

Should a New No Child Left Behind Include Vouchers?



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Over the next few months, Congress will be debating the biggest piece of federal legislation pertaining to K-12 schools, and some have suggested that we should use it to invest in taxpayer-funded scholarships that can be used by parents to send their children to private or religious schools. This proposal, often referred to as school vouchers, is grounded heavily in the belief that if the education system is given the opportunity to act like the free market, the quality of schools would improve, as consumer choice and competition would run bad schools out of business. And it is attractive at first blush for two reasons in particular: it would enable parents to be the primary decision makers when it comes to their kids, and it would allow some students an immediate way to escape schools that are failing them now rather than asking them to wait for states and districts to improve those schools for all the children in them—a task that inevitably takes time many students simply don't have.

While taxpayer vouchers for private schools currently exist in some form in 13 states and the District of Columbia, some lawmakers argue that the upcoming reauthorization of the

Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), better known as *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB), should be used to codify vouchers into federal law and spread them across the country. The current public drafts of the bill in both the House and Senate would stop short of that policy, but they would take a step in that direction by redirecting Title I funding (the major stream of federal funds targeted at low-income students) away from schools with the highest concentration of poverty and instead allow it to follow individual low-income students to the *public* school of their choice. But other Members in both the Senate and the House have already suggested that they plan to push for also allowing taxpayer dollars to follow students to private or religious schools as the bills continue through the legislative process.¹ Though the appeal of school voucher programs is palpable, there are five reasons that lawmakers should be wary of taking this step.

1. Voucher programs have not proven an ability to deliver on the promise of academic success.

There is little convincing evidence that students who receive vouchers are better off for it. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, a comprehensive review of voucher programs between 2000 and 2011 revealed that for the most part, voucher recipients fared no better or worse than students in the public school system.² One analysis of Milwaukee's voucher program in 2014 revealed that only 13 percent of voucher students scored proficient in math and 11 percent scored proficient in reading (both *lower* than the general public school student population in Milwaukee). Another study of Cleveland's voucher program found a mixed bag—voucher students performed worse in math but better in reading than their public school peers.³ There is some evidence that voucher programs may be correlated with modest gains in graduation rates, however, like many studies on the effects of vouchers, it is unclear whether the increase is a direct result of the voucher programs themselves or other kinds of reforms, as often multiple policy changes were made simultaneously.⁴ Without stronger data showing that

vouchers do more than merely maintain the status quo—especially for low-income and minority students—it is difficult to justify the diversion of resources away from districts and schools that sorely need it.

2. Voucher programs escape accountability and obscure how students are doing.

One factor that contributes to the lack of evidence about whether taxpayer vouchers really work to help low-income students is the reality that many states do not require their private schools to participate in the same transparency and accountability systems mandated of schools in the public system under the current provisions of *No Child Left Behind*. This means that unlike their public school counterparts, a majority of private schools do not have to administer the annual tests adopted by other K-12 schools in the state, they are not required to release their scores publicly (either for student averages or high-needs groups of students), and they need not set annual goals or face any repercussions if they fail to meet them.⁵ While it is one thing to allow private schools to escape this oversight when private money is footing the bill, this lack of transparency and accountability becomes incredibly problematic when voucher programs allow students to attend private schools on the taxpayer's dime. The lack of participation in the statewide testing system alone would make it impossible to tell how voucher students or specific groups among them, like students with disabilities or students of color, are faring from school to school—let alone compared to their non-vouchered peers. In fact, we've already seen states that run their own voucher programs like Indiana and Wisconsin go out of their way to pass state laws explicitly permitting voucher schools to opt out of statewide tests.⁶ Not only does this erase the enormous progress our country has made over the last decade in being able to uncover and address yawning gaps between various groups of student populations, it would also make it impossible to judge if the taxpayer investment was actually paying off. Instead, taxpayers would have to just blindly trust

that private schools are meeting proficiency standards—with no proof that students whose private school tuition they're funding are actually learning.

3. Voucher programs wreak havoc on school district budgets.

Most school districts administer their budget one way; voucher programs distribute spending through a completely different mechanism. Although a few school districts have begun to experiment with the student-based budgeting, most school districts make their annual budgets based on school-wide enrollment and district needs, not individual students, as would be the case under a voucher system.⁷ As school superintendents lamented in a white paper earlier this year, the idea of making Title I funds portable in any form—whether limited to public schools or expanded to private and religious schools—“destabilizes district financial planning and undermines local educational authority.”⁸ And while the drafts of NCLB rewrites currently on the table propose only making Title I funding portable within the public school system (still problematic for the same reason), proposals to permit this funding to move into the private school system would wreak even greater havoc on local school leaders—as they would have even less funding available to spend on crucial school- and district-wide programming in places with high concentrations of poverty, and that funding would be all the more unpredictable.

4. Voucher programs undercut support for schools with high concentrations of poverty—support which is at the very core of Title I's purpose.

The concept of “letting the money follow the child” may sound appealing, but the use of vouchers to do so would divert limited federal resources away from districts needing financial assistance the most. Since none of the proponents of vouchers are proposing that we increase funding levels, any money allocated toward a voucher program would be

coming out of the same pot of money currently dedicated to Title I funding—which distributes money to schools based on a formula of economic need. Instead, voucher programs would allow students to take taxpayer money out of the public school system, leaving low-income districts that rely heavily on needs-based Title I funding with less money to support their students. This redirection of funding to private schools would be even more detrimental to public school districts than current Title I portability proposals, because instead of shirting funding between the poorest and wealthiest *public* schools in the state, voucher systems run the risk of moving that same taxpayer funding into *private* schools, which are often already equipped with the best resources available.

5. Voucher programs are not the education fix Americans want.

Americans overwhelmingly reject the idea that vouchers are an effective way to repair our country's education system. This sentiment is evidenced through multiple public opinion surveys, which consistently rank vouchers as one of voters' least preferred school improvement strategies. For example, the 2013 PDK/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes toward the Public Schools found that despite voters' openness to school choice options like charter schools, over 70% of Americans said that they opposed vouchers—the highest level of disapproval for vouchers ever recorded in the 45 years of the survey's administration.⁹ Similarly, when voters were asked in a Third Way poll last year about how to best improve public schools, “allowing taxpayer dollars to help low-income public school students to attend private and parochial schools,” ranked dead last, with only 43% of voters in support of such a change—including less than half (48%) of Republican voters.¹⁰

Conclusion

At the end of the day, vouchers would create major disruptions to school districts with very little promise of payoff. Not only is there no real evidence to suggest that

vouchers produce better outcomes for kids, there are serious concerns that voucher programs would divert limited resources away from the students and districts that need them the most. Federal taxpayer-funded vouchers could set back the goal of improving our public school system as a whole, a risk that most Americans are not willing to take. And even when judged only as the Band-Aid solution they are, vouchers just aren't particularly effective. While states may decide to use their own taxpayer funding to experiment with voucher programs, Congress shouldn't risk gambling away federal Title I funding and doing damage to the low-income and high-needs students it exists specifically to protect.

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END NOTES

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- 10.** Global Strategy Group conducted a live telephone survey from November 11th to November 16th of 808 general election voters, with an oversample to reach 201 public school teachers. The margin of error at the 95% confidence level is 3.5% for voters at large and 7.0% for public school teachers.