



How Can States Make School Voucher Systems More Accountable, Accessible, and Transparent?



Joshua Cowen
Education Law Center and Michigan State University

Ryan D. Nowak
Michigan State University

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National Education Policy Center

School of Education
University of Colorado Boulder
nepc.colorado.edu

Acknowledgements

NEPC Staff

Faith Boninger
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Patricia Hinchey
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Elaine Duggan
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Kevin Welner
NEPC Director

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Executive Summary

Between 2021 and 2024, more than 20 states passed new laws that created or expanded publicly funded private school tuition systems. These voucher and voucher-like plans include direct appropriations to voucher programs, “education savings accounts” to pay for tuition and other educational expenses, and tax credits for private donations that fund tuition with diverted state revenue.

To date, independent research has documented serious negative outcomes of such programs. However, the prevalence of the programs continues to grow, especially in but not limited to politically conservative states. This suggests that evidence alone is insufficient to compel lawmakers to reject voucher schemes, particularly where those systems already exist.

Accordingly, this brief summarizes the research evidence about vouchers and identifies three areas of policy design that are especially important for student success and a good-faith use of public funding: *accountability*, *access*, and *transparency*. It examines features associated with these areas in voucher policies across a subset of states with brand new (Arkansas and Iowa), recently expanded (Arizona, Florida, Indiana and Ohio), and older (Wisconsin) voucher systems. The brief also reviews the extent to which legislation in these states provides for new, independent *evaluation* of their programs. This analysis points to 12 policy recommendations to ensure that new or existing voucher systems follow evidence-based practice. Specifically, when policymakers design legislation for private schools accepting public monies, they should take the following steps:

Accountability

- Mandate that such schools be subject to public school accountability measures—including participation in the same standardized testing programs—with findings identified and summarized at the school (not sector) level.
- Mandate background checks and either public or private school certification for all teachers.

Access

- Require voucher schools to follow federal, state and local anti-discrimination guidelines for students and staff.
- Require schools that deny admission or expel (or counsel out) students to submit a written report—including the school’s rationale for each case—to the administering state agency.
- Mandate that expulsions follow state law for public schools.

Transparency

- Mandate financial disclosures, including annual revenue (from both public and private sources), expenditures, debt, and capital outlays.
- Mandate expenditure/revenue audits, alongside yearly limits on state voucher spending.
- Authorize voucher payments on a monthly or quarterly—not annual—basis.
- Avoid wasting money on a third-party vendor by assigning a state agency (perhaps Treasury or Education) to administer the voucher system.
- Where a third-party administrator cannot be avoided, mandate a bidding process that follows state procurement guidelines and is subject to open-records requests—including financial terms of the contract awarded; mandate that vendors follow all state and federal guidelines for secure handling of student records.

Research and Evaluation

- Mandate independent evaluation of the system every five years, preferably conducted by a university-based team or the equivalent (for example, Mathematica Policy Research, RAND, or Abt Associates), and require relevant state agencies and schools receiving voucher funds to provide data that evaluators need.
- Require annual reporting of data on the percentage of voucher users who had never been in public school and on each school’s charging of any tuition/fees beyond the voucher subsidy.



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Introduction

By any measure, the legislative sessions between 2021 and 2024 were banner years for advocates of school voucher systems. During that time, more than 20 states (as of this writing) passed new spending bills to support private K-12 schooling.^{1,2} Funding mechanisms have been structured as tax credits that reduce revenues to states, direct appropriations for private tuition, or “education savings accounts,” which can be used as vouchers or for other private education expenses. Voucher advocates broadly claim that tax-funded programs improve student outcomes by allowing parents to choose schools that “best fit their child’s needs” while simultaneously applying competitive pressure to public schools, forcing district leaders to improve academic performance or risk public funding.³

The evidence undermining the first claim—that choice improves student outcomes—is overwhelming; indeed, voucher research has documented some of the worst policy-induced achievement declines in the history of education research. In relation to the second claim, there is some modest evidence favoring the notion of competitive effects of school choice. However: such competitive impacts are dwarfed by evidence suggesting that simply investing directly in public schools creates larger and more widespread benefits.

