False Choice: How Private School Vouchers Might Harm Minority Students

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In the following viewpoint, Matthew McKnight argues that although school vouchers have been proposed as the solution to the problem of the education achievement gap along racial lines, the evidence does not support vouchers as the answer. McKnight claims that there are numerous problems with voucher programs, such as funding, which prevent vouchers being used for high-performing private schools without additional money. Furthermore, McKnight contends that voucher programs do not address the problems minority students face with respect to diversity and inclusion.

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As you read, consider the following questions:

1. According to the author, in what year did the District of Columbia first implement the use of school vouchers?
2. McKnight claims that the maximum funding under the newly reinstated voucher program in Washington, DC, is what amount per year?
3. Instead of enacting school voucher programs, McKnight proposes spending public money on what?

For decades, policy wonks, lawmakers, and educators have wrestled with the phenomenon of the achievement gap in U.S. schools. The answer to the essential question—why does such a racialized gap exist?—has proven elusive. Race itself, poverty, location, lack of stability at home, and bad teachers has each been the culprit du jour at one time or another. Recently, however, many conservatives have decided that the problem might be the whole of public education—so they have sought to direct more funds toward private schools.

On March 31, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a bill to reinstate the school voucher program in the District of Columbia. The program delivers funding for low-income parents to send their children to private and independent schools. It was launched in 2003 as a five-year pilot but was discontinued by the Obama administration in 2009. (Students with vouchers were allowed to keep them until they graduated, but no new students could be enrolled in the program.) Although Obama continues to oppose the program, it was attached as a rider onto last week’s House budget deal, which passed the Senate on Thursday [April 14, 2011]. The conventional wisdom among those—namely Republicans—backing the program’s revival says that students with vouchers are all receiving top-notch educations, free of the problems that students at public schools face.

But there is growing evidence that suggests otherwise. There are problems with education in America
that are so deeply rooted that not even private and independent schools escape them, which renders the notion of school vouchers out of touch with the nuanced problem of the achievement gap that it attempts to solve. It is worth giving a closer look to the real nature of the private-school environments where low-income children with vouchers often end up.

At face value, vouchers' main function—delivering choice to low-income parents with children in failing schools—seems like a laudable goal. Except, that is, when it doesn’t work. In its most recent study of the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP), as the District's vouchers regime is called, the federal Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences (IES) reported that there have been "no statistically significant impacts on overall student achievement in reading and math after at least four years." Patrick Wolf, the lead investigator on the study, ultimately supported OSP in his February testimony to the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Operations. In the same testimony, however, he admitted that interpreting the program's effectiveness "is bound to be somewhat subjective."

Inadequate funding is part of the problem. In D.C., students who accepted vouchers before the program was discontinued generally attended one of two types of schools: parochial schools, and private or independent schools. But tuition at the city's most elite, highest-achieving private schools are far too expensive for both the previous voucher allotments ($7,500 per year) and the increase proposed in the new bill ($2,000 per year). A smaller number of students were able to make up the difference from other funding sources in order to attend the more costly private schools. But, this means that most students with vouchers can only afford to attend private or parochial schools that, in many cases, are only marginally less bad than their public schools.

Problems with voucher programs persist outside the District, too. In late March, Wisconsin's Department of Public Instruction released findings from the study of a similar program in Milwaukee that, when it began 21 years ago, was thought to be the standard-bearer for school choice programs. The Journal Sentinel reported, "Students in Milwaukee's school choice program performed worse than or about the same as students in Milwaukee Public Schools in math and reading on the latest statewide test, according to results released Tuesday that provided the first apples-to-apples achievement comparison between public and individual voucher schools."

But the flaws in voucher programs run deeper than what mere test scores can show. For many students who accept vouchers, there is a broader issue—the fact that private school education comes with its own sets of problems for minority students that proponents of vouchers either aren't aware of or choose not to acknowledge. Within the walls of many private schools, there are realities that create gaps between white students and low-income minority students.

