

CLOSING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

A SERIES OF STORIES, RESULTS,
AND LESSONS LEARNED FROM
SEVEN YEARS OF
EDUCATION INVESTING BY
THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION



EXPLORING QUALITY CHOICES: **VOUCHERS**

THROUGH ITS EDUCATION INVESTMENTS, THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION HELPS ENSURE THAT YOUNG PEOPLE GRADUATE FROM SCHOOL PREPARED TO SUCCEED AS ADULTS BY SUPPORTING QUALITY SCHOOL CHOICES AND STRONG SCHOOL/COMMUNITY/FAMILY CONNECTIONS.

Vouchers are controversial. In the past decade, courts have deliberated their constitutionality and newspaper editorial pages have brought the ideological battle to our breakfast tables. Ideology aside, are vouchers a quality option that contribute to closing the achievement gap and helping young people succeed as adults?

“We want to invest in creating quality educational choices that improve outcomes for kids and families,” said Bruno Manno, senior associate for education at the Casey Foundation. “That means we’ll look at supporting almost any choice innovation that has the potential to close the achievement gap and help young people from low-income families graduate prepared for adult success.”

The U.S. Supreme Court ruled 5–4 in 2002 that voucher programs are constitutional, but so far only three states — Florida, Ohio, and Wisconsin — have initiated full-fledged voucher programs to provide public funding to low-income families to send their children to private schools. Hard evidence of voucher efficacy is scarce.

Casey has supported a variety of efforts to learn from and strengthen these programs, including an Urban Institute study of vouchers in Florida and a Milwaukee group’s work to develop capacity and accountability in private schools serving voucher students. The majority of the Foundation’s investment in vouchers has gone toward implementation and evaluation for a program in Washington, DC.

This publication presents an in-depth look at Casey’s investment in the DC voucher effort and summarizes results and lessons learned so far. It also includes stories about the Foundation’s contribution to vouchers in Florida and Milwaukee.

Why Invest in the DC Program?

The DC voucher program is the first in the nation to include a rigorous, ongoing independent evaluation of changes in student achievement over time. As such, it provides a unique opportunity to contribute data-based evidence to the national voucher conversation.

Casey Foundation grants to the DC program totaling \$2.2 million over four years have contributed to general operations, annual documentation and lessons learned, ongoing support to participating families and students, and an in-depth qualitative study to supplement the program’s quantitative evaluation.

The quantitative evaluation includes a treatment group of families receiving vouchers and a control group of families that applied for vouchers but did not receive them through the random lottery. The qualitative evaluation focuses on 100 adults and 50 students in the program.

“The Foundation is a well-respected organization with a broad child and family agenda. If Casey is funding it, then it must be worth taking a look at it.” *Sally Sachar, former CEO, Washington Scholarship Fund*

HOW CASEY MADE A DIFFERENCE IN DC

- Casey support added depth to the evaluation and enabled the program to get immediate and ongoing feedback from families and schools.
- The Foundation helped provide a crucial missing link by partially funding ongoing support to participating families.
- By paying for documentation of lessons learned, Casey helped the program demonstrate accountability as well as share information with interested audiences.
- In lending its credibility to a controversial program that may provide quality education choices to low-income families, Casey reinforced the idea that vouchers are a worthy area of investigation.



Early Results in DC

What have we learned so far? After their first seven months in private and parochial schools, DC voucher recipients did no worse nor better than students who did not receive a voucher, according to a recently released U.S. Department of Education evaluation report on students' first set of academic performance data. Voucher parents, however, were far more likely to give their child's new school a grade of A or B than were parents of children who did not receive vouchers.

In addition, two years of focus group and interview data show that parents have dramatically increased their ability to understand and evaluate their child's education options, and they are significantly more involved in their child's education than they were at the outset of the program. Voucher students have demonstrated improved work ethic, better attitude toward learning, and increased self-esteem.

