



A Union of Professionals

AFT VOUCHER FACT SHEET

1. **No credible research has shown vouchers to raise student achievement.** Research – including that of voucher advocates – shows that the achievement of students with vouchers is no better, and sometimes worse, than that of comparable public school students.

Evaluating studies that made claims on voucher effectiveness, a September 2002 General Accounting Office report asserted that “there is no significant difference in achievement gains between voucher users and nonusers.” The third annual evaluation of the Cleveland voucher program commissioned by the Ohio Department of Education found that between 1998 – 2002, there was “no consistent, significant differences in achievement between scholarship and public school students by the end of third grade” in any subject.¹ These are two of many credible sources that have found evidence that vouchers simply aren’t working to raise student achievement.

Even research by avowed voucher advocates has been so thoroughly discredited that supporters no longer cite it as evidence that vouchers “work.” Despite their high profile, not one of the studies on voucher achievement put out by researchers such as voucher advocates Jay P. Greene and Paul Peterson has held water when replicated by others. In “Another Look at the New York City School Voucher Experiment,” Alan B. Krueger of Princeton University and the National Bureau of Economic Research and Pei Zhu of Princeton University re-examine Peterson’s data and conclude that the difference in achievement between the African-American students who received vouchers and the control group of students is statistically insignificant. “The safest conclusion,” they say, “is probably that the provision of vouchers did not lower the scores of African-American students.”²

2. **Schools, not parents, do the choosing in “school choice.”** Ultimately, vouchers are not about parental choice; the school makes the final decision as to which students it will accept. This means that schools of choice will choose to accept – and to retain – those students who are easiest to educate.

According to a 1998 U.S. Department of Education survey of urban private schools, between 70 and 85 percent of schools would “definitely or probably” *not* want to participate in a voucher program if they were required to accept “students with special needs, such as learning disabilities, limited English proficiency, or low achievement.”³ Even if they were willing to accept students with special needs, however, most private schools are not equipped to do so. And reports already have surfaced of low performing or special needs kids being “counseled out” of voucher schools.⁴

¹ Evaluation of the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program 1998-2001. Indiana Center for Evaluation, March 2003. Available online at <http://www.indiana.edu/~iuce/documents/clev5exec.pdf>.

² <http://www.irs.princeton.edu/pubs/pdfs/470.pdf>

³ “Barriers, Benefits and Costs of Using Private Schools to Alleviate Overcrowding in Public Schools,” U.S. Dept. of Education, 1998.

⁴ “Whose Choice” series, Akron Beacon Journal, Dec. 13-15, 1999.

3. **Vouchers drain money from public schools.** At a time when children in public schools need as many extra resources as we can give them, and when No Child Left Behind requirements are stretching scarce state and district resources, vouchers make bad economic policy.

The voucher program in Milwaukee, for example, cost an estimated \$65.6 million in 2002-2003 alone, nearly half of which came as a reduction in funding to the Milwaukee Public Schools. In 2001-02, up to 238 Wisconsin school districts were forced to raise property taxes to make up for funding lost to the voucher program.⁵ Schools that lose students to the voucher program are not “saving” the cost of educating those children, as the cost of running a classroom does not change if one or two students leave it.

4. **Voucher schools escape accountability to the public.** Those who use public funds must be held accountable for their effective use. This principle received strong bipartisan support with the passage of the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). But vouchers contradict NCLB and stand accountability on its head. Some voucher supporters both tout No Child Left Behind as a major achievement and actively promotes vouchers. In fact, the two initiatives seem at complete odds with each other. Under NCLB, all students must achieve proficiency in math and reading by 2014, proven by their performance on standardized tests. But a child who leaves the public school with a publicly-funded voucher is no longer held to the same standards as all other children.

With one exception, no voucher program currently in effect requires students using publicly financed vouchers in private schools to take the same tests as students in public schools. Voucher schools are not required to report their achievement levels to the public, as other publicly-funded schools do. In Florida, Cleveland and Milwaukee, a growing number of private schools accepting vouchers have come under fire for their fiscal and educational negligence. Yet, their independent status as private schools allowed them to collect public funds while their practices were shielded from public scrutiny.

Just because parents choose schools doesn't mean that they are safe, that they benefit students academically, or that they are a good use of taxpayer dollars. The question is not whether parents have a right to choose these schools, but rather whether taxpayers should be paying for them.

5. **The public, including minority groups, does not support vouchers.** By a large majority, the public opposes vouchers and all methods claiming to improve public education that involve replacing current institutions.

According to the 2003 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll, 60 percent of the public opposes vouchers, and this number is growing.⁶ Moreover, voters in eight statewide referenda have voted down vouchers, including in Michigan and in California, where in both states over two thirds of African American voters opposed vouchers as recently as 2000.

⁵ “MPCP Facts and Figures for 2002-2003.” Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, February 2003. Available online at <http://www.dpi.state.wi.us/dpi/dfm/sms/doc/mpc02fnf.doc>.