These gaps have to do with a sense of inclusion. Psychologists Greg Walton and Geoffrey Cohen have dedicated years of study to the impact that the quality of a person's social connection has on his or her achievement. Their 2007 research paper concluded, "[I]t seems that Black students globalized the implications of social hardship into a conclusion about their potential to fit and succeed in an academic setting." More to the point, the authors wrote:

We suggest that, in academic and professional settings, members of socially stigmatized groups are more uncertain of the quality of their social bonds and thus more sensitive to
issues of social belonging. We call this state *belonging uncertainty*, and suggest that it contributes to racial disparities in achievement.

The study found no such results among Caucasian students. Rather, as shown by a more recent study that builds on Walton and Cohen's research, stereotypes, and feeling the risk that one might confirm stereotypes, also negatively influence performance among minorities. Barnard [College] Professor Steven Stroessner calls this "stereotype threat." He writes that, in performance-based situations in which a person actually is or expects to be "the single representative of a stereotyped group ... or a numerical minority," lowered performance results most often occur. Stroessner adds that "minority status is sufficient but not necessary for stereotype threat"; indeed, "a reminder of a stereotype ... or even just a reminder of a person's group membership (typically race or gender) that is tied to the stereotype" can be other factors.

Curious about real-life examples of this phenomenon, I talked to students, parents, and administrators at various private schools in D.C. Dominic Vedder, 17, an African American senior at the elite, private Sidwell Friends School in D.C., notices the impact of "belonging uncertainty" and "stereotype threat." He came to Sidwell in ninth grade from KIPP DC KEY, a public charter school and part of a nationwide network that has recently come under scrutiny; although Sidwell accepts vouchers, he is not the recipient of one. "Sometimes, especially if you haven't been at Sidwell for a long time, you can definitely get the feeling of [being] an outsider, because there are a lot of people who have been with each other since kindergarten," Vedder said. He also pointed to the sharp racial imbalances, among students and teachers, as obstacles to a successful transition to Sidwell. When asked how he overcame them—he admits the change of schools incited a drop in his grades—Vedder said, "I stay involved in school, hang out with my friends [after] school," and participate in extra-curricular activities. In other words, it was through great effort that he found success.

But it's not so easy for other minority students transferring from public into private schools, often with the help of vouchers, to find success. (And not all private schools, as previously mentioned, are nearly as excellent, academically and otherwise, as Sidwell.) Recently, the researchers intervened against "belonging uncertainty" by engaging black college freshmen in an hour-long exercise aimed at conveying that every student—regardless of race—faces uncertainty about belonging in a new community. They found that such interventions could reverse the impact that uncertainty has on a minority student's academic performance. Unfortunately, however, voucher programs don't always come equipped with interventions to help minority students transition into their new school environments.

To be sure, some private schools across the country work to improve diversity and inclusion, and should continue to do so. And, even when achievement gains aren't clear for students with vouchers, there may be other factors—such as parent satisfaction—that come into play when determining the best place to send children to learn.

But the fact remains that vouchers, including D.C.'s reviving program, generally ignore the factors that work directly against their success. The ultimate fallacy of vouchers is that they are designed to deliver choices, not outcomes. In that process, minority students stand a serious chance of losing out. It would be wise, instead, to devote public money and energy to creating thriving public schools, open to all students and focused on their achievement, regardless of background.
Further Readings

Books


Periodicals


• Robert J. Birdsell and Mary Claire Ryan "Where Credit Is Due," America, November 28, 2011.


• Lee Fang "How Online Learning Companies Bought America's Schools," Nation, December 5, 2011.


• Michael A. LaFerrara "Toward a Free Market in Education: School Vouchers or Tax Credits?," Objective Standard, Spring 2011.


• Katrina Trinko "Why School Vouchers Are Worth a Shot," USA Today, April 19, 2011.


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