Thus, even in the most generous assessment of what is known, it is obvious that ideology and not evidence primarily drives the case for vouchers. And, that point is strengthened still further by additional scholarship on who chooses vouchers, who stays in a voucher-accepting schools over time, and who is at risk for discriminatory impacts recent legislation allows.⁴ Meanwhile, the most salient question for policymakers focused on state and district education budgets is: *who makes use of a voucher once a state offers them?* And on that question, the evidence—dating back to 2007—is overwhelming. As vouchers expand beyond targeted

programs tied to federal poverty guidelines, most students using vouchers had previously been enrolled in private school at the family's expense, or had otherwise never enrolled in a public school (either because they had been homeschooled or were entering private kindergarten).⁵ The implication is that vouchers present new costs to taxpayers and increasingly substantial liabilities for state budgets as funding for private schooling increasingly moves from families to the taxpaying public.⁶

Despite this evidence, many policymakers across the country must continue to grapple with managing voucher systems and designing new voucher legislation. To date, only one state—Illinois—has ever scaled back or eliminated a voucher-like spending program after its passage. While the evidence is clear that research-oriented decision-makers or education stakeholders should continue to oppose voucher systems, their commitment to evidence-based policy need not stop once a legislature imposes a new voucher plan. The same evidence that suggests vouchers poorly serve children and threaten state spending on public schools also suggests strategies for improving voucher systems' equity, adequacy, and outcome-driven efficiency.

In short, although there is no “good” voucher bill from the standpoint of evidence or equity, some programs are better or worse than others. This brief therefore focuses on significant differences among voucher policies to identify opportunities for systemic improvement. It provides a review of the existing literature on programs old and new; a survey of recent developments in state legislatures; an analysis of key legislation in seven states and of the literature typically cited in support of voucher programs; and, based on that information and analysis, a series of recommendations for legislation that better serves children, parents, and the taxpayers bearing the cost of private voucher school funding.

Review of the Literature

This summary includes only studies published in serious peer-reviewed outlets and independent, audit-style state or federal evaluations. Although organizations like the Brookings Institution or the Urban Institute have provided critical nonpartisan evidence on the voucher issue, think tank research is omitted to avoid controversy over what is and is not an advocacy or a politically leaning organization. Also excluded are obscure journals such as the *Journal of Private Enterprise* or the *Journal of School Choice*, which are publication homes to a variety of pro-voucher tracts written as serious research. For example, as this brief was drafted, the *Journal of School Choice*—housed at the University of Arkansas Department of Education Reform—offered a special issue on the topic “A School Choice Revolution?” Articles were invited primarily from the university's own faculty, its current and former graduate students, and staff from the right-wing Heritage Foundation.⁷

This review scans 10 specific topics: student achievement, educational attainment, private school quality, private school tuition prices, academic and other educational expenses, student access, student turnover, private school capacity, competition, and accountability. Evidence from this review inform a subsequent analysis of assessment, access, transparency and evaluation issues in existing legislation.

Student achievement evidence can be divided into two analytical time periods. During the early days of pilot-size voucher trials (often conducted as randomized experiments), there was some indication that vouchers had small but positive impacts on students who transferred from public to private school.⁸ Soon after, however, two longer evaluations (in Milwaukee and Washington, D.C.) found neither positive nor negative results on student achievement.⁹ Then, beginning in 2017, a series of studies from larger, scaled up voucher systems—the closest comparison to recently implemented state voucher systems—found dismal academic results. In Indiana, Louisiana, Ohio, and Washington D.C., researchers uncovered some of the largest test score declines ever seen in education research literature—on par with or exceeding COVID-19’s impact on academic outcomes.¹⁰ In Louisiana, for example, negative student achievement impacts reached above -0.40 standard deviations—roughly triple the impact of Hurricane Katrina on student test scores in New Orleans.¹¹

For the most part, negative achievement impacts have not been offset by gains in *educational attainment* (high school graduation or college enrollment rates), a common measure in state and federal accountability systems. Early research suggested hope for improved attainment. In 2013, researchers evaluating the first iteration of the Washington, D.C. voucher program for the U.S. Department of Education found a large impact. The same year, some members of the same research team found smaller positive impacts in Milwaukee. However: more recent research on other voucher systems has found no positive or negative differences in attainment.¹² The current picture, then, suggests that voucher programs do not reliably improve either student achievement or educational attainment.

