

NEPC Review: Accountability and Private-School Choice (Manhattan Institute, October 2021)



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November 2021

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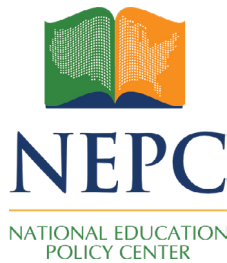
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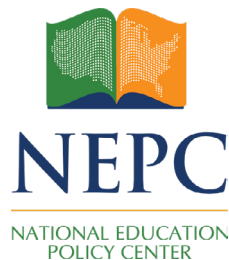
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Summary

The report *Accountability and Private-School Choice*, released by the Manhattan Institute in October, 2021, addresses the question of how private school voucher programs should be regulated. That is, if private schools are to receive public funds, what accountability mechanisms can fairly and reasonably safeguard taxpayer dollars? The report advocates for relaxing accountability mechanisms that presently constrain some voucher programs, asserting that “more and better” private schools will participate in response, benefitting students academically. Such claims, however, are supported by a selective reading and intentional misreading of educational research. Insofar as that is the case, the report merely repeats well-worn ideological positions and neither advances what we know about the challenge of regulating private schools nor offers useful information for policy decisions.



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I. Introduction

Authored by Nicole Stelle Garnett, the report *Accountability and Private-School Choice*, released by the Manhattan Institute in October, 2021, addresses the question of how private school voucher programs should be regulated.¹ That is, if private schools are to receive public funds, what accountability mechanisms can fairly and reasonably safeguard taxpayer dollars? After briefly outlining the “parental-choice landscape,” the report reframes the utility of voucher programs—rejecting the traditional rationale that vouchers will promote systemic improvement through competition. Instead, it embraces the notion that such instruments advance individual opportunity: “Parental choice policies are no longer justified by the need to subject government-operated schools to competition but rather by the imperative of giving disadvantaged students alternatives to failing public schools.”²

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

The report begins from the premise that the recent expansion of private school voucher programs—programs variously supported through tuition tax credits, taxpayer-funded “scholarship” programs, or education savings accounts—are “worthy of celebration.”³ The report uncritically asserts that allowing public funds to flow to private schools will “expand the educational opportunities available to . . . low- and moderate-income children.”⁴

Acknowledging that the question of accountability for private school voucher programs is “immensely complex” and ought to entail “some level of government oversight,” the report concludes that:

1. Private school voucher programs are necessary for “giving disadvantaged students al-

ternatives to failing public schools”;

2. Better information can help parents make better choices; and
3. Accountability regulations should be made more flexible for the purpose of allowing parents to choose from “more and better” private schools.⁵

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

The report bases its conclusions about the effectiveness of private school choice on theoretical work by advocates such as Milton Friedman and on a highly selective reading of empirical work on the topic. Recognizing that “parental choice alone has proved ineffective in weeding poorly performing schools out of private-school-choice programs,” the report concludes without evidence that more support for a robust free market is necessary.⁶ The state should therefore invest in consumer information, which the report asserts will make families the de facto regulators of schools. And the state should roll back regulations in order to encourage “more and better” providers to participate in voucher programs.⁷

IV. The Report’s Use of Research Literature

The report does not substantively engage with relevant research literature, citing only five peer-reviewed journal articles. Among the 46 references listed in the endnotes, roughly half are reports or opinion pieces by conservative groups or voucher advocates. The report argues that private school voucher programs are necessary for “giving disadvantaged students alternatives to failing public schools.”⁸ In doing so, however, it employs selective reading and seemingly intentional misreading of the little research it does cite. In sum, rather than acknowledging research that might challenge its assumptions and claims, the report primarily cites sympathetic work that might best be characterized as advocacy literature.

