

NEPC Review: The 123s of School Choice: What the Research Says About Private School Choice Programs, 2023 Edition (EdChoice, June 2023)



Reviewed by:

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October 2023

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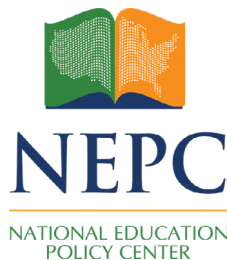
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Summary

The 2023 edition of EdChoice’s report, *The 123s of School Choice: What the Research Says About Private School Choice Programs in America*, is billed as an overview of the varied and often contested research on outcomes in school choice programs, which it defines narrowly as vouchers plus voucher-style programs that provide public funding for private schools. The report examines research on student achievement, access, competitive effects, and other topics, purportedly to help policymakers and parents weigh the benefits and costs of these voucher programs. The report seeks to tally all the relevant studies meeting its criteria and summarize the findings in an easy-to-understand format. In this “vote-counting” exercise, EdChoice claims to show that school choice “works,” based on finding more positive than negative studies. Yet vote-counting is a simplistic, flawed approach that obscures important differences in studies and can create a misleading narrative about the research evidence. Moreover, the report does not fully disclose its strategies for including studies, some of which are questionable. While it claims to present “the research” in a fair way, the report excludes or downplays research that is not as favorable to its agenda. In the end, this report is somewhat useful as a selective bibliography of studies, but the “vote-counting” methodology at the heart of the report seriously limits its use for evaluating these policies.



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I. Introduction

When school vouchers first appeared in modern education reform efforts about three decades ago, they were initially slow to spread. But vouchers and recent variations of the voucher idea—“neovouchers” such as Education Savings Accounts (ESAs) and Tuition Tax Credits¹—are currently proliferating across states, despite serious concerns raised in the research.

School voucher research has been contentious from the beginning. Interest groups have promoted research—some of it of questionable quality—to advance their agendas, especially around issues such as student achievement and school segregation. So it is not surprising if policymakers and other non-researchers are sometimes confused or frustrated by the competing “studies” from different advocates around school choice.

Adding to this contentious body of research is a new report from EdChoice, *The 123s of School Choice: What the Research Says about Private School Choice Programs in America, 2023 Edition*.² EdChoice—previously the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, founded by and named after the intellectual author of the modern voucher movement—has emerged as a primary advocate for school vouchers and voucher-style programs.³

The report focuses not on “school choice” in general, but on EdChoice’s more limited definition: public funding for private schools in the form of voucher or voucher-type programs, which it refers to as “private school choice programs.” The 2023 edition is a continuation of the *123s of School Choice* series, which is itself in some ways a companion of the series *ABCs of School Choice*,⁴ which lists private school choice programs, and a successor to the series *A Win-Win Solution: The Empirical Evidence on School Choice*, which preceded it.⁵ Like the *Win-Win* series, the newer *123* series makes claims regarding “what the research says”⁶

about “school choice,” based on a “vote-counting” analysis of its chosen studies across its chosen outcomes.

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

The report states that it is a “comprehensive guide as a convenient way to see the relevant studies on a variety of topics,” as opposed to more shallow media-driven debates.⁷ The report’s conclusions, similar to those of previous EdChoice reports, are up-front and unsurprising, given EdChoice’s school-choice advocacy mission. The report starts with the question, “Does school choice work?” and immediately answers: “The short answer is yes.” The report goes on to summarize the results of the different studies it selects (what EdChoice had, at least in a previous edition, described as “all the existing research”⁸) across the eight outcomes it identifies, such as student achievement, parent satisfaction, competitive effects, fiscal implications, and racial and ethnic integration. The report argues that over every outcome, the majority of research studies included in the report prove that voucher-based school choice “works”—often overwhelmingly.