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A key explanation for the large, negative results on student achievement is *private school quality*. When scaled up past the pilot phase, larger voucher systems appear to spur the entry of low-quality, pop-up providers in the private school marketplace. The average time till closure for pop-up schools in Wisconsin was less than four years.¹³ Additionally, many schools that did exist prior to voucher legislation have found themselves financially distressed and struggling to remain open due to lack of interest and enrollment.¹⁴ The decline in academic results may be a result of some vouchers subsidizing *non-academic and even non-educational expenses*. For example, private schools in Milwaukee that were attached to churches became the dominant source of revenue for their congregations once vouchers contributed funding.¹⁵ The potential for new revenue from a stream of steadily increasing tax money available in voucher programs helps explain changes in the *price of attending private school*: Researchers have found that some private schools raise tuition once taxpayers begin subsidizing enrollment via vouchers.¹⁶

Research on *student access*, *student turnover*, and *private school capacity* help broaden the picture of real-world effects of school choice. The evidence suggests that even when voucher offers are restricted to lower income families, children from even the lowest income households rarely move to voucher schools.¹⁷ Instead, even after vouchers are initially distributed by lottery, higher income students and students scoring higher on exams are more likely to attend and remain in voucher-accepting schools.¹⁸ Moreover, lower income students, stu-

dents of color, and students scoring lower on standardized exams who do manage to move to voucher-accepting private schools are also the least likely to remain there, suggesting a pattern of push-out or selective attrition.¹⁹ Fortunately, many of these students improve academically when they return to public school.²⁰ And despite claims that parents have a wide range of educational priorities for their children—and some evidence for such diverse school preferences—the data are clear that a dominant factor for all parents considering school vouchers is academic quality.²¹ Unfortunately, for reasons related to school quality noted above, there are real capacity constraints among the few effective private schools that accept vouchers. Families often get their third or even fourth choice of school in scaled-up voucher systems.²² In short: Vouchers do not ensure that students actually have access to the schools their parents prefer.

Finally, we turn to systemic outcomes that voucher advocates have continuously insisted would automatically result from school choice *competition* and, relatedly, *accountability*—both touted as ways to force public school improvement and to ensure quality in all schools. The introduction of vouchers in a handful of states (primarily Florida and Louisiana, as well as Wisconsin) did appear to spur slight improvements in academic outcomes for students in public schools competing with voucher schools for funding.²³ It is crucial to note, however, that such effects tend to be tiny (in Florida, roughly the equivalent of moving from the 50th to the 50.2 percentile) and evident in communities with historically marginalized populations—schools that stood to lose the most state funding.²⁴ Thus, in relation to the policy objective of gains in *public* school student outcomes, the evidence has been overwhelming for more than a decade that direct increases in public school funding produce larger and more long-term positive effects than voucher programs.²⁵ And, while voucher advocates claim that competition itself is a sufficient accountability measure for policymakers or parents to gauge school performance, only one study has actually assessed the effects of a high-quality accountability mechanism. In that study, when legislators passed a bill requiring Milwaukee’s voucher schools to administer the state achievement exam and report results by school name—the same requirements public schools faced—test scores in voucher schools improved substantially.²⁶ This suggests that the simple threat of lost revenue by itself is not enough to generate improvements in schools receiving taxpayer funds. Instead, accountability and transparency better motivate improvement.

Recent Developments

Despite compelling research evidence calling vouchers into question, between 2021 and 2024, more than 20 states passed new spending bills to support private K-12 schooling through the time of this writing.^{27, 28} Of these, five are structured as tax credits (Arkansas, Missouri, Nebraska, Ohio, and Oklahoma), three provide direct appropriations for private tuition (Indiana, North Carolina, and Ohio), and 11 allow “education savings accounts” for parents to use as vouchers or for other private education expenses (Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Iowa, Montana, New Hampshire, North Carolina, South Carolina, West Virginia, and Utah).