⁶ Lowell C. Rose and Alec M. Gallup. The 35th Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitude Toward the Public Schools. August, 2003. Available online at <http://www.pdkintl.org/kappan/k0309pol.htm#5>

In Texas, "opposition to school vouchers is at its highest level since the Texas Poll began asking the question in 1998. Fifty-eight percent of Texans oppose allowing public school students to use vouchers to attend private schools using tax dollars for tuition. Thirty-six percent support vouchers."⁷

6. **Voucher dollars do not go far enough for the neediest kids.** Supporters claim the Washington, DC, Cleveland and Milwaukee voucher programs, as well as the tuition tax credit programs in several states, will provide needy families with choices otherwise available only to more affluent families. In practice, however, this is rarely the case.

For example, a 2002 evaluation of the Arizona tuition tax credit program revealed that these thinly-veiled vouchers primarily benefited middle class families whose children already attended private school. According to the report, the wealthiest 25 percent of private schools received *over five times* as much in tax-refunded money as the least advantaged quarter of private schools. The average scholarship for that program was \$856 in 2000, not nearly enough to cover even the least expensive private school.⁸

In Cleveland, the maximum voucher a student can receive is \$2250; in Milwaukee, students receive \$5,882 for 2003-04. Neither of these amounts approaches the cost of attending the cities' most elite private schools, even if such schools were to participate in a voucher program.

7. **Vouchers cost taxpayers' more money, not less.** Advocates claim that vouchers save public dollars because private schools educate children more cheaply than public schools; both assumptions are false. Voucher programs actually cost taxpayers more because overall school spending is not reduced. In-depth case studies of voucher programs also point to reckless spending among voucher schools and one city has experienced a building boom among private voucher schools as they expand using public dollars.

Columbia University's Dr. Henry Levin found that, after adjusting for the cost of transportation and special education, voucher schools in Milwaukee actually cost almost \$1,000 more per pupil than the Milwaukee Public Schools.⁹ And a 1999 audit of the Cleveland voucher program's first year found almost \$2 million in questionable expenses, including transportation for students who were not even attending voucher schools. The real cost of vouchers comes not in the form of tuition payments but from "hidden costs" billed to taxpayers and to needy families, such as transportation and uniform fees. Vouchers are no bargain.

8. **Many of the children most likely to use vouchers would attend private school anyway.** Vouchers have been touted as an avenue for disadvantaged children to escape their sinking public schools. But many voucher proponents would like to see all children, regardless of income or the performance of their school, attending private schools with vouchers. And in the existing voucher programs, their value as an "escape hatch" from poorly performing public schools is already in question.

⁷ http://www.brownsvilleherald.com/ts_comments.php?id=59331_0_10_0_C

⁸ John Gehring, "Arizona Report Finds Poorest Gain Little from Tax Credits." *Education Week*, April 10, 2002. Available online at <http://www.edweek.org/ew/story.cfm?slug=30credit.h21&keywords=voucher>.

⁹ Henry Levin, "Educational Vouchers: Effectiveness, Choice, and Costs." *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, vol. 17. 1998.

In Cleveland, a Policy Matters Ohio study found that at least 39 percent of all voucher students had previously attended private schools or preschools, while only 21 percent had been enrolled previously in a Cleveland public school.¹⁰ Even in Florida's corporate voucher program, in which students must have been enrolled in a public school the previous year to receive a voucher, this has proven difficult to enforce. For example, two Internet-based for-profit schools were given permission to enroll children through the corporate voucher program who had not been in public school the previous year. The most recent information from Washington, DC's voucher program reveals that 19 percent of the students slated to receive publicly funded voucher previously attended private school and 15.4 percent of those enrolled are four and five year olds who have never attended public school.¹¹

9. **Vouchers are constitutionally suspect.** Though the conservative-dominated U.S. Supreme Court narrowly ruled in favor of the Cleveland voucher program in *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*, many state constitutions bar the use of public funds to religious schools. In fact, two-thirds of states have constitutions that provide for greater separation of church and state than the U.S. Constitution does.

Voucher laws violate state constitutions for reasons other than church/state separation. In 2002, circuit court Judge Ralph Smith struck down the Florida voucher programs as unconstitutional in *Holmes v. Bush*. Smith deemed the program unconstitutional because it "supplants the system of free public schools mandated by the Constitution," but did not rule that the program must be suspended pending the decision's appeal. In Colorado, however, Denver District Court Judge Joseph Meyer issued an injunction against the newly established voucher law. The December 2003 ruling found the program unconstitutional on the grounds that it took local control over schooling away from districts; the program, scheduled to send its first voucher recipients to private schools in Fall 2004, is now on hold.

10. **Vouchers will not improve public education.** The only proven, replicable way to improve public education is through research-based reform methods, like those that are raising achievement levels in schools and districts across the country. Many public schools and districts are improving education and raising achievement by *doing what works*: implementing research-based instructional programs, improving professional development, reducing class size, extending school hours to provide extra help for struggling students, and enforcing safety and order in classrooms and school buildings.

Vouchers are part of a high-risk, high-cost, and low-accountability tactic; they are a false promise that has not been proven to raise achievement and that ultimately will fail children.

¹⁰ Zach Schiller, "Cleveland School Vouchers: Where the Students Come From." Policy Matters Ohio, September 2001. Available online at <http://www.policymattersohio.org/pdf/ClevelandVouchers.pdf>

¹¹ Sewell Chan, "Many D.C. School Vouchers Go Unused." Washington Post, September 1, 2004. Available online at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A50668-2004Aug31.html>