

Review of *An Impact Analysis of North Carolina's Opportunity Scholarship Program on Student Achievement* (North Carolina State University working paper, June 2018)

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Introduction

Normally, when somebody hears about an evaluation of an education program, they reasonably assume the evaluation will tell them whether the program is working or not. When reading an evaluation report, policymakers, parents, and educators hope the evaluation will tell them if the program is helping the participating students. These seem like obvious, uncontroversial points.

On Monday, June 4, researchers from N.C. State released a working paper, “An Impact Analysis of North Carolina’s Opportunity Scholarship Program on Student Achievement,” which purports to be an evaluation of North Carolina’s largest private school voucher program.¹ The authors enthusiastically publicized and distributed the report, making sure to provide advance copies to media organizations and a pro-voucher advocacy group. The report has been highlighted by all of the state’s major media outlets.

But there’s a problem: *the report fails to tell us whether the Opportunity Scholarship program is working*. The researchers’ efforts tell us nothing about whether accepting an Opportunity Scholarship will help or harm a student’s education.

Overview of the Opportunity Scholarship voucher program

Since the 2014-15 school year, the Opportunity Scholarship program has provided qualifying families with vouchers of up to \$4,200 per year to attend private school. To qualify, families must have a household income that is within 246.05 percent of the federal poverty level. In the 2017-18 school year, the program received \$44.8 million of state funding, and provided 7,344 vouchers to students attending 405 private schools across the state.² Under current law, the program will continue to grow by \$10 million per year through FY 2027-28, at which time state appropriations for the voucher program will total \$144.8 million.

A June 2018 report from the Network for Public Education and the Schott Foundation for Public Education labeled North Carolina (along with Arkansas and Maine) as having the

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- 1 Anna J. Egalite, D.T. Stallings, and Stephen R. Porter, “An Impact Analysis of North Carolina’s Opportunity Scholarship Program on Student Achievement,” North Carolina State University Working Paper, as found at: <https://ced.ncsu.edu/elphd/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2018/06/OS-Test-Score-Impact-Working-Paper.pdf>
 - 2 North Carolina State Education Assistance Authority, “Opportunity Scholarship Program Summary of Data,” April 30, 2018, as found at: http://www.ncseaa.edu/documents/OPS_Summary_Data.pdf

nation's worst voucher accountability.³ North Carolina law requires private schools admitting Opportunity Scholarship students to administer "a nationally standardized test or other nationally standardized equivalent measurement" to their voucher students.⁴ Test results are only made public if the private school has at least 25 Opportunity Scholarship students. Schools may use a variety of assessments, which may or may not align with state standards or assessments used by other Opportunity Scholarship schools, making a comprehensive evaluation of student performance nearly impossible.

Beginning in July 2017, researchers from North Carolina State University have issued a series of reports related to North Carolina's Opportunity Scholarship voucher program.⁵ The first three of these reports were descriptive in nature. The first report examined school leader surveys and focus group data as to why private schools may or may not participate in the program. The second report compiled focus group and survey data on parents' perspective of the program. And the third report analyzed the demographics of the students applying for Opportunity Scholarships.

The research team's fourth report, the subject of this review, was the first attempt by the research team to measure the voucher program's impact on student outcomes. They seek to overcome the state's lack of meaningful, comparable accountability measures by recruiting Opportunity Scholarship and public school students to take a comparable exam. However, methodological weaknesses pose threats to the study's internal and external validity, making the study of limited value, at best.

Lack of comparability undermines external validity

The report's primary flaw is that it has no external validity. That is, the students tested as part of this study are different from the average Opportunity Scholarship student. As a result, there's no reason to think that the untested Opportunity Scholarship students would similarly outperform their public school counterparts. Just over half of the voucher schools that participated in the study were Catholic, while only 10 percent of all schools receiving Opportunity Scholarship vouchers are Catholic.⁶ Additionally, the report only looks at students who were recruited and volunteered to take a test. These students are different from the average voucher student.

