

# LINCOLN TIMES-NEWS

Lincoln County's Home Newspaper

---

## School choice war goes hot

Neal McCluskey

March 6, 2017

With a presidential administration that is disliked for myriad reasons openly pushing school choice, what had been kind of a cold war over choice for years has exploded into a hot one. And the tip of the anti-choice spear seems to be the New York Times. Last week it ran a piece by New America education director Kevin Carey suggesting that choice has been “dismal,” and doubled down on that with a subsequent attack on choice as an academic “failure.”

Is it a failure? First, the vast majority of random-assignment studies of private school voucher programs — the “gold-standard” research method that even controls for unobserved factors like parental motivation — have found choice producing equivalent or superior academic results, usually for a fraction of what is spent on public schools. Pointing at three, as we shall see, very limited studies, does not substantially change that track record.

Let's look at the studies Carey highlighted: one on Louisiana's voucher program, one on Ohio and one on Indiana. Make that two studies: Carey cited Indiana findings without providing a link to, or title of, the research, and he did not identify the researchers. The Times did the same in their editorial. Why? Because the Indiana research has not been published. What Carey perhaps drew on was a piece by Mark Dynarski at the Brookings Institution. And what was that based on? Apparently, a 2015 academic conference presentation by R. Joseph Waddington and Mark Berends, who at the time were in the midst of analyzing Indiana's program and who have not yet published their findings.

Next there is Ohio's voucher program. The good news is that the research has been published, indeed by the choice-favoring Thomas B. Fordham Institute. And it does indicate that what the researchers were able to study revealed a negative effect on standardized tests. But Carey omitted two important aspects of the study. One, it found that choice had a modestly positive effect on public schools, spurring them to improve. Perhaps more important, because the research design was something called “regression discontinuity” it was limited in what it was able to reliably determine. Basically, that design looks at performance clustered around some eligibility cut-off — in this case, public schools that just made or missed the performance level below which students became eligible for vouchers — so the analysis could not tell us about a whole lot of kids. Wrote the researchers: “We can only identify with relative confidence the estimated effects...for those students who had been attending the highest-performing EdChoice-

eligible public schools and not those who would have been attending lower-performing public schools.”

That is a big limit.

Finally, we come to the Louisiana study, which was random-assignment. Frankly, its negative findings are not new information. The report came out over a year ago, and we at Cato have written and talked about it extensively. And there are huge caveats to the findings, including that the program’s heavy regulations — e.g., participating schools must give state tests to voucher recipients and become part of a state accountability system — likely encouraged many of the better private schools to stay out. There are also competing private choice programs in the Pelican State. In addition, the rules requiring participating private schools to administer state tests are new, and there is a good chance that participating institutions were still transitioning. Indeed, as Carey noted, the study showed private school outcomes improving from the first year to the second. That could well indicate that the schools are adjusting to the change. And as in Ohio, there was evidence that the program spurred some improvements in public schools.

Choice advocates should not cheer about the latest research, but in totality, the evidence does not come close to showing choice a “failure.” Indeed, the evidence is still very favorable to choice. And the primary value of choice is not necessarily reflected in test scores: it is freeing families and educators to choose for themselves what education is best.

*Neal McCluskey is the director of the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom. This column originally appeared on the Cato @ Liberty blog.*