For example, the report included 17 studies of the impacts on achievement of the students participating in voucher programs, finding that 11 showed a “positive effect,” four showed no effect, and only three showed a negative effect.⁹ Similarly, on all eight measures, including attainment, parent satisfaction, and competitive effects, most of the 187 studies—84% overall—showed a positive effect, 10% showed no effect, and only 6% showed a negative effect. Furthermore, no negative effect was found in half the outcomes (attainment, civic values, integration, and school safety), while a small percentage of studies found negative impacts in fiscal impacts (6% of studies on the topic), competitive effects on public school test scores (7%), parent satisfaction (6%), and participant achievement (17%).¹⁰ Thus, according to EdChoice, voucher-based school choice overwhelmingly shows positive effects and is clearly a “go” for policymakers.

III. The Report’s Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

The report asserts that it presents “the evidence” on the impacts of private school vouchers,¹¹ implying that its compilation of studies includes all relevant research. Moreover, the report’s selection of eight outcomes implies that these are the outcomes of most interest to readers such as policymakers and parents. The report is unequivocal in its positive interpretation of the assembled research, but it also suggests that, since it presents all evidence and includes all important outcomes, readers can look at the summaries, track down individual studies, and decide for themselves.

IV. The Report's Use of Research Literature

Selection of studies is crucial for any report that purports to include all applicable research. The report indicates that it included every study that has met its criteria, although aside from a preference for randomized approaches, other criteria or search strategies are never justified. This is a concern, because past versions of such reports by EdChoice have missed research that, according to the claimed inclusion criteria, should have been included but was not as favorable to the EdChoice agenda.¹² And current versions include questionable classifications of studies whose stated purpose does not match EdChoice's characterization of them. For instance, the report includes studies of voucher advocacy (not "outcomes"), while other relevant papers are missing.¹³

As explained below, the omission of larger, more recent studies that show negative results for voucher programs is particularly problematic because the report draws conclusions based only on simple counts of the studies chosen for inclusion.

V. Review of the Report's Methods

This report is not an empirical analysis of data, but a "vote-counting" methodology that simply selects and tallies studies. The report notes that it "is not a meta-analysis,"¹⁴ despite focusing on issues that are best illuminated by more sophisticated approaches such as meta-analyses.

Vote-counting studies are generally considered among the lowest-quality method for understanding multiple research studies on a topic. This approach is widely condemned by researchers as simplistic, "flawed," and "should be avoided whenever possible" (clearly the case here).¹⁵ Even though vote-counting studies are deceptively easy to represent and understand, they are methodologically lazy or crude at best, and can obscure basic truths on the findings and misrepresent overall takeaways from the literature.

This failure to consider basic understandings of the weakness of this type of research is ironic, given EdChoice's claimed elevation of "rigorous" research: "matters of methodology are taken seriously at all levels of our organization."¹⁶ In the report's vote-counting approach, the "vote" of all studies is the same, regardless of essential differences in their worth. Moreover, the approach not only selects which studies get a "vote," but selectively chooses results within each study; that is, if a study finds no impact for almost all (sub)groups, but an effect in any one, the study is reported as showing a positive impact. While the authors acknowledge some of these limitations, they nevertheless amplify them by presenting color-coded tabulations with percentages, as if all these studies are of equal value, and in doing so seeking to cast their agenda in a more favorable light.

The figure "Test Score Outcome of Participants from Random Assignment Studies" on pages 15 and 16 of the report offers a prime example.¹⁷ This figure claims to show the impacts of these programs on participating students' test scores—the most prominent academic out-