Legislative discussion about these voucher bills has been characterized by supporters’ stead-

fast opposition to oversight and regulation of voucher-related schooling²⁹—even as Idaho³⁰ and Oklahoma³¹ witnessed investigations of third-party vendors for fraud and unexplained increases in service handling fees.³² Also consistent as new bills were passed has been advocacy for universal voucher systems based on exaggeration of supporting research³³ and dismissal of the research evidence calling them into question.³⁴

Discussion and Analysis

The high-quality voucher studies cited earlier urge extreme caution before policymakers expand voucher systems. However, they also suggest that several features of policy design are especially critical to educational equity and adequacy in existing voucher systems or in cases where new legislation has passed despite research-based warnings. This section details seven major state voucher systems: some brand new (Arkansas and Iowa), some that have been recently expanded (Arizona, Florida, Indiana, and Ohio), and one older system, Wisconsin, home to the nation's first publicly funded voucher system. We chose these for their variation in size, scope, recency of adoption, and presence in contemporary national news coverage on the issue.³⁵ Specifically, we look at three areas of policy design that are especially important for student success and a good-faith use of public funding: *assessment*, *access*, and *transparency*. Given the importance of those factors, we also review the extent to which recent voucher legislation provides for new, independent *evaluation* of these programs. The analysis below combines these components of policy design into four broad areas either present or absent in existing voucher system policy: *assessment*, *access*, *transparency*, and *research and evaluation*. An understanding of each is necessary to understand comparisons of state systems.

Essential Features of Voucher Systems

Accountability

Although the evidence suggests that several features of voucher systems are troubling, the catastrophic academic outcomes for students who transfer from public to private schools make it critical for academic results to be the starting place for any discussion of policy design. Whether state law requires that private schools receiving taxpayer funding must administer an academic assessment is among *the* key sticking points for debate in legislatures recently considering a voucher bill.³⁶ Also important is whether teachers in voucher-receiving schools must be state-certified, since research has consistently demonstrated that teacher quality is critical to student success.³⁷ Public schools must employ certified teachers, and so it is reasonable to insist on the same requirement in voucher-accepting schools, which often become nearly *entirely* funded—for some 85% of their enrollment—by taxpayers.³⁸ In the sense that public revenue funds them, voucher schools are public schools too.

Access

Voucher lobbyists claim that the underlying intent of these bills is providing new opportu-

nities for children—especially children who have been “failed” by so-called one-size-fits-all public schools.³⁹ But that claim is only as good as the extent to which voucher systems provide meaningful access to private schools, even setting aside the dreadful academic results found in the research literature for those who do get that access. This is particularly an issue for students with special needs, students from single-parent or divorced families, and those who are either LGBTQ+ or have LGBTQ+ parents.⁴⁰ Recent reporting suggests such students may face discrimination by religious groups operating the private schools in question.⁴¹

Transparency

The closure rates noted above indicate that many voucher schools operate under financially distressed conditions, raising the issues of basic transparency in private school finances and long-term school viability as well as the question of whether a private school should have state certification before receiving state funds. These issues exist alongside a relatively new concern in the creation of voucher systems: whether a state contracts with a third-party vendor to administer its voucher system and, if so, whether the vendor is allowed to charge an additional fee for each voucher it services. Reporting on this topic has become routine, including (where possible) discussion of the bidding process for vendors.⁴² At least two vendors have been investigated by state governments for potential fraud or mishandling of taxpayer funds.⁴³ Additionally, a third, quasi-governmental organization working with the Arizona Department of Education experienced a data breach involving student records in 2023, suggesting that contractors might perhaps be better vetted.⁴⁴ A bidding process that follows state procurement guidelines and is subject to open-records requests (including financial terms of the contract awarded) would likely prevent many instances of vendor fraud. Mandating that vendors follow all state and federal guidelines for secure handling of student records could prevent data breaches.

Research and Evaluation

Finally, there is the matter of whether recent voucher legislation authorizes independent review and evaluation. For this discussion, “evaluation” indicates the extent to which recent voucher legislation authorizes an independent review or audit of voucher system performance. Such evaluation was a highlight of the Milwaukee and Cleveland voucher systems in the 1990s, as well as of the first federally funded voucher system in Washington, D.C., both at its initial and then subsequent authorization.⁴⁵ And, more recent studies in Louisiana and Indiana that found substantial voucher impacts were identified in formal or quasi-formal partnerships with the state educational agencies.⁴⁶ In other words, information on voucher effects comes not only from academic assessments, but also from independent, repeated research resembling an academic audit. For example, the U.S. Department of Education oversaw two evaluations of the Washington, D.C. system. The first found more favorable results than its follow-up, suggesting a need for periodic re-evaluation of voucher performance (perhaps every five years, as in these two studies).⁴⁷ State legislation may require, allow or make such evaluations impossible.