Because of these differences, the report cannot be used to make claims about the average voucher student or the impact of the voucher program overall. The effects highlighted by the researchers only apply to the 89 Opportunity Scholarship students (in the researcher's preferred comparison) who volunteered to be tested, representing just 1.6 percent of the 5,624

3 The Network for Public Education and the Schott Foundation for Public Education, "Grading the States: A Report Card on Our Nation's Commitment to Public Schools." June 2018, as found at: <http://schottfoundation.org/report/grading-the-states>

4 North Carolina General Statutes 115C-562.5.(a).(4).

5 <https://ced.ncsu.edu/elphd/research/the-impact-of-the-north-carolina-opportunity-scholarship-program/>

6 North Carolina State Education Assistance Authority, "Opportunity Scholarship Program Summary of Data," April 30, 2018, as found at: http://www.ncseaa.edu/documents/OPS_Summary_Data.pdf

Opportunity Scholarship students in the 16-17 school year. The report tells us nothing about the other 98.4 percent of Opportunity Scholarship students

Unfortunately, one would have to carefully read the report to reach these conclusions. The press release fails to adequately warn readers of the paper's limitations.⁷ One would have to dig into [the ninth paragraph of the Charlotte Observer's story](#) on the report to find a clear description of the report's shortcomings:

“N.C. State researcher Anna Egalite says the study she and her colleagues conducted provides valuable insights but **doesn't mean the average scholarship recipient is outperforming peers who stayed in public schools.**”⁸

The report authors could have done a better job clarifying the extent to which the volunteer students differ from the typical Opportunity Scholarship student. For example, the report's Table 4 includes descriptive statistics of the private and public schools within their sample. However, there are no tables clarifying how the voucher schools and students in the treatment group compare to the total population of Opportunity Scholarship schools and students. Similarly, the report fails to clarify how the public schools in the control group compare to the schools from which Opportunity Scholarship students had been previously enrolled.

Even among tested students, many reasons to question results

In addition to the report telling us nothing about the performance of the average Opportunity Scholarship voucher student, there's also good reason to doubt that the small number of tested voucher students are actually performing as well as the report indicates. The report attempts to compare test results of voucher students against similar non-voucher students. But despite the sophisticated statistical methods of the researchers (propensity score matching), the groups still differ in ways that could affect the findings.

First, the voucher students were recruited by a voucher advocacy organization. The participating Opportunity Scholarship students were recruited by Parents for Educational Freedom in North Carolina (PEFNC), a pro-voucher advocacy organization. The report's authors make no effort to determine the extent to which PEFNC cherry-picked not just specific schools – but also cherry-picked specific students from those schools.

Second, the non-voucher students were likely from lower-income families than the voucher students. To be eligible for an Opportunity Scholarship voucher, students' families must have an income that is within 246 percent of the federal poverty level. Yet in selecting the

7 Anna Egalite, Trip Stallings and Stephen Porter, “Researchers release ‘An Impact Analysis of North Carolina’s Opportunity Scholarship Program on Student Achievement’” *Education NC*, June 4, 2018, as found at: <https://www.ednc.org/2018/06/04/researchers-release-an-impact-analysis-of-north-carolinas-opportunity-scholarship-program-on-student-achievement/>

8 Ann Doss Helms, “Good test scores but too much Bible: Two views from research on N.C. school vouchers,” *Charlotte Observer*, June 4, 2018, as found at: <http://www.charlotteobserver.com/news/local/education/article211941074.html>

control group, the N.C. State researchers only selected public school students from families of up to 185 percent of the federal poverty level. The researchers claim they control for this by comparing students' prior year test results, but that assumes that income differences had no impact on student performance in the ensuing school year.

Third, the non-voucher students were likely in higher-need schools than the public schools the voucher students would have been attending in the absence of the program. Opportunity Scholarship students can come from any school in the state. Yet in selecting the control group, the N.C. State researchers selected public school students from the highest-poverty schools in four districts (as mentioned above, the authors could have offered descriptive statistics of Opportunity Scholarship students' prior schools of enrollment, but failed to do so). The researchers claim they control for this by comparing students' prior year test results, but that assumes that the effects of attending a high-poverty school had no impact on student performance in the ensuing school year.

Fourth, the voucher students and non-voucher students faced different motivations. What were these students told before they entered the exam room? It's easy to imagine that the voucher students were told to do well, or they might have to change schools, whereas it's difficult to imagine what would motivate the public school students to do their best on a meaningless test.

