

The Voucher Debate after *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*: The Need to Focus on Core Education Issues

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The U.S. Supreme Court decision in the Cleveland voucher case means that vouchers have now become a more realistic political option. This means that debate must focus on the core issue of whether voucher programs will have the effect of improving educational achievement, especially of low-income pupils. Evidence from the U.S. and other countries suggests that such programs are unlikely to do so.

The decision of the U.S. Supreme Court in *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* will significantly alter debate over national education policy in the U.S., mainly because vouchers have suddenly become a more realistic political option.

Until June 27, 2002, the day the high court issued its ruling, it was possible in to dismiss voucher proposals out of hand. Why invest money or energy in a scheme that would most likely be deemed unconstitutional? But such easy victories for opponents of vouchers are now a thing of the past. With the constitutionality issue resolved, voucher proponents are likely to go on the offensive and push for such schemes on a variety of educational and other grounds. Indeed, pro-voucher legislation is already being unwrapped and introduced at both the state and national levels.

Proponents and opponents alike will now find themselves debating head-on the core policy issues raised by voucher proposals rather than the peripheral one of whether they could pass judicial muster. As this debate intensifies, it is important to keep clear heads about what these core policy issues are.

A Variety of Agendas

Focusing on core issues is not always easy, since both proponents and opponents of vouchers come to the debate from a wide variety of perspectives and with diverse agendas, not all of which are transparent. The *Akron Beacon Journal* published a series of investigative reports in December 1999 showing that the Cleveland voucher scheme was supported by top state officials largely as a way of channelling public funds into Roman Catholic schools for political purposes.¹ Vouchers have intuitive appeal to neo-liberals who believe that the unleashing of market forces will have a salutary impact on the delivery of social services, including education. Vouchers are also favoured by those seeking as a matter of principal to shift as many social activities as possible from public to private hands. On the other side, the most vigorous opponents of voucher proposals have been the teachers unions, for whom jobs are a central concern.

As a result of these various agendas, the push for school vouchers has created some strange bedfellows. Free marketers not known for their sensitivity to the plight of the poor find themselves allied with disadvantaged urban parents and community organizations who are simply fed up with the abysmal quality of the schools their children must attend. For them, vouchers appear to offer an escape hatch for at least some of their children.

In his separate opinion upholding the majority view, Justice Clarence Thomas took note of this fact. "Just as blacks supported public education during Reconstruction," he wrote, "many blacks and other minorities now support school choice programs, because they provide the greatest educational opportunities for their children

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in struggling communities.” His argument struck a chord with Justice David Souter, who in the main dissent conceded that “the record indicates that the schools are failing to serve their objective.” Justice Souter suggested that if anything could justify vouchers, this argument would come the closest to doing so.

As the voucher debate heats up, it is critically important to focus on the issue that Justices Thomas and Souter have raised, namely, the likely *educational* impact of vouchers. Will voucher schemes promote educational achievement, especially for low-income students?

Do Voucher Programs Raise Student Achievement?²

The answer in Cleveland would appear to be negative. In a study commissioned by the state of Ohio, Kim K. Metcalf of Indiana University compared the test scores of students in Cleveland who received vouchers to those of public school students who wanted vouchers but did not get them because there were not enough to go around, and she found no significant differences in the scores of the two groups. Susan Tave Zelman, the state superintendent of public instruction, was quoted by the *New York Times* as saying, “We don’t see anything one way or another from these studies on the academic results of vouchers. The lack of dramatic results is neither a negative nor positive judgment on the program.”³

Similar conclusions emerge from studies of voucher schemes elsewhere in the world. Chile, for example, operated a universal voucher program that generated a large number of new for-profit secular private schools that operated alongside the more established and somewhat better resourced Roman Catholic schools. Careful analysis of fourth-grade achievement data in Chile indicates that, compared to the traditional public schools, Catholic schools generated higher achievement in Spanish and math, while the new secular schools produced somewhat lower achievement than public schools in Santiago, and even lower achievement outside the capital city.⁴

New Zealand’s experience with universal public school choice illustrates the potential downside of unrestricted choice programs for disadvantaged students. One undoubted effect of the expansion of choice in that country was that it exacerbated the problems of the schools at the bottom of the distribution, notably those serving low-income students in South Auckland and other inner-city areas, and reduced the ability of those schools to provide an adequate education.⁵

Of course, some disadvantaged students in both of these countries were made better off, because vouchers in Chile and public school choice in New Zealand gave those students access to some schools that previously were outside their financial reach. This observation is important and complicates any discussion of voucher programs. From an ethical perspective, it is hard to justify denying schooling options to such children simply because their families are poor or because their departure may reduce the quality of education of those left behind. Providing additional choices to these families is a desirable goal.

The U.S Evidence from Voucher Experiments

The most reliable U.S. evidence of the impact of voucher schemes on the educational achievement of students who shift to private schools comes from studies by William G. Howell and Paul E. Peterson of the privately funded voucher schemes in New York City, Washington, D.C., and Dayton, Ohio.⁶ These studies are based on experimental designs in which the children of low-income families who applied for a voucher were randomly assigned to two groups. Those in the treatment group received a voucher, while the others were assigned to a control group and received no voucher. All students were given baseline achievement tests, and all were subject to follow-up testing on an annual basis.

Based on three years of the voucher programs in New York and Washington, D.C., and two years in Dayton, Howell and Peterson found no evidence of a general achievement difference between the public and the private schools.⁷ In no year and in no individual city (other than the second year in Washington) was there evidence that students who shifted to private schools achieved at higher average levels than students who remained in the public school

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system. Further, when the analysis was disaggregated by the race of the students, no differences emerged for either white or Hispanic students.

