

SCHOOL REFORM PROPOSALS: THE RESEARCH EVIDENCE

CHARTER SCHOOLS, VOUCHERS, AND EMOS

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Research Quality

Research on privatization ranges from anecdotal to controlled. Reports of data by firms that operate private or charter schools or hold private management contracts for public schools, and evaluations conducted by advocates of charter or voucher programs, have frequently been found to be misleading or to be flawed in interpretations, conclusions, or methodology.

Research Findings

Charter Schools: Charter schools are public schools operating independently, freed from rules and regulations governing conventional public schools and obligated to raise achievement or face revocation. Advocates say they link accountability to achievement.

Accountability: Charter advocates hold an ideal of market-style accountability, with transparent operations and results, but charter schools have frequently resisted data requests and challenged the validity of unfavorable data. Charter schools have not taken the lead in becoming “transparent.”

Achievement: Reliable data on achievement in charter schools has been sparse. An Arizona evaluation reported small gains and used methods too unclear to assess. Evaluations in California, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Washington, D.C., generally did not favor charters, with some exceptions, but are not conclusive because of differences in school populations.

Vouchers: Voucher proponents argue that giving parents the ability to use tax dollars to choose private schools over public schools will encourage innovation and spur schools to achieve higher standards and better student outcomes.

Evaluating Vouchers: The small size of voucher programs makes generalizing results difficult to impossible. Accurate evaluation of vouchers requires random assignment of comparable students, but some voucher advocates argue that voucher schools should be permitted to choose their students, making universal conclusions nearly impossible.

Voucher Evaluations: Evaluations in Milwaukee and Cleveland have produced mixed to negative results, and evaluators have argued over methodology and other issues. An evaluation of Florida found a voucher effect that prompted public schools threatened with losing students to private schools to improve performance, but critics said the evaluator ignored other explanations and made statistical errors.

Privately Funded Vouchers: Evaluations of a private voucher program in Indianapolis produced mixed results. A Milwaukee private voucher evaluation favoring private schools lacked controls. Evaluations of private voucher programs in New York, Dayton, Ohio, and Washington, D.C., reported positive results, but conclusions have been challenged as flawed.

Private School-Public School Comparisons: Differences in demographics call into question the belief by some that private schools produce higher achievement than public schools. Studies comparing public and private schools also challenge this belief.

Education Management Organizations: EMOs are private firms that hold contracts to manage public schools. Claims that EMOs have made for performance as operators of public or public charter schools have often been found to be at odds with independent evaluations. EMOs have often reported favorable achievement data, but independent reviews of those data have found them to be incomplete and sometimes misleading.

Conclusion: Neither charter schools, private school vouchers, nor private management of schools have produced evidence of factors that can be systematically applied to increase achievement. Privatization alternatives have shown little accountability; achievement data have ranged from inconsistent to suspect.

Recommendations

- No existing charter school or private school voucher program funded by public money should be expanded based on existing evidence.
- Policy makers seeking to implement or expand voucher or charter school experiments should first design and implement rigorous evaluation programs that comprehensively examine the impact of such programs both on the students who participate in them and on school districts in which they operate.
- School districts and state legislatures should institute monitoring systems to ensure that for-profit Education Management Organizations fulfill the obligations they undertake when they contract to manage local public schools, including conventional public schools as well as charter schools, and should rigorously enforce contract compliance.

The foregoing is a summary of a chapter in the book *School Reform Proposals: The Research Evidence* (Information Age Publishing, 2002), edited by Alex Molnar. The full chapter can be viewed at:

http://www.asu.edu/educ/epsil/EPRU/documents/EPRU_2002-101/Chapter_13-Bracey-Final-Cut.pdf