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Exaggerated Claims

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Over the last year or so, many tales of woe have spread that seized on a few, preliminary studies that appeared to show negative effects for students in school choice programs. Just three days before the release of those studies, one newspaper columnist used the studies to conclude, “the evidence is clear, vouchers don’t work.”

But two new studies looking at standardized test scores — as well as additional studies by me and my colleagues at the School Choice Demonstration Project — were just released last month. It turns out the failure of choice was greatly exaggerated.

A study of the Indiana Choice Scholarship Program, for example, revealed that students using the program performed on par in mathematics and even made gains in English language arts by the fourth year.

This upward trend is not unusual. The recent review of 19 experimental voucher studies around the world conducted by researchers at the University of Arkansas shows that private school choice programs need a few years to start improving test scores. This is likely because children need to adjust to their new educational settings and private institutions must respond to the environmental shift in the market for schooling.

The positive test score trend can be interpreted in two ways. One is that private schools in voucher programs adjust and improve after a few years of participation. The other possibility is that incentives cause private schools to shift from a focus on character education toward a focus on test scores, since most states use test scores as their preferred accountability measure. So what does the scientific evidence have to say?

There have been 17 experiments on the effects of private school choice on student achievement in the United States. Of these studies, only two have shown negative impacts on student test scores, four have found no effects and eleven have found positive effects overall or for subgroups of students.

The scientific evidence on long-term outcomes is more hopeful for private school choice programs. University of Arkansas’s Dr. Patrick J. Wolf led an experiment on the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program which found that winning a random lottery to use a private school voucher increased students’ likelihood of graduation by 21 percentage points.

A study examining impacts on criminal activity, conducted by me and Patrick J. Wolf, found that Milwaukee voucher students are around half as likely to become criminals as adults than their traditional public school peers.

Although the “failure” of private school choice is continuously echoed by education reporters, the scientific evidence largely suggests otherwise.

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