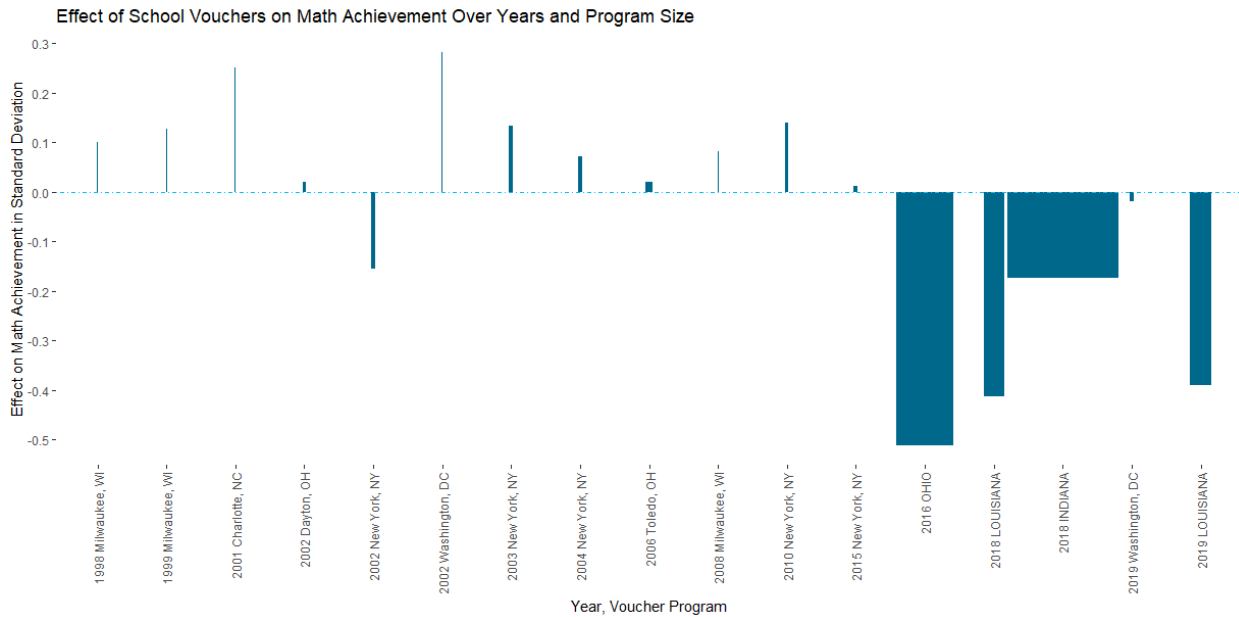
come of the students who enroll in them. Improving learning outcomes is the “main purpose” of such programs, according to the author of the first study featured on the first line of the figure.¹⁸ This figure tallies the learning impacts on voucher program participants in 17 studies from 2001 to 2021. Checkboxes marked “Any Positive Effect” total 11 of the 17 and are colored green, “No Visible Effect” total 4 and are colored yellow, and “Any Negative Effect” total 3 and are colored red.

The report simplistically casts the assembled studies for this category of impacts in an overall positive light, calculating that only 17% of studies show evidence of harm. But this vote-counting approach misrepresents the research. The report observes that “you’ll see a lot more green in the ‘positive’ column than red in the ‘negative’ column” in its tables.¹⁹ While the report earlier acknowledges that “social science is not that simple,” it nonetheless still relies on these simplistic presentations.²⁰ In this report, all studies carry equal weight, no matter their sample size, duration, or effect size. So a small “green-coded” study of a couple hundred or so students in a small program in a single city at a single point in time finding a small impact for a single subgroup carries the same weight as a large, longitudinal study of tens of thousands of children in a statewide program that finds huge, negative impacts on students.

