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School Voucher Debate Gets an Incomplete

(Washington, DC) -- Public financing of school vouchers is one of the most contentious issues facing U.S. education policy today and is likely to be a central topic in the upcoming presidential election. The debate has become polarized with the pro and anti-voucher camps lining up against each other based on their respective philosophies without always looking at the evidence or asking the right questions.

The Center on Education Policy, a national independent advocate for public education and for more effective public schools, has released "School Vouchers: What We Know and Don't Know -- And How We Could Learn More," a report to raise the level and lower the volume of the debate and help focus policymakers, parents, and education officials on what is understood about voucher programs and what questions remain unanswered.

The Center's report is designed to facilitate an open dialogue about voucher programs among people with opposing views. "Only through an objective well-informed debate grounded in substantive research can the strengths and weaknesses of voucher programs be fully understood," said Jack Jennings, Director of the Center on Education Policy.

The Center convened a diverse panel that included prominent opponents and proponents of vouchers. This panel of researchers, representatives of public, private, and religious school groups, and foundation officials reviewed voucher programs in Milwaukee, Cleveland, and Florida, as well as in countries around the world. Despite the hardened positions on public school vouchers, the Center found that the research on voucher programs is inconclusive and is limited by significant gaps in assessment.

Based on the Panel's discussions and an analysis of the research, the Center established the following key findings:

- *Inconclusive evidence* -- current information is inadequate to accurately determine whether vouchers improve student achievement levels or other outcomes.
- *Impacts beyond achievement* -- research must be conducted to determine how well programs are being implemented, whether schools are complying with student selection and other requirements, why some families do not apply, and why some students leave voucher programs.
- *Effects on schools* -- there is little information to determine how voucher programs impact public, private, and religious schools on curriculum, instruction, and operations of participating schools.
- *Other countries* -- a detailed study of international voucher programs should be undertaken to determine what can be learned from these experiences.
- *Challenges of research* -- there is a need for researchers to design objective voucher studies that will expand our knowledge of the full impact of voucher programs on students and schools.

The Center offers a series of recommendations targeted to policy-makers and researchers to help build our knowledge and understanding of voucher programs. The recommendations include:

Policy-makers should:

- Require up-front evaluation of requirements for all voucher programs
- Develop extensive requirements for voucher programs
- Commit to long-term program evaluations

Researchers should:

- Include people with differing viewpoints on study advisory boards and among early reviewers
- Assess issues beyond measuring student achievement
- Develop multiple kinds of voucher studies to review issues from different vantage points
- Design, carry out, review, and report studies according to professional ground rules
- Seek school cooperation early in the evaluation process

The report shows that the fundamental challenge facing policy-makers and education officials is to address the gaps in our understanding of current voucher programs and begin to answer the unresolved questions. Without objectively addressing all the issues relating to current voucher programs, the debate will remain polarized and divisive, thereby undermining efforts to reach the shared common goal -- improving student achievement.

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