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Researcher: Ohio, don't fall for bait, switch. Vouchers 'thinly veiled tax break' for rich

The (voucher) program is not helping low-income students as advertised. It is acting as a thinly veiled tax break for families who already have the means to attend private schools at the expense of public school students," Benjamin Helton

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Over the last few weeks, both Iowa and Utah became the most recent states to enact universal school voucher policy.

This money will come from the same general fund as those for public school students. So, if a student leaves public schools and uses one of these vouchers in to pay for a private school, those funds are sapped from public resources.

These funds are also available if a student is already attending a private school.

This legislation was rushed through the Iowa and Utah legislatures incredibly quickly and Ohio seems ready to follow suit with a similar bill.

More: School choice remains popular following COVID closures. What it means for students and schools.

But why the sudden urgency to pass these bills?

The answer is simple: they do not work as advertised and school choice advocates know it. Expanded school voucher policies are a bait and switch that make voters feel like education problems are being addressed, but, in reality, they solve no actual problems in public education.

Removing the thin veil

Firstly, as is being seen in Arizona right now, the majority of voucher applicants have no record of ever attending public school.

The program is not helping low-income students as advertised. It is acting as a thinly veiled tax break for families who already have the means to attend private schools at the expense of public school students.

Kids pay the cost.

Secondly, state test scores take a hit when voucher policies get enacted.

Both Louisiana and Indiana enacted expanded voucher policies and saw drops in state-wide student achievement that have yet to recover.

Any marginal gains observed in student achievement are seen in small subsets of students and often offset by drops in achievement for other students, usually in underserved populations choice policies are supposed to help.

School choice advocates like Corey DeAngelis know all this.

He knows how nebulous and discouraging the data are when discussing student outcomes of school choice policy. And there is ample evidence to suggest that states like Arizona, and now Iowa and Utah, will see similar student outcomes as Louisiana and Indiana.

So, they have shifted the argument toward vague concepts like “educational freedom” before more hard numbers emerge.

In "The Fractured Schoolhouse: Reexamining Education for a Free, Equal and Harmonious Society," Neal McCluskey, director of the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom, argues that "Education must be based in freedom, even if it is largely freedom for

parents, not only because liberty is the fundamental building block of American society and a good in and of itself, but because it is key to preserving the communities in which people find their psychological place – their homes.”

There is little to argue with in this ideological statement. Who wouldn't want these things through education? But, to borrow a line from earlier in McCluskey's book, “Aiming at a goal and hitting it are two different things.”

Words like “liberty” and “freedom” are more conducive to the school choice argument because they cannot be actively measured, unlike student achievement.

Political operatives like DeAngelis and McCluskey changed the target outcome of education policy from a cork dartboard to a puff of mist.

School choice advocates know that if they frame their argument in something easily countable, like student achievement, they do not have the numbers to support their positions.

Political scientist John Kingdon wrote “The countable problem sometimes acquires a power of its own that is unmatched by problems that are less countable.”

So, often, school choice advocates will simply ignore test score outcomes when presenting their argument for universal choice policies– at least unless they are talking about “failing” public schools.

Similarly, another tactical change was finding a factor that would be more easily affected by their rhetoric.

The clearest example of this can be seen in polling data. The narrative of “failing” public schools is nothing new and completely manufactured. But that does not often affect the perceptions of voters.

According to a recent Gallup survey, about 69% of the general population in the United States is dissatisfied with “the quality of public education in the nation,” with 40% saying “very dissatisfied.” This perception drops to 20% and 6%, respectively, when asking parents who actually have students in K-12 education.

Choice advocates will often focus on easy, slam dunk metrics like parental satisfaction instead of being transparent about subsets of opinion that may hurt their overall narrative.

These rhetorical tactics are working.

Despite the negative outcomes associated with expansive voucher policies, legislators in over 20 states have now introduced bills that will allow all students, even those who have not previously attended public schools, to apply for vouchers.

History is a strong predictor of these policies' successes, and choice advocates know it. The possibility of student outcomes similar to those in Arizona, Louisiana, and Indiana is why these bills are being presented with such urgency. Iowa is the newest potential harbinger of negative effects of these "choice" policies and, as Kingdon suggested, it is more difficult to spin hard numbers than loosely defined parameters.

There have been some promising results of diversifying educational options through charter schools in Florida. But, those policies have been incrementally tweaked over the last 20 years, do not include private schools, and are not lacking controversy and corruption. These new universal voucher policies are even less accountable to taxpayers and carry even more risk of corruption.

Voucher policies are a bait and switch.

They promote educational freedom through "choice."

But, as data have suggested and recent history illustrated, the choice is clearly not for everybody and giving only certain students choice does not improve student achievement outcomes. And choice advocates know it.

Neal McCluskey is the director of Cato's Center for Educational Freedom.