Study Finds Significant Achievement Losses for Indiana Students Who Switch From a Public to a Private School with a Voucher

A new study in RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences finds "significant achievement losses" for Indiana students who switch from a public to a private school with a voucher.

Voucher Pathways and Student Achievement in Indiana’s Choice Scholarship Program

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Abstract

This article examines the pathways that students can follow within the Indiana Choice Scholarship Program and the associations with their math and English language arts achievement in upper elementary and middle school. We analyze student-level longitudinal data by matching voucher and nonvoucher students to estimate the role of participating in the voucher program, taking advantage of the uniqueness of Indiana public and private schools taking the same standardized assessment over time. The different student pathways for using vouchers are related to student achievement with significant achievement losses for students who switch from a public to a private school with a voucher. Students who have always attended a private school, both before and after receiving a voucher, experience no significant changes in achievement.

One school choice option for families is providing them with scholarships, or vouchers, to give parents the opportunity to send their children to the school of their choice. Using public funds otherwise spent on a student’s public school education by the district or state, vouchers are allocated to families who use them to make partial or full tuition payments at private schools. The number of voucher bills that states have passed and the number of states introducing voucher bills increased dramatically in the last few years (Berends 2018). The number of students participating in voucher programs across the nation also increased significantly in the last decade, although the approximately 182,700 students receiving vouchers remains a small fraction of the total number of U.S. students (for a description of ongoing voucher programs, see EdChoice 2018). The Indiana Choice Scholarship Program (ICSP), authorized in 2011, provides vouchers to more than thirty-five thousand of these students—serving more than 20 percent of all voucher students nationwide, but only about 3 percent of the 1,139,822 K–12 students in Indiana (Indiana Department of Education 2018).

As vouchers have become more prominent as a form of school choice, they have been highly contested and debated in educational policy, the media, and research communities. Dating back to studies of the first voucher program in Milwaukee in the 1990s, researchers have used administrative data to evaluate the effects of vouchers on student outcomes, and although these analyses been central to our understanding of voucher effects, findings have been mixed (see Berends, Cannata, and Goldring 2011). Although policymakers expected that evaluation of the Milwaukee program and subsequent voucher programs in other locales would settle disputes about the effects of vouchers on student outcomes, the research findings instead have been nuanced and mixed with some positive, some negative, and some
null effects on student academic achievement outcomes (for reviews, see Austin and Berends 2018; Epple, Romano, and Urquiola 2017; Shakeel, Anderson, and Wolf 2016; Zimmer and Bettinger 2015).

**DISCUSSION**

In this article, we analyze the pathways students can take in the Indiana voucher program, including voucher students who switched from public to private schools, from private to public schools, from private to public to private schools, or always attended a private school. Students who always attend private schools experience no differences in achievement gains before or after receiving a voucher. This is unsurprising because these students do not change school context and therefore have consistent experience in a private school environment. However, it also indicates that students may not experience a stigma associated with beginning to receive a voucher, or at least that any potential stigma experienced does not influence their academic performance.

The negative findings in math for students who switch from a public to a private school with a voucher mirror what we have found using other estimation strategies (Berends and Waddington 2018; Waddington and Berends 2018). Here, we are able to compare the losses of these students with those of other groups of voucher students. It appears that students who have no experience in private schools experience a larger decline in their math scores than their counterparts enrolled in private schools for at least part of their schooling. These losses are largest for students who transition in earlier grades. Similarly, transitions from public to private schools with a voucher after fourth grade are associated with achievement loss in ELA, but transitions in the middle school years are associated with gains. The pattern of more negative outcomes following earlier transitions is one that additional research should examine (Langenkamp and Carbonaro 2018). In our future research, we also will examine further how these achievement losses vary by school context, such as racial-ethnic and socioeconomic composition and school climate.

Students who start in a public school, transition to a private school with a voucher, and then subsequently transition back to public school generally experienced larger achievement losses than students who start in a public school, transition to a private school with a voucher, and remain in a private school with a voucher. These students are a group that our future research will examine to test two hypotheses: perhaps the low-performing students are being pushed out of private schools, or perhaps their families are motivated to pull them out because their child may not be performing well in private schools (as evidenced by some of the subgroup outcomes for nonstructural movers). These hypotheses are important to examine because some opponents of school choice argue that if private schools retain the ability to expel students for disciplinary or academic reasons, they should not receive public funds (Ravitch 2010).

Families who gamed the system early in the voucher program and moved their children from a private to a public and back to a private school to become eligible for a voucher may be a more motivated group. Their potential motivation may help explain why these students’ achievement losses are more mitigated compared with other groups of voucher students.
Most voucher programs are designed to provide new learning opportunities, particularly for low-income students. Because of changes in the ICSP over time, students have taken different pathways to receiving a voucher. Our results here reveal variation in the association between these pathways and academic achievement scores. Moving from public to private schools with a voucher results in decreasing test scores, at least in math and especially for students who transition in earlier grades. Students who always attended private schools have higher math achievement at baseline experience no changes in their achievement before and after receiving a voucher. The achievement losses for public to private movers may be cause for concern for policymakers advocating for voucher programs. However, how students come to receive a voucher is as important to consider as the impact of receiving a voucher per se.

Although the results presented here are not causal estimates, they point to some potential considerations for parents considering using a voucher to move their child from a public to a private school and for policymakers considering a new or revised voucher program. Parents should be aware that research on transitions in general suggests that students often experience a decline in achievement in the first year following a transition to a new school of any type. Our findings suggest that attending a private voucher school generally does not compensate for that achievement loss. In addition, parents considering the timing of such a transition should note that transitions at earlier grades are associated with larger achievement losses, but that both structural and nonstructural transitions are associated with achievement loss in math for students who start in a public school and transition to a private school with a voucher, regardless of whether they ultimately transition back to a public school or remain in a private school.

The association between voucher transitions and achievement changes in ELA is weaker; achievement losses in ELA are concentrated in year two post-baseline following both structural and nonstructural changes and following a move after fourth grade. Students who transition to a private school with a voucher following sixth or seventh grade in a public school experienced average achievement gains.

Policymakers considering voucher policies should consider how voucher eligibility criteria shape the timing of students’ school transitions and the pathways through which they make those transitions. Qualitative research in Indiana suggests that elementary and middle school students have more trouble adjusting to school expectations when they transition from a public to a private school in older grades (Austin 2019). However, recent quantitative analyses of the Washington, D.C., voucher program are consistent with our findings (Dynarski et al. 2017). Analyses of administrative data like those presented here will continue to inform policymakers as they weigh these and other important considerations for voucher policy design.

In addition, Indiana’s K–12 administrative records can now be linked with data from the Indiana Commission on Higher Education and the National Student Clearinghouse through a statewide longitudinal data system. Future research will be able to explore the relationships between receiving a voucher and high school graduation, college readiness, and educational attainment. To date, forty-seven states have received at least one federal grant to support building their statewide longitudinal data system, the information from which will provide social scientists with valuable data to assess program impacts, various student and adult outcomes, and educational inequality more generally. As the articles
in this issue highlight, access to and use of such data can be burdensome, frustrating, and time consuming. Establishing researcher-practitioner partnerships not only promotes the use of research findings to inform practices, programs, and policies but also builds strong relationships with agency staff who know the data well and may help address some of the challenges of using administrative data. Addressing such challenges is key as data systems expand by adding data from state agencies, such as workforce data, child services, criminal justice and corrections. Such developments will enable researchers to connect individuals’ schooling experiences to a variety of adult outcomes that will inform research and policy—making societal contributions far into the future.