The Impact of Private Schools

The report makes the case that private school voucher programs are necessary for “giving disadvantaged students alternatives to failing public schools.”⁹ In support of this position, the report contends that “most studies of private-school-choice programs find modest positive effects on academic performance over time.”¹⁰ To buttress this claim, the report cites only the author’s earlier article in the *University of Michigan Journal of Law Reform*, from which that phrase is lifted verbatim.¹¹ That originally published version of the claim cites a single study from 2009.¹² Moreover, the findings of that 2009 study, published in the *Annual Review of Economics*, do not support the claim of positive academic outcomes. Instead, the cited report concludes: “The best research to date finds relatively small achievement gains for students offered education vouchers, most of which are not statistically different from zero.”¹³

Since 2009, a number of studies have investigated the performance of students in voucher programs and have presented a mixed overall picture. A 2011 review found that “the literature on private school vouchers does not conclusively link the use of vouchers to improved academic performance,” noting “mixed results” across studies.¹⁴ One 2016 review found that private school choice delivers “some benefits” to participating students, whereas a different 2016 review of voucher programs in the U.S. and abroad found that student achievement results were mixed, and often accompanied by unintended consequences.¹⁵ Since 2016, several studies have found that students who participate in private school voucher programs underperform relative to comparable students in public schools.¹⁶ This is not discussed in the report.

Strengthening the Market with More Private Schools

The report asserts that the pool of school choices will be strengthened if regulations are relaxed, claiming that regulations “are particularly likely to have a deterrent effect on participation” in voucher programs.¹⁷ To support this assertion, the report cites a study of Louisiana as evidence that lower-quality private schools participated in that state’s voucher program due to “extensive regulations placed on the program by government authorities.”¹⁸ Yet, as a report from the Brookings Institution found, there is no evidence from the Louisiana study that participating private schools were academically inferior or that regulation impairs academic achievement.¹⁹ Even if this were the case, however, the report itself notes that fully enrolled schools with sound finances are less likely to participate in voucher programs, regardless of regulatory strength.

The report theorizes benefits to student learning if “more and better” private schools participate in voucher programs, and speculates that loosening regulations is a necessary step. However, it is also important to note that there are theoretical tradeoffs in loosening regulations. The question, then, is whether the potential benefit of “more and better” choices would outweigh the potential cost of reduced accountability. This is a difficult question to answer, but the report fails to acknowledge relevant research that speaks to it. One recent study, for instance, investigated the benefits of *increased* regulation and of an expanding “school choice” market via private school vouchers in Chile. As those researchers found, “the combination of increased support of schools and accountability was the critical mechanism” for increased student scores. Transfers to private schools via the voucher program, by contrast, “played a small role.”²⁰

Finally, even if all private schools were to participate in a voucher program, there is reason to be skeptical that more schools would mean *better* schools. In a large-scale study published in 2013, researchers found that the apparent benefits of private schools with regard to student achievement results are chiefly the product of selection effects. After accounting for student demography, gains in student achievement are similar and often larger in public schools than in private schools.²¹

Giving Parents Better Information

The report suggests that families currently lack adequate access to high-quality information about school quality. This, for the most part, is true.²² However, several of the report's characterizations of measurement and accountability systems raise questions. For instance, the report praises private schools' use of norm-referenced tests for the tests' "relatively straightforward percentile scores," while critiquing state attempts to develop criterion-referenced accountability systems.²³ Yet norm-referencing indicates nothing about actual performance, instead telling families only how a school is performing relative to others. This means, for example, that a school with a high rating in a norm-referenced system might simply be the best of an overall weak set of schools.