Comparison of State Systems

Table 1 summarizes the legislative details for each of the seven states examined through the framework of these four policy developments, excluding—except where discussed in the analysis section below—more targeted programs like a special needs voucher. Following are comparative overviews of the state systems in each category.

Table 1: State Accountability and Transparency Requirements for Voucher Systems

| | AZ ⁱ | AR ⁱⁱ | FL ⁱⁱⁱ | IN ^{iv} | IA ^v | OH ^{vi} | WI ^{vii} |
|--|-----------------|------------------|-------------------|------------------|-----------------|------------------|-------------------|
| Administer State Standardized Tests? | No | Yes | No ⁴⁸ | Yes | Yes | No | Yes |
| Require Teacher Certification? | No | No | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Accept All Applicants? | No | No | No | No | No | No | Yes |
| Document Reason for Rejection? | No | No | No | No | No | No | - |
| Required to Provide Accommodations Beyond FAPE? | No | No | No | No | No | No | No |
| Public Financial Reporting? | No | No | Yes ⁴⁹ | No | No | No | Yes |
| 3rd Party Vendor Handles Payments? | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | No | No |
| Amount Vendors Can Take? | 2.5%+ | 5% | 3% | 5% | - | N/A | N/A |
| Affirmative Requirement for Program Evaluation? | No | Yes | No | No | Yes | No | No |

*Find state references at end of brief.

Accountability

A simple requirement for standardized testing offers only partial insight into a state’s assessment system. A second concern is whether the requirement specifies the same test required for public schools, allowing an apples-to-apples comparison. A third is whether results are reported out publicly, allowing parents and other taxpayers to examine and compare results.

All states but three, Arizona, Florida, and Ohio do require voucher-receiving schools to administer the state assessment. Florida requires a nationally normed assessment and Ohio requires an alternative standardized assessment, but they allow private schools to choose whether or not to use the state version. For all intents and purposes, this allows private schools to avoid accountability, since apart from complicated psychometric conversion scales, most standardized tests are not directly comparable to each other; as a result, few parents can make sense of one result compared to another. This is a critical contrast to federal and state accountability requirements for public schools, which stress performance and reporting at the school level. Research has stressed that only when individual school

performance is reported out by school name in the voucher system—just as it is for public schools—does voucher student performance improve.⁵⁰

Results are similarly mixed in regard to teacher certification. As with the state assessment, Arizona and Florida do not require state certification for teachers in voucher schools—or even a bachelor’s degree, which both states allowed to be waived with “equivalent experience.” The same is true of Arkansas. Although research on teacher effectiveness indicates that teachers are a major source of variation in student outcomes (good teachers *do* matter), there is limited evidence as to whether credentials like certification are reliable indicators of teacher quality.⁵¹ However, absent detailed data on teacher experience—which research finds to be a key influence on teacher practice⁵²—or more reliable assessments of individual teacher contributions to student learning, basic credentialing seems a minimal threshold for voucher school teaching staff. Absent credentialing requirements, legislation allows the academic background of adults instructing children each day remains to remain vague—especially given limited information on private schools’ own building-level practice.

Access

Access indicators include whether the states examined require voucher schools to: accept all applicants; document the reason for rejecting a child; and/or provide mandatory accommodations for students with a special academic need (Table 1).

Current voucher systems prioritize existing voucher users for enrollment in a following year—a reasonable feature ensuring students’ ability to remain in a given school over time. But both academic literature and recent reporting indicate that the vast majority of new voucher users in statewide expansions are students previously enrolled in the private sector.⁵³ Therefore, an important access indicator is whether public school students—especially those intending to leave a low-rated public school—are prioritized in admissions. That criterion is present in only one state, Wisconsin.

In addition, only Wisconsin requires private schools receiving voucher payments to accept all students who apply. Other states lack not only that requirement, but also any requirement for schools to explain in writing their rejection of certain student applicants. While voucher proponents argue for allowing “pluralistic” private school discrimination based on religious values, even allowing such discrimination would not preclude requiring schools to submit a written explanation of their admission denials for state tracking purposes.⁵⁴ Such tracking matters: While Wisconsin may nominally require all applicants be accepted, the high rates of student exit from voucher schools make clear that initial enrollment in a private school is not the same thing as long-term enrollment there. Private schools can and do dismiss students under the radar of state oversight, and in ways that suggest both systematic aversion of some students by ability-grouping and in some cases overt discrimination.⁵⁵

The issue of access is especially important for students with disabilities and special academic needs. None of the seven states detailed requires voucher schools to offer accommodations under their general use vouchers apart from minimal FAPE (free, appropriate, public education) standards—and few if any related reporting requirements appear in the autho-

ricing legislation examined. Only Florida, Ohio, and Wisconsin have separate vouchers for students with special needs, and for the most part such vouchers do contain provisions that private schools provide a documentable service as a condition of payment.

