

School Vouchers

Ohio

In 2005 the Ohio legislature enacted the Educational Choice Scholarship Program (EdChoice), a voucher program for primary and secondary students. In 2016 David Figlio, a Northwestern University faculty member and Krzysztof Karbownik, a Northwestern postdoctoral research fellow examined EdChoice's impact in the academic years 2003–04 through 2012–13. We are drawing on their work. Initially, the program provided scholarships for students in Ohio's worst schools as judged by the Ohio Department of Education. Later, students from somewhat better schools were made eligible for the scholarships. In 2013-14, as part of a program called EdChoice Expansion, disadvantaged kindergartners from all schools were authorized to receive scholarships, and each year thereafter the program is to be expanded by one grade level.

By 2017 an estimated 30,000 students had been admitted to private schools with vouchers (O'Donnell 2017). This is a little under two percent of regular public school students (Governing.com). As of this writing (2017) the State of Ohio has a cap of 60,000 on the number of students permitted to participate. To be part of this program a private school must adhere to state operating standards posted in the Department of Education web site.

Figlio and Karbownik (2016) focused on a number of questions the most important of which was the effect on student mathematics and reading performance of attending private schools under the program. Academic performance was measured by a standardized test called Ohio Achievement Assessments. Figlio and Karbownik examined only the original form of EdChoice. What follows is a highly condensed and simplified version of their research supplemented by two newspaper accounts.

The fundamental research design problem with evaluations of all forms of school choice including private school vouchers, charter schools, and home schooling is how regular public schools can be compared to whatever alternative is being examined which means comparing the standardized test performance of students who remain in

public schools and those who exercise choice. One complication is that those who transfer to private schools under EdChoice have higher standardized test scores than those who stay in public schools before taking any private school classes (Figlio and Krzysztof 2016, 10). So, private schools enjoy an advantage in likely test results just from this factor even if the private schools are no better than the regular public schools from which students transferred.

We saw in our discussion of charter school performance in Chapter V that when there is a shortage of charter school slots and a lottery determines who is allowed admission as is the case in Massachusetts, comparisons of lottery winners and losers (i.e., those admitted to charter schools and others obliged to remain in regular public schools) are straightforward. However, EdChoice does not include a lottery. So, the Figlio and Krzysztof used propensity score matching by which they compared nonparticipants who were similar to participants along several characteristics (p. 27). The authors examined student test score differences in the academic years 2005-06 and 2007-08. They found that, broadly speaking, the impact of EdChoice on student test results are either zero or positive depending on the assumptions built into the analyses (pp. 25, 32). However, this result is probably not a matter of private schools being superior to public schools. The authors found that *eligibility* for EdChoice was correlated with improved test scores as suggested above. The authors speculate that this is due to public schools responding to competition from the EdChoice program. Among other things, the public schools may want to avoid losing students (and therefore funds) to the program (p. 39). As we saw in Chapter V, conservatives have long argued that choice encourages competition between regular public schools and charters or various private options, and this effect appears to be an example. Another factor driving this result may be that because students must be admitted to private schools before applying for vouchers, EdChoice attracts relatively high-scoring students with motivated parents (p. 39).

Oddly, even though eligibility for EdChoice is beneficial, those attending private schools via EdChoice do worse than they would have remaining in public schools (as predicted by statistical models) (p. 39).

Figlio and Krzysztof (2016, 7) find: “it appears that EdChoice has benefitted the majority of students, but the students who actually left the public schools—at least those on the margin of eligibility—perform worse on statewide tests.” They later qualify this unexpected result (p. 39), but it demonstrates that formulating public policy in this field is not easy, and it also shows that parents trying to decide between keeping their children in a regular public school or transferring them to one of several private schools must perform considerable research. In many cases parents may also want particular cultural or religious qualities offered by some private schools that are unavailable in public schools.

The finding that EdChoice students in private schools tend not to perform as well as others with similar characteristics remaining in public schools caught the attention of Ohio journalists. Perhaps private school students were not scoring as well on the Ohio standardized test because the private schools were of relatively poor quality. Neither the private schools nor the State of Ohio appeared to make much of an effort to gather or publish data allowing this question to be explored. According to *Columbus Dispatch* reporters Shannon Gilchrist and Bill Bush (2016), unlike Ohio’s public schools, the state’s 474 private schools that accept vouchers are not the subjects of state evaluations (i.e., “report cards”), and they are obliged to provide test scores only of voucher students. According to Gilchrist and Bush (2016), voucher student test results are located in the Ohio Department of Education’s website separate from regular public school and charter school scores and in a format less user-friendly. In April 2017 we confirmed their description. The data are presented one school at a time in a manner that makes meaningful statistical analysis all but impossible, but we found that data for regular public schools were almost as badly organized.

References

- Figlio, D. & K. Karbownik. 2016. Evaluation of Ohio’s EdChoice scholarship program: Selection, competition, and performance effects. Thomas B. Fordham Institute.

- Gilchrist, S. & B. Bush. 2016. How good are private schools that take Ohio voucher students? Hard to know. *Columbus Dispatch*. 7/17/16.
- O'Donnell, P. 2017. Ohio's tuition vouchers could soon give more money to more middle class, suburban students. *Cleveland Plain Dealer*. 2/17/17.