



The New Terrain of the School Voucher Wars

CHRISTOPHER LUBIENSKI AND JOEL MALIN,
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Donald Trump has summed up his education platform in two words: “school choice.” Now, with the U.S. Supreme Court taking up the issue of public funding for private schools this fall with *Espinoza v. Montana Department of Revenue*, back-to-school season also means back-to-the-school-voucher-wars. But much has changed since the Court voted 5-4 in 2002 to permit a program designed to increase academic performance in Cleveland.

After two decades of choice advocates arguing that school vouchers in particular improve academic achievement for poor children, Trump elevated Betsy DeVos, one of the leading voucher proponents, as his secretary of Education. State policymakers have also massively scaled-up school vouchers and voucher-like programs such as education savings account programs across the country. However, over the last four years, researchers have consistently found insignificant or, more often, substantially negative impacts on learning for the children whose parents have enrolled them in these programs. Such negative impacts are largely unprecedented in evaluations of educational interventions, raising questions about the ethics of experimenting on children through these programs.

When plans to use taxpayer funds for private schooling were first introduced into American education in the early 1990s, they were pitched as a way to give poor and urban children a chance to leave failing public schools for better learning opportunities in what were thought to be more effective private schools.

Indeed, there are reasons to expect school vouchers would work, such as the facts that choosing a school might allow for better matching between a child’s preferred learning style and a school’s educational program, or that private schools tend to have smaller classes.

But it has never been clear that using vouchers to choose private schools leads to better educational outcomes for students.

When vouchers were first studied, researchers fought vicious battles over relatively minor differences in academic achievement. Voucher advocates like DeVos embraced any evidence of learning gains for students using vouchers to switch to private schools, and a number of think tanks and large philanthropies like the Walton Family Foundation also lined up to support this education reform. Some even saw vouchers as the key for reducing achievement gaps between white and minority students. But while most researchers found

that any gains were rather negligible overall, advocates argued that vouchers were at least not harming students' academic achievement.

Recently though, there has been a sea-change in the results.

As city-based pilot programs in places like Cleveland and Milwaukee were eclipsed by statewide programs in Ohio, Indiana, Louisiana, and elsewhere, researchers are consistently seeing large, significant, negative impacts — outcomes almost unheard of in evaluations of education interventions.

Researchers — including several voucher advocates — have conducted nine rigorous, large-scale studies since 2015 on achievement in voucher programs. In no case did these studies find any statistically positive achievement gains for students using vouchers. But seven of the nine studies found that voucher students saw relative learning losses. Too often, these losses were substantial.

For instance, research on Louisiana's program indicates that when some children performing squarely in the average range use a voucher to enroll in a private school, their scores fall almost to the lowest performing quartile of students overall. And initial hopes that those losses were temporary have not panned out.

Stated simply, students using vouchers to attend private schools are falling behind their peers in learning. That is, DeVos and her allies are promoting programs that hurt children.

Student achievement has always been the currency of education policy. After all, policymakers, taxpayers and parents want to see students learning, as well as effective schools using their tax dollars. But as these measures are failing to materialize, some have turned instead to other arguments, such as increasing parental satisfaction through school choice, or DeVos's belief that offering more choices for families is an end in itself — an argument that will be central in the Montana case in the Supreme Court.

Yet, this claim raises the issue: How much are policymakers willing to harm children's learning as the price for increased choice or (misplaced) parental satisfaction?

And, since voucher programs tend to be for low-income families, this question is particularly pertinent because we are talking about poor children impacted by public policies. It is not just a question of the ethics of researchers conducting experiments on policies that have been shown to have negative consequences for children. This is also a case where policymakers are promoting policies that have been shown to have significant negative impacts for some of our most vulnerable students.

Christopher Lubienski is a Professor of Education Policy at Indiana University, where he studies the use of research in education policy. He is a member of the Scholars Strategy Network. Joel Malin is an Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. He is interested in understanding and enhancing the connections between research, policy, and educational practice.