

Opening Statement of Dr. Patrick J. Wolf, University of Arkansas

[“School Vouchers: Friend or Foe?”](#)

Askwith Debate, Harvard University Graduate School of Education

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I’m delighted to be back at Harvard, where I obtained my Ph.D. in 1994 with the help of a school voucher called a Javits Fellowship. I’m especially pleased to be at the Harvard Ed School, where 25 years ago I met the young woman who is my wife. See what school vouchers did for me!

Just as Kathleen has stuck with me over more than 20 years, my interest in evaluating school voucher programs also has persisted. I have led or assisted with most of the major voucher studies in the U.S. I am pleased to share with you what I have learned.

I’m going to use the umbrella term private school choice or simply “choice” to refer to any government program that helps families access private schools as options for their children, be they voucher, tax-credit scholarship or Education Savings Account programs. Twenty-eight U.S. states operate 52 different choice programs because they are fair, effective, and beneficial to society. Regarding fairness, Howard Fuller eloquently explained that what we are debating today is whether or not poor families should have the same educational options as rich ones. I say, “yes”, in part as a matter of social justice and in part because private school choice benefits children and society.

Four empirical studies have examined the effects of choice on educational attainment, defined as how far a student goes in school. When it comes to education, how far you go matters more in life than how much you know, so educational attainment is the best measure of the effectiveness of a choice program. All four studies conclude that disadvantaged students attain

more education if they have access to school choice. My experimental study of the DC school voucher program performed for the U.S. Department of Education finds that using a voucher increases a student's likelihood of graduating from high school by 21 percentage points. Similar experimental research by Matt Chingos and Paul Peterson of Harvard reports that African American students in New York City enroll in college at significantly higher rates if they have access to school choice. Two studies of Milwaukee's long-running choice program, including one by my research team, find that voucher students graduate from high school, enroll in a four-year college, and persist into their crucial second year of college at significantly higher rates than their public school peers.

The effect of private school choice on student test scores is less clear. As Sunny Ladd stated in her congressional testimony in 2003, the most reliable evidence about the test score effects of school choice come from experimental studies. There have been 16 analyses or re-analyses of randomized experimental data from school choice programs in Charlotte, Dayton, DC, Louisiana, Milwaukee, and New York. Eleven of them report statistically significant positive effects of choice on reading or math scores, either for all participants or for disadvantaged subgroups of students. Three report no statistically significant effects of choice and the remaining two, one of which I authored, find negative test score effects from the Louisiana program, at least initially. Combining all of these experimental results into a meta-analysis, as my graduate students and I have done, indicates that the average effect of private school choice on student test scores is positive in both reading and math but modest in size and on the border of statistical significance. Effects tend to be null or negative the first few years, as students adjust to their new schools, and then turn more clearly positive after three years.

There are even more studies of the effect of private school choice competition on the test scores of non-choosing students, often called the students “left behind” in affected public schools. Of the twenty-six statistical studies, 25 report that test scores increase for public schools students after private school choice programs are launched or expanded.

There have been 68 empirical findings regarding the effect of private school choice on the democratic values of students, including tolerance, political activity, and voluntarism. Forty-one of them report positive effects of private schooling on civic outcomes, while 24 report no differences and only 3 describe negative effects. Studies that I have co-authored have determined that the Milwaukee voucher program reduces criminal behavior and that the Louisiana program increases the racial integration of public schools.

It is no wonder that state legislatures across the country have enacted 52 private school choice programs. School vouchers yield many individual and societal benefits, especially for disadvantaged students.

*Note: Edited to correct the name of the Javits Fellowship and for length.*