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School Vouchers: No Clear Advantage in Academic Achievement

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In the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s, private school advocates tried to build support for tuition vouchers, payments of public tax funds for private school tuition. President Richard Nixon most notably endorsed this idea. Proponents of vouchers argued that parents who sent their children to private schools were "taxed" twice -- once by paying regular public school taxes and again by paying tuition for their children's private schools. That proposition did not carry in the public debate, and vouchers were not enacted.

In the late 1970s, voucher proponents shifted tactics and found a new argument: poor children in the inner city deserved the same right to a good education in a private school as did children of more affluent parents who could afford the tuition. This strategy put an "equity" face on vouchers. It made liberals squirm because they believed they had the interests of poor students most at heart. In addition to that political advantage, this equity argument made vouchers seem part of school reform.

This new argument carried the day, and vouchers were enacted. During the 1990s, the Wisconsin state legislature created a voucher program for Milwaukee students, and Ohio adopted a voucher program for Cleveland. New voucher programs were established in Florida in 1999 and Washington, D.C. in 2004. The Florida law was struck down on state constitutional grounds, but the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the Ohio law, clearing the way in many states for new voucher legislation.

Thus, the shift of strategy by the pro-voucher forces toward equity and reform arguments produced success. Their opponents were put in the uncomfortable position of arguing against a policy that seemingly would improve the education of low-income students.

Unfortunately, though, the main premise of the equity argument has not been fulfilled -- inner-city poor students attending private schools with vouchers in general show no greater gains in academic achievement than comparable students in public schools.

This week, the [Center on Education Policy](#) released a [report](#) that reviews ten years of research on voucher programs in Wisconsin, Ohio, Florida, and Washington, D.C. The main conclusion is that students using vouchers to attend private schools do not generally attain higher test scores than public school students. The report also points out that much of the research over the last ten years has been conducted by pro-voucher organizations, and yet these organizations have not conclusively shown higher academic achievement resulting from vouchers.

Seeing their main rationale unfulfilled, the proponents of vouchers in the last several years have shifted to new reasons for vouchers, such as the inherent value of parents choosing their children's schools. The proponents, though, ought to be held to the equity argument for vouchers. If vouchers don't lead to higher achievement for low-income students -- and test scores suggest they do not -- then that removes a major educational rationale for voucher programs.

In addition, the equity argument for vouchers is eroding in another respect. The new voucher programs are not focused on poor students. This year, the state of Indiana enacted a voucher program that is available to middle-income families. The state of Wisconsin has expanded eligibility for the Milwaukee voucher program to include higher-income families in suburban districts and Racine. Douglas County, Colorado, has outdone those two states and created a voucher program for students from families of any income level. Children of millionaires in Douglas County, as well as children of middle-income and poor families, will be able to use public tax dollars to pay for private school tuition in Colorado.

These actions show that the equity argument put forth in the late 1970s was successful in opening the doors for vouchers. The proponents of vouchers needed an appealing argument to overcome resistance to using public funds to send students to private schools. The focus was put on helping low-income children in inner cities to achieve at higher levels. Unfortunately this has not proven to be the case, but that argument did make vouchers more acceptable so that now they are expanding beyond inner-city, low-income students to children of middle class and upper income families.

The public debate ought to revolve around the clear issue of whether we as a nation want good public schools for all students, most particularly for low-income students. The main issue should not be whether poor inner-city kids should receive public support to attend private schools. If we really cared about improving the education of low-income students, we would guarantee them high-quality preschool programs, experienced elementary and secondary teachers, high academic standards and fair funding. That is what research tells us will really help those kids and what we ought to commit to doing.

Today, 90% of American students attend public schools, a slightly higher share than the 88% who did so from the 1950s through the 1970s. Clearly, the future of America is being formed in the public schools where the vast majority of tomorrow's citizens and workers are being educated. We should not get sidetracked into debates about vouchers.

We should stay focused on how to improve all public schools and how to provide a good education for children from low-income families.