Moreover, the report acknowledges that it excludes other large, well-designed studies from the count (that just happen to show huge negative impacts from vouchers) because:

Our inclusion criteria require at least 10 random assignment studies of a certain outcome to exist in order for us to exclude all other nonexperimental study types. In the case of studies on program participant test scores, we include only random assignment studies. We include both RCT [randomized control trials] and nonexperimental studies in the other outcome sections.²¹

The report provides no research basis for this exclusion of other studies merely because of the existence of an apparently arbitrary number of RCT (mostly much smaller) studies. If we were to include just a few other considerations, such as date, program size, and level of impact,²² a very different story emerges, with more recent studies, all of larger programs (with larger samples), showing substantial negative impacts on students, far outweighing any narrow benefits noted in earlier, smaller studies. The figure “Effect of School Vouchers on Math Achievement Over Years and Program Size” shows that early programs yielded modest gains in relatively small programs, but as programs grew in size in later years, the results turned significantly negative.²³



Source: Center for Evaluation & Education Policy, Indiana University Bloomington

The EdChoice report offers some arguments as to what it considers to be “good studies,” and notes that it seeks to

present the increasingly large body of private school choice research in a clear and easy-to-read format and cite the relevant studies so that anyone who is interested in the individual results can easily find them and read in more detail.²⁴

But this means that the report sacrifices accuracy and integrity in favor of a comic-book-level presentation which just happens to put in a more positive light a policy that has been shown to be hurting, and not helping, participants—by eye-opening levels—in every recent and large study. Certainly, even the admission of any negative impacts is itself notable, because many choice advocates had previously claimed that there was no evidence that these programs hurt student learning.²⁵ Indeed, earlier versions of EdChoice studies highlighted positive test scores without concern about their usefulness.²⁶ However, the report now spends some three pages explaining to readers why they should not pay much attention to newer, rigorous research showing huge relative losses in learning—what it tries to wave away as simply achievement “test scores”—despite the expectation for higher test scores that EdChoice itself used as “one of the talking points that helped school choice pick up steam.”²⁷ Such dismissals of achievement measures are not apparent in earlier EdChoice reports on positive test score outcomes.

Furthermore, despite what it claims, the study includes research that is hardly “high-quality,” but aligns with EdChoice’s agenda.²⁸ Consider the studies listed in the section on parental satisfaction, of which 91% are EdChoice’s “green” category. To understand if parents are satisfied with the programs, a useful study would examine the experiences of all those who

have used the program. But “studies” counted and even conducted by EdChoice often solicit responses only from parents currently using the programs (who are obviously more likely to give positive reviews by virtue of the fact that they are still in the programs) and exclude families who have withdrawn from the program—a substantial consideration, given the notable levels of attrition from these programs.²⁹ For instance, a 2013 “study” cited in the report, conducted by voucher advocates, simply emailed the 179 Arizona parents then “using education savings accounts”³⁰ who had “registered to use a Yahoo! message board that ESA parents created.”³¹ Such an approach is like surveying people at a Nickelback concert as to whether or not they like Nickelback. Whether or not Nickelback is a good band is a different question. This hardly supports EdChoice’s claim to “research that adheres to high scientific standards.”³²

Space considerations prevent a more comprehensive review, but each section suffers from such substantial shortcomings, in addition to a lack of citations to claims about what studies purport to show.³³

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

While the report pays lip service to nuance, its overall conclusion is summed up on the first page: “Does school choice work? The short answer is yes.”³⁴ This, of course, discounts the most recent and, in many ways, best evidence on the “main purpose” of these programs, which shows the exact opposite—that not only does school choice not necessarily work, it harms the students who use it.³⁵ Far from providing a “comprehensive guide” to “relevant studies on a variety of topics,” as opposed to the familiar debates “driven by short op-eds and even shorter tweets”³⁶ (many of which, it should be noted, are produced by the report’s authors and their associates³⁷), this report exemplifies the classic use of statements that are not necessarily factually incorrect, but are still presented in incomplete, oversimplified and misleading ways.

VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

This report serves as a selective bibliography of studies, not as any type of useful illumination on the topic. It suffers from study-selection issues, a mis-weighting of studies of varied value, and—most importantly—a simplistic and often misleading design that serious researchers consider “crude, flawed, and worthless.”³⁸ To paraphrase an old truism, there are lies, damn lies, and advocacy-driven vote-counting reports such as this one.

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