Voucher advocates have explained the scarcity of special needs accommodations in general-use voucher systems by arguing that some parents may leave for a private school specifically to avoid having a child labeled as special need.⁵⁶ But independent watchdogs including the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) and the Arizona Attorney General's office have issued warnings that parents with a special needs child are not well-informed about protections they give up when accepting a voucher.⁵⁷ Note that Table 1 indicates that Arkansas requires public schools in the geographic location of voucher-receiving private schools to contract to provide these services—potentially mitigating the issue of access to some services for some students—but these simply shift the burden back to public districts. Moreover, recent open records requests from investigative reporters in that state have shown that a substantial number of existing private school parents “jumped the line” for voucher eligibility—which nominally listed students with special needs first—by quickly obtaining doctors' notes or other superficial documentation to justify a disability status.⁵⁸ This suggests that students with real special needs may be further crowded out by a voucher system lacking robust protections and requirements.

Transparency

Transparency indicators include financial disclosures on annual revenue (from both public and private sources), expenditures, debt, and capital outlays; the presence or absence of an administrating vendor allowance and its maximum service fee; and whether voucher payments are made to schools periodically or in one lump sum—a particularly salient feature, given the high rate of student exits from voucher schools. It is also important that total state spending on vouchers in a given year is capped in each annual budget negotiation, as vouchers have routinely exceeded initial annual projections from state budget officials.⁵⁹

Florida and Wisconsin do require financial records disclosure, though in the former, only for schools receiving more than \$250,000 in voucher payments. Meanwhile in the latter, there is at least some evidence that disclosures have resulted in financially insolvent schools being denied taxpayer funding.⁶⁰ But as Table 1 notes, the other five states detailed have few or no such safeguards, leaving them open to experiencing the phenomena of new, pop-up schools flooding the tax-subsidized private school market—along with their high rates of school failure. State accreditation is another way to ensure some measure of transparency, but only Arizona requires it for voucher schools, with alternative accreditation routes possible in other states. Accreditation requirements may (or may not) also help clarify school performance. In Wisconsin, for example, conservative voucher philanthropy has funded accreditation programs for voucher schools in that state—but the process does at least ensure some basic level of paperwork is filed at the state level. This minimal standard is important given reporting from states like North Carolina (which does not require accreditation) showing that funding has gone to some entities that appear to exist in name only, without actually serving any children.⁶¹ Similarly, the Arizona attorney general recently indicted a group of individuals who exploited lax oversight provisions in that state's voucher system to create

what investigators called nonexistent “ghost students” to receive funding.⁶²

Third-party vendors administer vouchers in Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Indiana and Iowa, but not in Ohio and Wisconsin. Allowable fees range from 2.5% to 5% in the five vendor states verified (with Iowa undocumented), although some voucher proposals elsewhere have included fees of up to 10% per voucher.⁶³ Except in Indiana, where the state’s treasurer oversees the voucher system, vendors nominally contract with the state education agency to administer funds. Statutes do not make clear exactly how these agencies select vendors, although state procurement laws generally appear to require competitive bid processes at least for final candidates. More to the point, with voucher systems ranging in the hundreds of millions of dollars in taxpayer spending per state, per year, vendor fees consume tens of millions of dollars simply for providing middleman service—money lost to direct supports for children.

Apart from Iowa, which processes payments in one lump sum at the start of the academic year, states distribute voucher payments (either by vendor or, in Ohio and Wisconsin, directly), on a quarterly (Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Indiana, and Wisconsin) or monthly (Ohio) basis. As noted, high exit rates make payment schedules critical so that voucher schools do not receive funds for children they no longer serve.⁶⁴ It is unclear from the legislation examined what, if any, processes may exist for pro-rating or returning student tuition for students who exit, although in general laws require parents to notify the state if they move students from a private to a public school.

