



## School Vouchers: There is No Upside

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What if I told you there is a policy idea in education that, when implemented to its full extent, caused some of the largest academic drops ever measured in the research record?

What if I told you that 40 percent of schools funded under that policy closed their doors afterward, and that kids in those schools fled them at about a rate of 20 percent per year?

What if I told you that some of the [largest financial backers](#) of that idea also put their money behind [election denial and voter suppression](#) groups still claiming Donald Trump won the 2020 election? Would you believe what those groups told you about their ideas for improving schools?

What if I told you that idea exists, that it's called school vouchers, and despite all of the evidence against it the idea persists and is [even expanding](#)?

That's the reality of education policy making in 2023. Despite an [ever-growing](#) volume of data showing that direct and sustained dollar investments in public schools yield large and

[inter-generational](#) opportunity, the alternative scheme to divert those dollars into individual accounts for private tuition and side-item educational expenses is alive and well.

But so is the evidence against school vouchers schemes, and because that evidence grows so quickly it's important from time to time to stop and take stock. So here's what a combination of independent analysis from the research community and old-fashioned shoe-leather reporting by journalists has shown us to be true today:

**First**, vouchers mostly fund children already in private school. Despite supporter rhetoric that voucher schemes are about new opportunities, the reality is 70-80 percent of kids in states like [Arizona](#), [Missouri](#), and [Wisconsin](#) were already in private school before taxpayers picked up the tab. In [New Hampshire](#), that number is 9 out of 10 already-private kids. At the end of the day, vouchers are just a mundane lobbying attempt to win new tax goodies for a particular special interest.

**Second**, about that catastrophic academic harm. Although a few tiny studies from the late 1990s and early 2000's showed small gains in test scores for voucher users, since 2013 the record is dismal. For the few kids who did use vouchers to leave public schools, their test score drops are between -0.15 and -0.50 standard deviations. That's almost unprecedented. As a comparison, we have to look to education policy but to natural disasters to find a similar loss. On the low end of that range is the academic loss suffered by New Orleans kids after Hurricane Katrina. On the middle end is about what COVID19 did, on average, to student growth rates. In [Louisiana](#), [Ohio](#)—where those harmful voucher effects approach half a negative standard deviation—the loss is almost twice the pandemic's academic impact.

Even Betsy DeVos, as a public official leading Donald Trump's Education Department, had to answer for those test score drops. Asked by reporters about the Louisiana voucher results she admitted the program was [not very well conceived](#)." That hasn't stopped her from trying to spread those programs with her inherited fortune now that she's back in the private sector.

**Third**, the evidence also shows it's no mystery why these voucher results are so academically bad. The typical private school in-line for a voucher handout isn't one of the elite, private schools in popular narrative. The typical voucher school is what I refer to as a sub-prime provider: small, often run out of a church property like its basement, often popping up specifically to get the voucher. Think of the way we know now that the PPP Covid relief fund for small businesses drew all kinds of shady applicants and [fraudsters](#). That happens a lot when states expand voucher programs. In Wisconsin for example, [40 percent of schools](#) have opened and then failed and closed their doors since the voucher program grew.

The **fourth** pattern is related: kids flee those subprime schools. Also in Wisconsin, my team found that about 20 percent of kids [left their voucher school](#) every year and most went into a public school. These tended to be the lowest scoring kids, and kids of color—and they tended to leave those newest pop-up schools. We did find that their [academic outcomes improved](#) once they landed in their public schools, but they paid a price beforehand. Conservatives like to say that's the market correcting itself. But tell that to the parents who put their trust in those sub-prime providers—even for a short time.

**Fifth** comes the issue of transparency and oversight. All of the above evidence should already tell you why it's critically important that states passing voucher laws also include strong academic and financial reporting requirements. If we're going to use taxpayer funds on these private ventures, we

need to know what the academic results are and what the return on government investment is. We could settle on whatever public schools are required to do to test and report on their own finances. Not only does that help tell us who the private fraudsters are and what's actually [being taught](#) by those vendors, it actually [improves](#) voucher academic results.

**Finally**, I want to say something about discrimination. And about civil rights. Imagine you had no access to the evidence I just laid out above. Imagine you had no idea that vouchers caused extraordinary academic declines or that they mostly funded kids in private schools already. Or that almost half of all voucher-receiving schools had to close.

Imagine you simply knew that written into the [legislation](#) for voucher programs is the explicit right of private schools to turn down any child they wanted to reject so long as something about that child varied from the school's so-called "creed" (that's the term usually used in statute) or value. We know that in Indiana, where one of the largest and lowest-performing voucher programs exists, more than [\\$16 million](#) in taxpayer dollars went to schools discriminating against LGBTQ children. [Similar story](#) in Florida—and that includes kids whose [parents are gay](#) regardless of how the children identify.

None of that should be surprising. In fact it's a homecoming of sorts for school vouchers, which began as an attempt by segregationists in Virginia to [get around](#) the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling. With all the vitriol today about "[woke](#)" and "[DEI](#)" among voucher backers, what's to say they can't reject Black children or other kids whose very presence might offend a school's creed too?

And then there is the simple fact that groups like the Bradley Foundation, the Heritage Foundation, and the Koch's—all major players in voucher research and advocacy—are also major backers of [voter-suppression](#) and outright rejection of the 2020 election results. *The New Yorker's* Jane Mayer—perhaps the preeminent expert on dark money in American politics—has carefully tied those activities together in her [reporting](#). The journalist Anne Nelson has written exhaustively on the role of the [Council for National Policy](#) and its role in that, and how leaders of far-Right education reform plans like vouchers are also closely tied to the Right's political organizing.

***So there you have it: catastrophic academic harm. A revolving door of private school failures. High turnover rates among at-risk children. Avoiding oversight and transparency. Overt, systematic discrimination against vulnerable kids and families. Deep and sustained ties to anti-democratic forces working in the United States today.***

***That's school vouchers in 2023. That's the evidence, it's all right there, and the only question remaining is what to do about it.***

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