

**School Choice in New
York City After Three
Years: An Evaluation of
the School Choice
Scholarships Program**

Executive Summary

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 1997, the School Choice Scholarships Foundation (SCSF) announced that it would provide 1,300 scholarships so that children of low-income families in grades K–4 in the New York City public schools could transfer to private schools. Each scholarship, or “voucher,” was worth up to \$1,400 annually and could be used for up to four years at a religious or a secular school. The SCSF received applications from more than 20,000 students from February through April 1997. From the pool of applicants, scholarship recipients were selected in a lottery held in May 1997.

This report presents the third-year findings from an evaluation of the SCSF program in which students were randomly assigned to a treatment group (scholarship group) or a control group. The evaluation findings are particularly relevant to the current national debate about the impacts of vouchers on students and parents—especially in that the SCSF program is one of the largest of the current voucher programs in terms of enrollment and has yielded results for a racially and ethnically diverse population of low-income students. Similar randomized field trials of school voucher programs have been conducted in Dayton, Ohio, and in Washington, D.C. This summary highlights the key evaluation findings and briefly describes the study.

KEY FINDINGS ON OUTCOMES

Impacts on Test Scores After Three Years

- On standardized tests, students *offered* a scholarship generally performed at about the same level as students in the control group. More specifically, we used the Iowa Test of Basic Skills to assess students’ performance in reading and mathematics and found that, overall, students in both groups performed about the same. Moreover, those who *ever attended* a private school did not perform at higher levels than those who *never attended* a private school. Nor did those who attended a private school for *three full years* perform at higher levels than those who did never attended a private school.
- The pattern of impacts for Latino students, however, differs markedly from the pattern for African American students. We found no impact of a scholarship offer or of attending a private school on the test scores of Latino students, but we found a significant impact on the test scores of African American students. After three years the composite test scores (a combination of math and reading) of African American students who were offered a scholarship were about 5.5 percentile points higher than the composite test scores of African Americans not offered a scholarship. The composite test scores of African American students who ever attended a private school (for one, two, or three years) was 7.6 points higher than the composite test scores of students who had never attended a private school. The composite test scores of African American students who attended a private school for three full years was 9.2 percentile points higher than the scores of students who had never attended a private school. Impacts of a voucher offer do not vary significantly by grade level.

- After the first year of the program, the overall impact of a voucher offer on composite test scores for African American students was 4.4 percentile points; after two years, the impact was 3.2 percentile points; and after three years, it was 5.5 percentile points. Changes in the impact of actually attending a private school were larger, starting at 5.7 percentile points in year one, falling to 4.4 points in year two, and then rising to 9.2 points in year three. The differences between years one and two and years one and three were not statistically significant, but the difference between years two and three was.
- There was no change in the impact of being offered a voucher or attending a private school on Latino test scores over time.

Impacts on School Facilities, School Climate, Parents' Satisfaction with Schools, and Parental Communication and Involvement

- As reported by parents, the schools attended by the scholarship students were smaller than the schools attended by public school students (382 students versus 519 students in each type of school, respectively). Class size was smaller as well—there were two fewer students in the private-school classrooms than in the public-school classrooms (26 students versus 28 students). Private schools were less likely than public schools to have a cafeteria, a nurse's office, or special programs for non-English speakers and students with learning problems. On the other hand, private schools were more likely to have computer laboratories, after-school programs, and tutors for individual students. No differences were found in music or art programs, or in programs for advanced learners. Nor were there differences found in the availability of child counselors, a gymnasium, or a library.
- Private schools were more orderly than public schools, according to parents. Compared with public school parents, private school parents were less likely to report that the following were serious problems at their child's school: students destroying property, tardiness, missing classes, fighting, cheating, and racial conflict. For example, 64 percent of the parents with a child in public school reported that fighting was a serious problem compared with 34 percent of the parents with a child in private school.
- Private-school students reported better learning conditions at their school than did public-school students. Sixty-five percent of private-school students said that students get along with teachers while only 49 percent of public-school students said the same. Private-school students were also more likely to report that students are proud to attend their school and that behavior rules are strict. They were also less likely to feel put down by teachers or to report a lot of cheating by other students.
- Students in private schools were asked to complete more homework than students in public schools. Sixty-four percent of the parents with a child in private school said that their child had more than an hour of homework per day, compared with 41 percent of the parents with a child in public school.

- Parents of students in private schools said that they received more communication from their school about their children than did parents in public schools.
- Parents with a child in private school will be less involved in their child’s education than parents with a child in public school. For example, parents of public-school students reported that they helped their child with homework an average of 11 times a month, compared with 9 times a month for private-school parents.
- Compared with public-school students, private-school students were more likely to participate in church youth groups and attend religious services.
- Parents of children who switched from public to private schools were much more satisfied with their schools than parents of children who remained in the public schools. For example, when asked to grade their schools, nearly 42 percent of the parents with a child in private school gave their school an “A,” compared with just 10 percent of parents with a child in public school.

KEY FINDINGS ON PARTICIPATION IN THE SCSF PROGRAM

- Among those offered a scholarship, 53 percent used it to attend a private school for three full years, 9 percent used it for the first two years but not the third, 12 percent used it only in the first year, 2 percent used it only in the second year, and 24 percent never used it.
- Parents who declined a scholarship most frequently gave the following reasons for doing so: they could not afford the added tuition and expenses not covered by the voucher (45 percent), they could not find a school in a convenient location (33 percent), and their child had special needs (14 percent).
- There are many similarities and some differences between the parents and students who used the scholarship for at least one year and those who did not. Baseline test scores were similar for scholarship takers and decliners; scholarship takers and decliners, and their parents were equally likely to have lived at their current residence for two years; and mothers of takers and decliners were equally likely to have been born in the United States. On the other hand, scholarship decliners were somewhat less likely than scholarship takers to have received special education services before the baseline testing session; mothers of scholarship takers were more likely to have attended college for some amount of time; and the average income of families of scholarship takers was \$2,400 higher than that of scholarship decliners.
- Students who attended private school were no more likely than those who remained in public school to move from one school to another. Parent reports indicate that similar percentages of public and private school students remained in the same school throughout the school year. Similarly, the percentage of students who planned to attend the same school the next year was similar for the two groups. In contrast, public school students were more likely to “graduate” from one school level to the next, perhaps because private schools are more likely to have grades K–8 in the same

school. Suspension rates for students in private school were less than those for students in public school.

THE EVALUATION

The evaluation of the SCSF program in New York City presented a unique opportunity to examine the impact of vouchers on students and parents for students switching to private schools. New York City has not only a racially and ethnically diverse population but also the largest school system in the nation. We computed the effects of vouchers on education outcomes by using a randomized experimental design, which allowed us to compare two statistically equivalent groups of students and thereby isolate the unique effect of vouchers on the outcomes of interests, including student test scores, school climate and facilities, and parents' involvement and communication with schools.

Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. (MPR) along with researchers at Harvard University and the Program on Education Policy and Governance at Harvard have joined together in conducting this evaluation, which includes data collection, analysis, and the reporting of annual findings. MPR has collected data four times on the same students and families since 1997 (1997, 1998, 1999, and 2000). For instance, The Iowa Test of Basic skills was given to students to measure their academic achievement in reading and mathematics. In addition, parents and students completed surveys so that we could learn more about students' educational experiences, parents' experiences with the schools, and their school-related plans for the upcoming year. The student response rate for each test administration was moderately high—100, 78, 65, and 67 percent in 1997, 1998, 1999, and 2000, respectively. The response rates were somewhat higher for the parent and student surveys than for the achievement tests.