Of equal significance, both the quantitative and qualitative components of the independent evaluation have established sound baseline data and methodologies that promise to shed significant light on the longitudinal impact of vouchers on student performance over the next few years.

“In his old school, my son wasn’t performing. He had a short attention span, and he had behavior issues. After one year in his new school, he got on the honor roll.” *Carl Cash, voucher parent*

DC VOUCHER RESULTS

Impact

- 1,800 currently enrolled voucher students.
- Application rate of 4:1.
- After seven months in the program, voucher students did no worse nor better than students who did not receive vouchers.
- Voucher recipient parents are far more likely to give their child's school a grade of A or B than are parents of students who didn't receive vouchers.
- Parents have increased their capacity to evaluate their children's education options.
- Parents have increased their involvement in their children's education.

- Parents report improved communication with their children.
- Children have demonstrated improved work ethic, attitude toward learning, and self-esteem.
- 81 percent of students in the treatment and control groups reported for evaluation testing in 2006.

Influence

- Partnerships with a bipartisan group of organizations that provide a variety of services for voucher students and families, including DC State Education Office, DC Public Charter School Association, DC Public Schools Care Center, Greater Washington Urban League, Capital Partners for Education, Commonwealth Foundation, and DC Parents for School Choice.

Leverage

- \$2.77 million from Walton Family Foundation.
- \$550,000 from individual donors.
- \$500,000 from Bradley Foundation.
- \$512,500 from Alliance for School Choice.
- \$100,000 from Daniels Fund.

DC Voucher Program Overview

By any measure, the DC public school system is among the worst in the nation. In April 2007, there were 55,355 children in the DC system. Seventy percent of them were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. According to recent test data, two out of three students are not proficient in reading, and three out of four students are not proficient in math. Only 26 out of 146 schools in the DC district made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in 2006 under the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

DC public schools have been in trouble for a while. In 2003, President George W. Bush proposed that the federal government fund a \$250 million five-year voucher program in the nation's capital. His proposal met with fierce opposition. In response, an unusual bipartisan coalition of congressional and local Democrats and Republicans recast the proposal to provide equal funding to each of the three sectors in DC education: public schools, charter schools, and the voucher program.

President Bush signed the DC School Choice Incentive Act in late January 2004. Every year for five years, the law provides \$13 million of new money for DC public schools, \$13 million for DC charter schools, and \$13 million for DC vouchers.

“In middle school, my dreams died down. When I got the scholarship and came to Archbishop Carroll High School, it opened my eyes to math and science, and I started creative writing again. I have dreams again.” Magalee Cirpili, 12th grade

In early April of the same year, the Washington Scholarship Fund (the Fund) was selected to run the program. Less than five months later, it had solicited applications from almost 2,700 families, engaged 58 private and parochial schools, and enrolled over 1,000 children in 53 of those schools.

In the first three years, more than 6,300 students applied for roughly 1,800 vouchers. Forty-four percent of voucher recipients are from schools that failed to get AYP two years in a row. Eighty-two percent are minority, and the average household income of participating families is \$17,356. More than half of the children are from single-parent households, and most of their parents do not have bachelor's degrees.

Voucher students attend a diverse array of parochial and independent private schools. Six children attend the Lowell School, an exclusive elementary school in affluent northwest Washington. The emphasis is on collaborative learning, analytical thinking, and problem solving. At Nannie Helen Burroughs, a Baptist-oriented elementary school located in one of the city's poorest neighborhoods, 50 of the school's 170 students are scholarship recipients. The classrooms convey a sense of order, and teachers emphasize high academic achievement, African-American history, and the Bible.



Marquette University Helps Private Schools Raise Student Achievement

With support from Casey totaling \$600,000, the Institute for the Transformation of Learning at Marquette University helps private schools enrolling voucher students in Milwaukee improve how they operate in order to raise student achievement.

Milwaukee has the country's oldest and longest running voucher program. The Wisconsin state legislature recently agreed to raise the total number of vouchers to 22,500 if participating private schools get accredited. The legislature also authorized the Institute at Marquette to accredit private schools.

