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The "Failure" of School Vouchers in Milwaukee

By **Joseph Lawler** on 4.15.10 @ 10:57AM

Last week AEI education scholar Frederick Hess mentioned a study that found that Milwaukee's school voucher system -- the first of its kind in a major U.S. city -- has shown disappointing results: students in the voucher program are performing no better than public school students on tests, according to this study. Hess took those findings to suggest that at the least the voucher system in Milwaukee has not been the panacea that school-choice proponents have promised. Matt Yglesias took it one step further and called the program a "failure."

On the Cato-at-Liberty blog, Andrew Coulson has provided some important context that might help determine whether or not the Milwaukee program, and by extension the push for vouchers in general, has proved a failure.

The Milwaukee study is part of a vast literature. Over the past quarter century at least *sixty-five* studies have compared outcomes in public and private schools around the world, reporting *156 separate statistical findings*.

The evidence of this literature is starkly one-sided. The vast preponderance of findings show private schools outperforming public schools after all the normal controls. What's more, when we focus on the research comparing truly market-like systems to state-run school monopolies, the market advantage is found to be even more dramatic...

Even the recent Milwaukee result described by Yglesias as a failure shows voucher students in private schools performing as well as public school students who receive roughly 50% more government funding. How is a program that produces similar academic results to the status quo at a much lower cost to taxpayers a failure? And what of the research suggesting that students in the Milwaukee voucher program graduate at higher rates than those in public schools?

I think that Coulson has accidentally understated the argument that the vouchers are a lot cheaper because of what looks like a simple arithmetic error: Milwaukee spends \$6,442 per voucher student and \$14,011 per public school student. That means that they spend more than *100 percent* more per public school student, not 50. (The government doesn't pay all of the voucher students' tuitions. The average cost per voucher student is \$7,703, meaning that the schools must come up with over \$1000 of private funding per student.)

The larger point that Hess and Yglesias are getting at is that these

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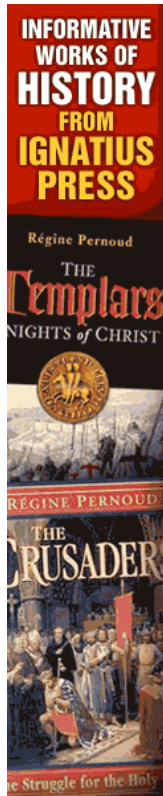
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voucher students are still not getting a decent education, which truly is a failure. But given the available evidence that school choice works in general and the fact that the system is saving significant amounts (a very salient fact when you consider the condition of state and city finances), it's probably wise not to overemphasize this one disappointing finding.

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COMMENTS

Thomas | 4.15.10 @ 12:19PM

Once again, we seem to be embracing the notion that the school is solely responsible for the performance of the student. Nothing could be farther from reality.

Schools do bear a certain responsibility for imparting facts, knowledge and, in some cases, wisdom. But, the student has to have both the ability and the desire to embrace that knowledge and use it. The ability is dependent upon a number of things including physical and mental abilities. The desire is largely dependent upon societal, cultural and familial standards of success.

In the case of locations that use vouchers, it should not come as surprise that student performance scores are similar between public and private schools. In the past, private schools had a higher percentage of students who desired to perform to higher standards, because they came from families that stressed such performance and actively educated their children in this desire to perform academically. Vouchers allow students, who do not have the same high performance values, to enroll in private schools. These students enter private schools with the same disadvantages as their public school counterparts. Hence the similar educational results.

Education is not broken, society is.

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daniel bowers | 4.15.10 @ 12:36PM

Joseph Lawler is disengenious when comparing 'voucher schools', and 'private schools' with 'public schools. Both 'voucher schools' and 'public schools', are the same animal with some differences: for public schools the funding of Special Education students, Advanced Placement students, and IB students is completely in their baliwak-the 'voucher schools' (still very much a public schools) have no such requirement. Public schools must take every student, discipline problems aside, must ake every student that walks through the entrance door. Voucher schools and Private schools do not. To compare public and voucher schools is bad enough; to compare these two with private schools which have none to very littel oversight, is an egregious error.

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