Research and Evaluation

In the states studied, language in authorizing legislation is vague in relation to research and evaluation, although it does not explicitly prohibit them. However, only two states—Arkansas and Iowa—have language sufficiently specific to be interpreted as consistent with mandatory evaluation. In Arkansas, the new system requires an annual implementation report that includes academic, satisfaction, fiscal, and persistence rates. Similar reporting metrics are required in the Iowa legislation, as part of the state’s annual condition of education report. But elsewhere, the lack of robust oversight and accountability provisions in authorizing legislation means that taxpayers will be at least partially dependent on pro-voucher industry sources for evidence of self-regulation and reform.

For example, entire organizations—“think tanks”—exist to promote the idea that there is a reliable research base demonstrating that vouchers provide important benefits for children. The leading such think tank, EdChoice (founded by conservative economist Milton Friedman, who first proposed the idea of school vouchers), publishes a periodic update called the *123s of School Choice*, purportedly a volume of evidence supporting vouchers.⁶⁵ As detailed below, however, the latest iterations of the EdChoice catalog are simply lists of primarily industry-backed, voucher advocacy sources that actually underscore the need for transparent, independent evaluations of new voucher systems. Other researchers have focused on such industry studies in detail⁶⁶ and demonstrated that a substantial portion of the research cited in such documents comes directly from voucher advocates. Moreover, many of these studies are based on proprietary data unavailable to parents or even policymakers. Absent state

guidelines including norms and processes for evaluation and review, reports of voucher impact based on obscured data can readily run the risk of overstatement.

To illustrate this problem, Table 2 details the latest EdChoice study summary; it indicates whether one or more authors are voucher advocates and whether a study constituted a stand-alone report or publication. The table codes a study as written by a “voucher advocate” if one or more of its authors has spoken favorably of vouchers in the non-academic press, based on basic media searches. It codes a study as “Peterson-affiliated” if one or more authors were: Harvard’s Professor Paul Peterson—the original voucher advocacy researcher whose work was cited by the conservative Supreme Court majority which first approved vouchers (*Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* in 2002); either of two Peterson students (Jay P. Greene of Patrick J. Wolf); or Greene or Wolf’s own students—all forming a small training network of voucher advocacy research. Since lengthy citations confer the appearance of rigor and extensive supporting data, the table includes a count of how many unique, single papers actually provide support for claims. This is an important metric, given that EdChoice cites multiple geographic sites or research questions within one publication as separate studies, also enhancing the appearance of abundant research support.

Table 2: Origin of Studies Summarized by EdChoice, by Voucher Outcome Type and Author

| | At Least 1 Voucher Advocate Author | Peterson Affiliate | Unique Papers Within Section |
|-----------------------------|---|---------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Test Scores | 7 (41.2%) | 7 (41.2%) | 15 (88.2%) |
| Attainment | 6 (85.7%) | 6 (85.7%) | 5 (71.4%) |
| Satisfaction | 24 (72.7%) | 21 (63.6%) | 27 (81.8%) |
| Competitive Effects | 17 (58.6%) | 12 (41.4%) | 27 (93.1%) |
| Civic Values | 6 (54.5%) | 7 (63.6%) | 11 (100%) |
| Racial Integration | 8 (100%) | 4 (50%) | 8 (100%) |
| Fiscal Effects | 67 (90.5%) | 46 (62.2%) | 25 (33.3%) |
| Climate & Safety | 7 (87.5%) | 7 (87.5%) | 6 (75%) |
| Whole Document* | 142 (75.9%) | 110 (58.8%) | 110 (58.8%) |

*Rows correspond to voucher outcome categories created by EdChoice in its *123s of School Choice* brief.⁶⁷ The final row contains the values of the entirety of the *123s of School Choice*. Some papers are individually cited in multiple sections, meaning it appears as a unique citation within sections, hence the final column not being a result of clean addition.

As the table above indicates, more than 75% of voucher citations in the EdChoice summary are authored or co-authored by a small group of closely affiliated voucher advocates. Sixty

percent come from either Paul Peterson, two of his former students, or a small number of those two former students' students. This is a potential problem not only in terms of identifying comprehensive, reliable research on vouchers, but also because even without any intentional misrepresentation, reliance on such a restricted research base affects the training of tomorrow's researchers. Readings for graduate students shape the standards for research replication and review that they later apply in their own work and concurrently determine the professional networks they will consult for feedback and comment. In the very best-case scenario, the insularity of voucher advocacy research is a major reason why many of the studies outlined in this policy brief—studies on high rates of student exit from voucher systems, for example, or high rates of private school closure—are simply absent from EdChoice's documents. In the worst-case scenario it's a willful omission.