The one subgroup for which Howell and Peterson did find positive differences in achievement is that of African American students. Even for this group, however, the differences were consistent across neither cities nor grades. For example, African American students in Washington, D.C., who shifted to private schools achieved at far higher levels in year two of the program, but their gains were negligible in years one and three. Although the New York study generated a more consistent average pattern of achievement over time, the positive differential emerged clearly and consistently only for students in the fifth grade.⁸

Based on Howell and Peterson's preferred estimates, which disproportionately weight the relatively stable New York results, African Americans who switched to private schools scored about 3.9, 6.3 and 6.5 percentile points higher than comparable students in the control group in the first three years of the program. These effects are based on the national distribution of percentile rankings on the Iowa Test of Basic skills and are about two-thirds the size of the differences that emerged in another intervention program that helped African Americans—the Tennessee experiment that reduced class sizes.⁹

Generalizability of the Positive Findings for African Americans

At best, the Howell and Peterson findings apply to a select group of low-income African Americans. Their analysis shows that the relevant group is less likely to have a mother on welfare, less likely to have a learning disability and more likely to be religiously observant than a random sample of low-income African Americans applying for vouchers in big cities.¹⁰

Furthermore, it is not at all clear that the observed positive achievement effects of private schools can be extrapolated to an expanded voucher program, even one targeted at a similar group of African American students. The issue turns on the explanation for the observed achievement gains. If the apparent success of the private schools for African Americans reflected their autonomy and the absence of bureaucracy, then, following the logic of John Chubb and Terry Moe, an expanded private school sector could, in principle, generate comparable gains.¹¹ The observation that the differential achievement gains emerged only for African Americans, however, argues against this explanation.

Alternatively, if the success of the private schools reflected a better match between the needs of African American students and the offerings of particular schools, then expanding the private sector would once again continue to generate comparable positive benefits, but only if the factors that parents were looking for could be replicated in newly established private schools. The problem is that the measured success of the African American students who shifted to private schools likely reflects in part the more disciplined student bodies in the private schools, especially in the Roman Catholic schools, or the more advantaged and motivated group of students whose parents were willing to pay the private school tuition. These are school characteristics that cannot easily be replicated in new private schools. This explanation for the positive findings in the Howell and Peterson research cannot be ruled out, since the authors had no data on the mix of students in the receiving private schools.

A Further Caution

Before raising the hopes of African Americans in other cities, it would behoove policy makers to be aware of the high rates of attrition from voucher programs over time. In the early years of the Milwaukee voucher program, dropout rates were very high: 54 percent of the voucher recipients did not return to their private school after the first year of the program.¹² The high attrition rate in that program might be explained in part by the poor quality of some of the participating private schools, given that religious schools were not permitted to participate and the fact that one major private school closed.

High dropout rates, however, also emerged in the privately funded New York City voucher program, which did include religious schools. By the end of the third year of that program, 38 percent of the voucher users had dropped

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out of their voucher-subsidized private school.¹³ Multivariate analyses of those who were offered vouchers, used them, and then dropped out indicate that while African Americans were more likely than other racial groups to accept an offer of a voucher, they were also more likely to drop out of the private schools in subsequent years.¹⁴ This finding raises additional questions about the potential for voucher programs to meet the needs of the one group for whom some positive benefits have been observed.

Focusing on the Core Issue

As the debate over vouchers heats up, it is important to keep the focus of discussions on the core issue of whether voucher programs have the capacity to improve the quality of teaching and learning for disadvantaged students. The weight of the evidence thus far—both in the U.S. and in other countries—suggests that they do not. It would be a sad irony if the long-term impact of *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* were to be a diversion of valuable resources and energy from the important task of figuring out what interventions will in fact succeed in promoting school improvement, especially in urban areas with their large concentrations of low-income minority students.

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¹ Doug Oplinger and Dennis J. Willard, “Voucher System Falls Far Short of Goals,” *Akron Beacon-Journal*, Dec. 14, 1999.

² Much of the following discussion draws on Helen F. Ladd, “School Vouchers: A Critical View,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, forthcoming.

³ Richard Rothstein in the *New York Times*, July 3, 2002.

⁴ McEwan, Patrick J. and Martin Carnoy, “The Effectiveness and Efficiency of Private Schools in Child’s Voucher System” *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 22, no. 3 (2000): 227.

⁵ Fiske, Edward B. and Helen F. Ladd, *When Schools Compete: A Cautionary Tale* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 2000).

⁶ Howell, William G. and Paul E. Peterson, *The Education Gap: Vouchers and Urban Schools* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 2002).

⁷ Howell and Peterson, 2002, Table 6.1.

⁸ Howell and Peterson, 2002, Table 6.2 and Table D.1.

⁹ When the results of the Tennessee class size experiment are converted into gains in percentile ranks, they show a 9-to-10 percentile rank gain for black students shifting to a small class within a public school. This comparison between the effects of vouchers and the class size experiment based on percentile ranks is preferred to comparisons based on the more common measure of “effect sizes” defined in terms of standard deviations, because the latter comparisons require that the relevant standard deviations come from similar distributions of test scores. (Personal correspondence with Alan Krueger.)

¹⁰ Howell and Peterson, 2002, Table 3.12.

¹¹ Chubb, John and Terry Moe, *Politics, Markets, and America’s Schools*. (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1991).

¹² Witte, John, *The Market Approach to Education: An Analysis of America’s First Voucher Program* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001).

¹³ Howell, William G, “Dynamic Selection Effects in School Voucher Programs.” Paper prepared for presentation at the annual meeting of the Association of Public Policy and Management, 2001, Washington, D.C. .

¹⁴ Howell, 2002, 14.