Similarly, the report makes a claim, for which there is significant evidence, that aggregate ratings—ratings that provide a single summative score, rather than individual scores for important individual elements of school performance—are problematic.²⁴ By compressing available information, A-F ratings and other such summative evaluations do little or nothing to help the public understand what an individual school is doing well or poorly. There is evidence that this is true, particularly in accountability systems that rely chiefly on student standardized test scores.²⁵ Yet, in making this point, the report also misrepresents how summative scores are typically calculated: "The overall school score often aggregates numerous factors (in some cases, dozens) in a statistically complex way, making it difficult for parents and schools to interpret."²⁶ This not the case—no state includes dozens of factors in its aggregate ratings of schools, so data informing those ratings are more limited than the report suggests.²⁷ Moreover, a brief cited as evidence—*Emerging Approaches to Measuring Student Growth*, produced by the Reform Support Network—is explicitly about "growth" scores, rather than aggregate school ratings.²⁸

V. Review of the Report's Methods

There are no research methods in this report, which is essentially an essay. This, in itself, is not necessarily a flaw. Many such reports do not perform original research, instead seeking to draw upon existing scholarship to offer evidence-based policy recommendations. However, this report mostly eschews peer-reviewed scholarship in favor of sympathetic policy reports. When the report does draw on academic research, it does so in a highly selective fashion designed to advance an ideologically motivated argument.

In light of this approach, the report fails to seriously wrestle with several of its core assertions, ignoring evidence that might complicate or challenge those assertions. For instance, the report argues that better information can help parents make better choices, which it contends will increase the efficacy of voucher programs. While this may be true, there is no attempt to engage with the possibility that it is *not* true. Why do parents choose particular voucher schools? What information are they acting upon? How might new sources of information change their behavior? There are bodies of literature that address these questions, but the report does not engage with any of them. There is a reference to a peer-reviewed

study in support of the fact that “only a minority of parents rank test scores as the most important predictor of school quality.”²⁹ But there is no reason to believe that parents using private school vouchers are selecting academically weak schools merely because they lack information beyond test scores.

Similarly, the report contends without evidence that “more and better” private schools would begin participating in voucher programs if accountability regulations were relaxed. Yet the report notes several reasons why private schools would choose not to participate, and then fixates only on regulatory burden. Additionally, the report never engages with the research examining differences across private schools, which are far from homogenous. The institutions many Americans think of when they imagine a high-performing private school—a highly exclusive and expensive school like Andover or Exeter—are exceedingly unlikely to participate in voucher programs for reasons having little to do with accountability structures.

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

This report does make some useful observations about the limited information about school quality presently available to most families, as well as about the imperfect nature of public accountability systems. However, it is chiefly an ideologically driven essay that engages in selective use of research evidence. As a result, no meaningful conclusions can be drawn from this report. The boldest assertion—that private schools are more effective than public schools—is very much a contested claim, for which there is substantial evidence to the contrary. And startlingly, the report significantly misrepresents the findings of the single piece of research cited as support for this claim.

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

This report cannot be used to guide policy or practice. Although the report notes that determining appropriate regulations for private school vouchers is an “enormously complicated” problem, it nevertheless offers only a simplistic solution. Worse, that solution is grounded not in research evidence, but rather, in assumptions and ideology. Failing to engage with research in an honest and meaningful way, the report is an opinion essay disguised as a piece of policy research.

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The report resists (for example, p. 4) the term “vouchers,” noting that “While many commentators lump all private-school-choice programs into a single category (often derisively referred to as ‘vouchers’), there are a variety of school-choice mechanisms: (1) voucher or scholarship programs, through which students receive publicly funded scholarships to attend private schools; (2) scholarship tax-credit programs, which employ state tax policy to incentivize private donations to nonprofit scholarship-granting organizations; (3) education savings accounts (ESA), which give parents the option to use the education dollars allocated for their children on a variety of educational options, including tuition and fees, textbooks, and tutoring; and (4) individual tuition tax-credit programs, which provide tax benefits for private-school tuition” (p. 4). This review, nevertheless, will use the term “voucher,” as it is one that the public broadly recognizes and understands. Moreover, characterizing a private school voucher as a “scholarship” when those funds come from the public treasury and not from tuition-discounting by the school is a rhetorical device (as well as a mechanism for evading state bans on the direct transfer of public funds to religious schools). ESAs and individual tax-credit programs differ only in the mechanism for transferring money to parents, and despite their names are very much what advocates and critics alike would identify as “vouchers.”

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