Moreover, of the purported 188 studies cited, only 110 (58.5%) are actually unique, single papers. The rest are double-counted, and in some cases triple-counted. An example is a 2002 study that Peterson's team published in the prestigious *Journal of Policy Analysis in Management*, which shows positive effects of small (pilot-sized) and privately funded voucher trials in New York, Dayton, and Washington, D.C. In the EdChoice summary, those results are counted as three separate studies—one for each city.⁶⁸ The New York data from that paper were subsequently called into question by two separate research teams for failing to meet basic model specification checks on the results.⁶⁹ The key point here is what other critics have noted: The fact that this small, self-citing, and insular group of research-advocates is responsible for nearly all of the favorable reports on American voucher systems in effect makes evidence supporting vouchers appear more comprehensive and consensus-based than it actually is.⁷⁰

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Such overstatement of the case for vouchers is all the more exaggerated by EdChoice's failure to acknowledge many of the peer-reviewed reports noted in the literature review above. Equally problematic are the categories of the EdChoice summary (again, see Table 2). With the exception of student achievement and

occasionally educational attainment, these are not necessarily the same concerns found in authorizing language, nor do they allow for direct comparisons of voucher and traditional public school performance. The further effect of such EdChoice study summaries, and in some cases the mere existence of those studies in the first place, is to muddle evidence of what are truly unprecedented negative educational impacts since 2010.⁷¹

When evidence comes from such sources in place of newly mandated independent evaluations, policymakers—and ultimately taxpayers and parents—may be unaware of the risks and tradeoffs of creating or expanding voucher systems. Such lack of awareness is all the more glaring given that federal and state accountability systems provide substantive information on public school outcomes. Without robust evaluation of voucher alternatives, real and perceived public school shortcomings exist alongside reports on voucher alternatives heavily skewed toward the best-case scenario presented by their most fervent supporters.

Summing It Up

Although true evidence-based policymaking would preclude new voucher programs from becoming law, there are nevertheless features of such schemes that make some more evidence-oriented and, simply put, better for the taxpayers who bear the cost, and better for the children who use them. This policy brief has discussed the research evidence behind vouchers and the current status of voucher legislation in several key states with key recent developments. From this discussion, we make several important policy recommendations related to the accountability, access, transparency, and research and evaluation of school voucher systems.

Recommendations

True evidence-based policymaking would reject new or expanded voucher programs. However, where policy exists, it is possible to make it more evidence-oriented and, simply put, better for the taxpayers who bear the cost, and better for the children who use them.

Specifically, based on the discussion and analysis above, it is recommended that when policymakers design legislation for private schools accepting public monies, they:

Accountability

- Mandate that such schools be subject to public school accountability measures—including participation in the same standardized testing programs—with findings identified and summarized at the school (not sector) level.
- Mandate background checks and either public or private school certification for all teachers.

Access

- Require voucher schools to follow federal, state and local anti-discrimination guidelines for students and staff.
- Require schools that deny admission or expel (or counsel out) students to submit a written report—including the school's rationale for each case—to the administering state agency.
- Mandate that expulsions follow state law for public schools.

Transparency

- Mandate financial disclosures, including annual revenue (from both public and private sources), expenditures, debt, and capital outlays.
- Mandate expenditure/revenue audits, alongside yearly limits on state voucher spending.

- Authorize voucher payments on a monthly or quarterly—not annual—basis.
- Avoid wasting money on a third-party vendor by assigning a state agency (perhaps Treasury or Education) to administer the voucher system.
- Where a third-party administrator cannot be avoided, mandate a bidding process that follows state procurement guidelines and is subject to open-records requests—including financial terms of the contract awarded; mandate that vendors follow all state and federal guidelines for secure handling of student records.

Research and Evaluation

- Mandate independent evaluation of the system every five years, preferably conducted by a university-based team or the equivalent (for example, Mathematica Policy Research, RAND, or Abt Associates), and require relevant state agencies and schools receiving voucher funds to provide data that evaluators need.
- Require annual reporting of data on the percentage of voucher users who had never been in public school and on each school's charging of any tuition/fees beyond the voucher subsidy.

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