies found that private school choice programs actually lead to racial integration, likely because many neighborhood schools are already segregated by race. None of the eight studies found that private school choice leads to racial segregation overall.

Neal also claimed that "the majority of kids in the [Indiana] voucher program already were, or were in bound for, charter or private schools." That's not true. The 2017 NPR report he cited does not allow anyone to make that conclusion. As Martin Lueken and Jeff Spalding show, cautious estimates indicate that the vast majority— around 80 percent—of students using the Indiana voucher program would be in government-run schools without voucher funding. Nine studies of voucher programs from other locations have similarly found that about 90 percent of the students using the programs would be in public schools without voucher funding.

Neal cited a 2017 working paper on the Indiana voucher program and said that "students who exercised vouchers to move to private schools actually fell behind their public school peers in academics, particularly in math." Although that statement is true for the results from the first couple of years of the evaluation, it is highly misleading. The same 2017 working paper Neal cited found that, relative to students in public schools, students using the Indiana voucher program performed the same in math and marginally better in English Language Arts after four years.

James also said that school choice has "not proven effective at improving education." That is also highly misleading. Ten of the 16 random assignment evaluations on the topic find that private school choice programs increased math or reading test scores overall or for student subgroups at a fraction of the cost. Only two of the 16 random assignment studies, both of which examined the highly regulated Louisiana voucher program, found negative effects on test scores. And four of the six rigorous studies on the topic found that private school choice increased educational attainment overall or for student subgroups. None of the six studies found that school choice reduced educational attainment.

Let's vigorously debate the merits of allowing families to choose the schools that work best for their own kids. Let's discuss the merits of allowing education dollars to fund students as opposed to systems. But let's ground the discussions of these issues in the facts established by the extensive data and research on school choice.

Corey A. DeAngelis is the director of school choice at Reason Foundation. He is also an adjunct scholar at Cato Institute.