The Institute works with 20 of 30 participating independent private schools. Business and education leaders serve on the accreditation board. Unlike other accreditation bodies in Wisconsin, the Institute provides technical assistance to its schools, including staff and board assessment, retreats and trainings, and on-site education audits.

The Institute's first two schools will apply for accreditation in the 2007–2008 school year. Once schools get accredited, they are required to participate in the Institute's ongoing accountability system, which will feature annual reporting and periodic site visits.

The biggest challenges that the Institute encounters are the uneven quality of board governance and resistance from teachers and staff who don't want to change how they do things. "I've learned that we have to accept people where they are," said the Institute's Bob Pavlik. He noted that a strong board is essential for raising student achievement in private schools.

"My child has the same right to a good education as a senator's child does." *April Cole-Walton, voucher parent*



Separating Out Voucher Effects in Florida Proves Complicated

The Urban Institute, with support from Casey totaling \$800,000, has studied the impact of vouchers on Florida schools. Vouchers are part of a major statewide school accountability system that went into effect in Florida in 1999. Under the plan, students in failing schools receive vouchers that can be redeemed at eligible schools.

In the Florida accountability system, vouchers are a penalty for schools that are given a failing grade of "F" for any two out of four consecutive years. The only way that schools can move out of the "F" category is by raising standardized test scores above certain thresholds. Urban Institute researchers wanted to find out what impact this voucher threat had on school performance.

Via in-depth case studies on five schools, researchers found that the new accountability system did have an impact on student achievement, raising test scores in failing schools and spurring successful schools to maintain their "A" status. They also found that all five schools narrowed instructional focus so that students would improve their performance on tests.

Because of complex variables in the accountability system, it was impossible to attribute improved student achievement to the voucher threat alone. In fact, researchers found that teachers were far more motivated by fear of stigma associated with a grade of "F" than by the threat of vouchers.

DC PROGRAM CHALLENGES

- Voucher amounts are not enough to cover the actual cost of high school tuition.
- Children who enter private or parochial schools in high school are often far behind, and the schools typically don't have capacity to serve students with significant remedial needs.
- The time period between passage of the legislation and program launch was too tight and posed a threat to program and evaluation quality.
- Verifying income eligibility year after year is extremely labor intensive due to the requirements in the legislation.



Two-thirds of the private and parochial schools in Washington, DC, are participating in the program. Of the 58 schools currently enrolling voucher recipients, 53 percent are faith-based and 47 percent are independent private schools. Scholarships are for up to \$7,500, which cover the average tuition of \$5,000 at participating elementary schools. However, scholarships do not adequately cover the average tuition of \$12,000 at participating high schools.

Supporting Families and Getting Good Data

Ever since it won the grant to run the voucher program, the Washington Scholarship Fund has had its hands full. Walk into its downtown DC office at almost any time of day or night and you'll run right into a hectic flurry of activity. As smiling Mr. Johnson offers you a Danish and some coffee, paper-laden staffers rush past, printers spit out documents, case managers field phone calls, and families chat and fill out paperwork at a big community table scattered with brightly colored toys.

The original idea was for the voucher program to be a check-cutting operation, but Fund staff quickly realized that it would have to do a lot more than write checks if the program was going to work. Staffers immediately had to create an application process and develop numerous office management and student and school tracking systems from scratch.

At the same time, they worked with a team of researchers led by Georgetown University, selected by the U.S. Department of Education's Institute for Education Sciences, to design the voucher lottery and run the evaluation. Each spring, the Fund takes the lead on getting children to show up for evaluation testing.

The additional qualitative evaluation, supported by Casey and led by Georgetown, has enabled staff to get immediate and ongoing feedback from families and schools regarding what is and isn't working, and the Fund has adapted the program accordingly. "It has been like building an airplane while learning to fly it," said Sally Sachar, former CEO of the Fund.



SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVED VOUCHER LEGISLATION

by Washington Scholarship Fund

- Index the scholarship grant so that it increases each year with rising tuition costs.
- Bifurcate the scholarship cap to address the large difference in tuition for high school versus elementary school.
- Allocate more funding for administering the program.
- Have an earn-out threshold for renewing families that allows them to improve their economic circumstances up to a reasonable level.
- Make it simpler for families to prove financial eligibility by allowing those who are already eligible for certain public benefits to automatically qualify.

Early on, staff created a parent empowerment group to support participating families. The parent-driven monthly agenda focuses on practical matters like meeting paperwork deadlines, finding tutors, selecting appropriate summer programs, and learning how to interact with teachers in private and parochial schools.

Washington Scholarship Fund has had to raise money constantly to pay for program management and crucial ongoing support for children, families, and schools. The legislation provides a maximum of \$375,000 annually for these activities, which cost close to \$1.83 million a year. The Fund has also formed partnerships with many other organizations to give families and students the support they need to succeed.

Anticipating Problems, Finding Solutions

Staffers are always on the lookout for implementation issues that might require an immediate fix. Two years into the program, they realized that a significant number of families were in danger of “earning out.” In the original law, families were eligible to participate if they earned up to 185 percent of the federal poverty level, and they could renew in the program if they earned up to 200 percent of poverty. If too many families earned out, the evaluation would suffer, and children would have to abruptly switch schools again.

The Fund found that parents were taking drastic steps to stay below the 200 percent income eligibility limit, including turning down job promotions, cutting back on work hours, forgoing better housing options, and choosing not to reconcile with significant others. One of the hopes of the voucher program is that families do better as their children do better. The earn-out threshold was causing parents to turn away from options that would improve the family’s economic situation.

As a stop-gap, the Fund borrowed money from private sources to finance students who, through the earn-out provision, were becoming ineligible because of very small increases

in income. Meanwhile, the Fund made the case to Congress that if it didn't modify the provision, the evaluation would lose more than 300 students over the remaining years of the program.

In January 2007, Congress changed the earn-out threshold from 200 to 300 percent of poverty for families of students participating in the evaluation.

Next Steps for Casey and Vouchers

The pilot program is authorized to operate for five years and is scheduled to end after the 2008–2009 school year. Advocates are seeking to reauthorize the legislation so the program and the evaluation can continue and generate the longitudinal data that the national voucher conversation demands. Casey will continue to provide support that bolsters the depth and breadth of the evaluation and enables the DC voucher program to help children and families succeed.

“The social adjustment is the hardest part.” *Rita Johnson, Principal, Nannie Helen Burroughs Elementary School*

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE DC VOUCHER PROGRAM

- Students and parents switching from public to private or parochial school experience culture shock and need ongoing support to overcome it.
- Funding the vouchers and the evaluation is not enough. Programs need significant resources to fund ongoing support to families and schools.
- The parent empowerment group is an effective and efficient mechanism for delivering information to families and building a mutual support network.
- A qualitative component in the evaluation provides immediate and ongoing feedback from families and schools to program implementers.
- Including high schools in voucher programs requires additional thought. Overall supply, remediation needs of students, and gaps between voucher amounts and actual tuition costs pose significant obstacles.
- Create database systems before you start the program to measure student progress, monitor schools, and track communication with families and donors.
- Brief legislators about issues as they appear on the horizon. Communicate in a nonpartisan way and propose multiple solutions.
- Signal bipartisanship by working with partners that represent a variety of political points of view.
- Focus on high-quality implementation and avoid getting caught up in the debate about school choice.
- Figuring out if vouchers are an effective way to close the achievement gap and help low-income children graduate prepared for adult success will require additional time and investment in the program and the evaluation.
- Some low-income families and children are more vulnerable than others. To provide effective support, use a variety of approaches so that diverse families and children get the help they need to succeed at new schools.



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