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School Vouchers Have No Strong Effect on Student Achievement According to Review of 10 Years of Voucher Research and Action

CEP Urges Greater Scrutiny of Research to Avoid Bias

WASHINGTON, D.C. – July 27, 2010 – A new report by the Center on Education Policy (CEP) that reviews a decade of voucher research finds no clear positive impact on student academic achievement and mixed outcomes overall for students who attend private schools using vouchers.

CEP, one of the nation's leading sources of education research, also found that much of the recent voucher research has been carried out or sponsored by pro-voucher organizations and urges greater scrutiny to ensure future studies are not biased. CEP's report comes amid a spike in interest in school vouchers – and disagreement about their merit – that has been fueled in part by Republican control of the U.S. House of Representatives and a majority of statehouses.

Keeping Informed about School Vouchers: A Review of Major Developments and Research reviews and synthesizes major voucher studies of the past decade. It also summarizes current publicly funded voucher programs and reflects on voucher policies since 2000, when CEP last looked at voucher research. Over the past 10 years there have been significant court rulings, the defeat of voucher referenda in some states, and the creation of new voucher programs. Evidence has also accumulated about the effects of older voucher programs.

Overall, several of the most prominent voucher studies released since 2000 conclude that achievement gains for students receiving publicly funded vouchers are similar to those for comparable public school students. These studies include findings from voucher programs in Cleveland, Milwaukee, and Washington, D.C.

Studies of Washington, D.C., and Milwaukee included in CEP's review also found higher high school graduation rates among voucher students. Some of this advantage becomes less significant when family characteristics are taken into consideration, such as income and education, and these studies could not determine whether higher graduation rates are a direct result of practices in voucher schools. Parents of voucher students are also generally more satisfied with their children's education after using vouchers, multiple studies have found.

"We have a great body of research about the effects of vouchers that policymakers should draw on to inform current debates," said Alexandra Usher, co-author of the CEP study. "Before state legislators and Congress move quickly to enact new voucher programs, they should consider the evidence from programs already in place for several years to ensure they understand the impacts their policies would have."

Noting that many voucher studies of the past decade have been sponsored or conducted by organizations with clear positions or mission statements in favor of vouchers, the report also recommends steps to ensure that voucher studies are designed, conducted and reported in an objective and rigorous way.

“We were surprised to find so many studies done by pro-voucher groups,” said Nancy Kober, co-author of the CEP study. “While this doesn’t mean researchers with definite positions on vouchers can’t be objective, it speaks to the need for outside scrutiny of study methods and guidance from objective expert panels.”

The report also points out that rhetoric used by voucher advocates to support voucher programs has shifted in recent years. In past years, proponents often argued that vouchers would give low-income students trapped in under-performing schools a chance to attend a better school and achieve at higher levels. As evidence has accumulated that vouchers have had little effect on achievement, some proponents have chosen to highlight research showing higher graduation rates among voucher students and greater satisfaction among parents and to emphasize the inherent value of parental choice. Voucher opponents, meanwhile, have emphasized that voucher students do not come out ahead academically and continue to maintain that vouchers drain public schools of much-needed resources while affecting only a small number of children.

The scope of voucher programs and proposals has also broadened over the past decade beyond serving just low-income students in low-performing urban schools, the report finds. Some of the newer voucher programs, such as those in Indiana, Wisconsin, and Douglas County, Colo., are open to middle-income or suburban families.

Studies of voucher programs in Milwaukee, Florida, and Ohio, including research by groups with a clear pro-voucher mission, have found some evidence of achievement gains among students in *public* schools most affected by vouchers, which the authors of these studies attribute to competition from vouchers.

Part I of the CEP report outlines CEP’s own reflections on the changing voucher landscape and synthesizes findings that cut across multiple studies of vouchers over the past decade. Part II briefly describes the current voucher programs, as well as significant court cases and statewide ballot initiatives over the past ten years. Part III summarizes the major findings and methods of 27 studies of publicly-funded voucher programs conducted since 2000.

The full report is available online at www.cep-dc.org.

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Based in Washington, D.C., and founded in 1995 by Jack Jennings, the Center on Education Policy is a national independent advocate for public education and for more effective public schools. The Center works to help Americans better understand the role of public education in a democracy and the need to improve the academic quality of public schools. The Center does not represent special interests. Instead, it helps citizens make sense of conflicting opinions and perceptions about public education and create conditions that will lead to better public schools.