

VOUCHERS IN AN INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

In discussions of school vouchers, advocates and researchers are increasingly referring to experience outside of the United States. Knowledge of this international experience is not widespread, few people have really digested what is in this international research, and reference to this international research is often greeted with uncritical acceptance or dismissed as totally irrelevant. Our subcommittee believes this international research could add new insights to the U.S. discussion of vouchers, but it needs to be made accessible to a broader audience and its strengths and weaknesses acknowledged. Our subcommittee, therefore, believes that a literature review of this work could be an important and relatively low cost contribution to the policy debate. Some organizations, such as the Center on Education Policy, have prepared reports reviewing particular aspects of the international experience, but a broad review with an examination of research methods behind the results seems to be lacking.

Why Do This?

This work could serve three important purposes:

- To fill in American knowledge gaps about the nature(s) and effects of voucher systems with a comprehensive literature review of what has been learned from the experience of other nations;
- To help the discussion of this research move beyond uncritical acceptance or complete dismissal of this work by assessing the degree of confidence that should be placed on findings and their generalizability (both in methodological and contextual terms);
- To create a common resource and reference point for scholars, policymakers, and others involved in the issue by preparing a summary of the original work.

Since no new research is proposed, we believe the relatively modest costs justify the potential multiple benefits.

How Would This be Done?

We envision the review covering many aspects of vouchers and propose the "Topic Categories for Evaluation Questions" (distributed at earlier meetings) to be a useful framework of topics for the literature review. This review would account for different types of voucher research (e.g., implementation/process research, impacts/outcomes for voucher users, broader system effects, etc.) and would emphasize "full disclosure" reporting, ranging from how the voucher system works to contextual issues (both of which may have to be found outside the research literature) to descriptions of research methodology and data collection strategies. We propose that the review seek to make explicit statements about the strengths and weaknesses/limitations of the research data and methodology used, based on principles of sound research appropriate to the study under consideration (e.g., ethnographic case study vs. quantitative data collection/analysis). Illustrative issues in this regard include: the nature of

alternative ("counterfactual") against which to compare program experience and the implications of this for the findings; data collection strategies (e.g., who is in the sample/who is missed and with what implications for possible bias in or limitations of the findings); context of the program and nature of the sample, with implications for generalizability of findings; etc.. To the extent feasible (e.g., language issues), we propose that the review include and analyze "primary" research studies cited in "secondary" research analyses.

Who Could Do This?

Expertise in the countries involved, the issues covered, and the methodologies used should be the prime criterion. This review is likely to require multiple investigators because of number of countries, languages, and range of methodological expertise involved. There are opportunities to build multiple perspectives into the process, either in the conduct of the work, its review (at a variety of points), or both. For example, given the likelihood of the proposed literature review requiring a team effort, the team could be constituted using "multiple perspectives" as one criterion; or/and, the project could build in a broad-based group of advisors and reviewers with multiple perspectives on the issue. In addition, the product could include sections with comments by advisors/reviewers with multiple perspectives on the issue

What are Open Issues in This Proposal?

Some questions remain open in this proposal, which may be taken up by the larger group or flagged for consideration in a more detailed literature-review project design and/or "request for proposals."

- What are the rules for exclusion or inclusion of a country?
- What are the rules for inclusion or exclusion of a "voucher" system (e.g., universal voucher, targeted voucher, direct aid to private and religious schools, combination systems, etc.)?
- How should the product be organized (e.g., country by country? issue by issue, along the lines of the "Topic Categories"? type of research effort (e.g., implementation vs. outcomes research? combinations and permutations thereof?)