Finally, the report explains that the test the students took (the Iowa Test of Basic Skills) is not aligned to North Carolina's Standard Course of Study. If the test aligns more closely with the private schools' curricula, that would explain some amount of the differences in test results.

Given these five threats to the report's internal validity, it's not clear that the observed test score differences among the small number of students who volunteered to participate in this study can be entirely attributed to participation in the Opportunity Scholarship program.

By downplaying study's shortfalls, the report's press release allows a misleading narrative to emerge

Ultimately, the report's biggest weakness remains that the results – even if accurately measured – tell us nothing about the program as a whole. Because the report only examines the test results of a small, non-representative sample of students who volunteered to participate, these results don't tell us whether the average scholarship recipient is outperforming peers who stayed in public schools. To the authors' credit, the report makes this flaw clear. To the extent the report tells us anything about student performance of voucher students, it only tells us about the 1.6 percent of voucher students recruited to take part in the study.

In short, this report is not an evaluation in the common understanding of the word. Despite the report's publicity, it does nothing to tell us whether the Opportunity Scholarship is helping or hurting its students. And the roll-out, coordinated with right-wing advocacy groups, has done more to misinform, rather than inform, the public.

Unfortunately, the authors' press release fails to mention the study's utter lack of external validity.⁹ Instead of warning readers that the findings should can't be used to draw conclusions on the effectiveness of North Carolina's voucher program, the release highlights the "large positive impacts associated with voucher usage in North Carolina." Additionally, an advanced copy of the report was provided to the pro-voucher PEFNC, allowing the organization to create a narrative-setting landing page touting the report's findings.¹⁰

Predictably, voucher advocates have seized upon this conclusion and exaggerated the report's findings, spreading a false narrative of the program's effectiveness. For example, the right-leaning *Carolina Journal* highlighted the study under the misleading headline "Opportunity Scholarship study shows academic gains" while the Jeb Bush-led Foundation for Excellence in Education reported "Research Finds Positive Outcomes for North Carolina Opportunity Scholarship Students."^{11,12}

Notably, several of the organizations making misleading claims share funding with the report's primary funders: the John William Pope Foundation and the Walton Family Foundation.

Conclusion

The report's authors have emphasized that one of their central goals in writing the report was to highlight how the Opportunity Scholarship's existing policies prevent researchers from conducting an evaluation that would allow policymakers to draw conclusions about the program as a whole. If this were the case, the authors should have written a report that more directly and clearly highlights these shortcomings. They could have provided policymakers with options for strengthening the program's existing accountability structure – currently the worst in the country – so that a meaningful evaluation could be conducted. For example, they could have recommended requiring Opportunity Scholarship students to take the state's End-of-Grade assessments. They could have encouraged the General Assembly to limit Opportunity Scholarship enrollment so that the performance of voucher recipients could be compared against similar public school students.

9 Anna Egalite, Trip Stallings and Stephen Porter, "Researchers release 'An Impact Analysis of North Carolina's Opportunity Scholarship Program on Student Achievement'" *Education NC*, June 4, 2018, as found at: <https://www.ednc.org/2018/06/04/researchers-release-an-impact-analysis-of-north-carolinas-opportunity-scholarship-program-on-student-achievement/>

10 Parents for Educational Freedom in North Carolina, "North Carolina's Opportunity Scholarship Program: An Early Report Card," as found at: <http://pefnc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/OSP-Impact-1-pager-PEFNC.pdf>

11 Lindsay Marchello, "Opportunity Scholarship study shows academic gains," *Carolina Journal*, June 4, 2018, as found at: <https://www.carolinajournal.com/news-article/opportunity-scholarship-study-shows-academic-gains/>

12 Adam Peshek, "Research Finds Positive Outcomes for North Carolina Opportunity Scholarship Students," *The EdFly Blog*, June 4, 2018, as found at: <https://www.excelined.org/edfly-blog/research-finds-positive-outcomes-for-north-carolina-opportunity-scholarship-students/>

Unfortunately, few readers walked away from the report with these takeaways, and North Carolina General Assembly lawmakers are about to conclude yet another legislative session without implementing meaningful evaluation and accountability measures on state voucher programs. Despite the N.C. State report, unfettered expansion of vouchers continues, and policymakers, educators, and parents still don't know whether the program is working or not.