



School vouchers are tickets to safer schools

Corey DeAngelis

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At a bare minimum, schools should keep our children safe while classes are in session. New evidence suggests that private school choice can help with that.

The second-year results of the federal evaluation of the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program just came out. The OSP is a federally funded school voucher program that allows low-income families in D.C. to use public education dollars to cover private-school tuition for their kids.

The rigorous study by the U.S. Department of Education found that using a voucher to attend a private school increased school safety for students. And the positive effects were huge.

Students that won the voucher lottery and attended a private school were over 35 percent more likely to report that their schools were very safe. And parents of voucher-using students were about 36 percent more likely to report that their children were in very safe schools.

In addition, the study found suggestive evidence indicating that students that won the lottery to attend a private school in D.C. were 7 percent more likely than their public school peers to report never being threatened with physical harm at school.

And this isn't the only rigorous evaluation to find that voucher programs lead to safer schools for kids. The previous federal evaluation of the D.C. program — completed almost a decade ago — also found that vouchers allowed children to access schools that were more safe and orderly.

What's more, these large safety benefits come at a substantial savings to the taxpayer. After all, voucher students receive only about a third of the average amount spent per child in D.C. district schools.

But why do benefits like these materialize? Schools of choice must cater to the needs of families. Private schools that provide a safe educational experience for children are rewarded financially when families can vote with their feet.

At the same time, private schools that do not successfully maintain a safe environment must improve their policies if they do not want to face shutdown. After all, no one wants to send their child to a school that is known to have bullying incidents that lead to student injury or even death.

Public-school leaders are also more likely to be weighed down with burdensome government regulations that make it extremely difficult for them to control discipline policy and school culture.

Education policy experts such as Manhattan Institute's Max Eden have argued that these types of lax discipline reforms could make public schools more dangerous if they lead to more disruptive behavior. For example, New York City has issued two discipline reforms aimed to reduce student suspensions since 2012.

And while total suspensions have dropped since then, students and teachers in NYC have reported more disorder, violence, drugs and gang activity in their public schools.

On the other side of the equation, the recent federal evaluation of the D.C. program found that parents of voucher students were 28-percent more likely to report that they were highly satisfied with the discipline policy at their children's schools than public-school parents.

In addition, my peer-reviewed study of a nationally representative sample of school leaders in the United States recently found that private school principals were over six percentage points more likely to report that they had a major influence on setting school discipline policies than public school leaders.

The results from the D.C. voucher experiment confirm what we already know about families' values. When given the opportunity to select their children's schools, families consistently prioritize school culture and safety.

According to a 2013 study, 53 percent of families listed improved student safety as a top reason for choosing particular private schools for their children.

In addition, by conducting focus group interviews, researchers at the University of Arkansas found that parents of children using the D.C. voucher program listed school safety as one of their top three reasons for choosing particular private schools.

It would be a shame to ignore the fact that private school choice leads to safer schools for our kids. We must not let politics blind us from this reality. Children's safety depends on it.

Corey A. DeAngelis is an education policy analyst at the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom.