



REVIEW OF *PLUCK AND TENACITY*

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Summary of Review

The new Fordham report, *Pluck & Tenacity*, examines the impact of school vouchers on five private schools in Ohio. While the journalist who authored the report is primarily interested in the effect on this small set of schools, we focus here on an underlying assumption asserted at the beginning of the report: that because of vouchers, “school outcomes will improve.” As presented in this report, this assumption about the beneficial impacts of vouchers is a case-study in how to engage in slanted selection and interpretation of research evidence. As we show in this review, the totality of three endnotes used in the report reflect not just an incomplete picture of the research literature on vouchers, but an extreme case of cherry-picking sources to support a contested policy agenda. Moreover, even with the few sources cited to put voucher outcomes in a favorable light, the author cherry-picks the findings that suit Fordham’s agenda, while ignoring the findings from those very same sources that do not support—and even contradict—the premise. Thus, the report is grounded in a twice-skewed and intellectually dishonest view of the research on vouchers and their academic outcomes. The subsequent journalistic celebration of five schools in Ohio then continues this unsystematic treatment of evidence, amounting to little more than cheerleading for vouchers.

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REVIEW OF
PLUCK & TENACITY:
HOW FIVE PRIVATE SCHOOLS IN OHIO
HAVE ADAPTED TO VOUCHERS

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I. Introduction

The controversial issue of vouchers has traditionally been contested around the impacts these private school subsidies have on academic outcomes. More specifically, research has focused primarily on the “first-order” effects—the impact on the academic achievement (typically measured by standardized test scores) of public school students who use vouchers to attend private schools.¹ Research has also focused on “second-order” impacts, as vouchers may have spillover effects on other students who are not using vouchers—for example, whether there are competitive effects generated by voucher programs that cause other schools to improve their performance, thereby benefiting non-voucher students.²

Journalist Ellen Belcher takes on a different question: the effects of vouchers on the private schools that accept them. The release of her report by the Fordham Institute examines five Ohio private schools that accept vouchers and was supported by a concurrent release of profiles of these schools in *Education Next*.³ The profiles of these schools make up the bulk of Belcher’s report.

While the question of the impact of vouchers on voucher-accepting private schools is indeed an interesting and worthy issue, our interest here is in the preliminary assertion made by Belcher in the executive summary of the report (and by two other contributors in the Foreword) that vouchers improve school outcomes.⁴ In fact, our review focuses primarily on the first sentences of the executive summary:

One key theory behind vouchers is that by opening private-school opportunities to disadvantaged children, student outcomes will improve. Research and program evaluations have supported the theory. Participation in a voucher program, for example, has boosted the college-going rates for African American students in New York City, and the children who participated in the voucher program in Washington, D.C., were more likely to graduate from high school.⁵ In Dayton, Ohio, African American students who participated in the privately

funded PACE scholarship program to attend a private school demonstrated higher reading achievement after two years.⁶

II. The Report's Findings, Conclusions, and Rationale

Although the report puts forth seven findings on the effects of vouchers in the five schools, the preliminary assertion regarding the beneficial impact of vouchers on student outcomes of interest in this review is drawn from an extremely narrow slice of the literature on school vouchers. The author selectively cites a report on college attendance rates in one program, one on graduation rates in another, and one on achievement gains (in only one subject) in a third. Perhaps to support this cherry-picking, two voucher advocates cite in the Foreword a single source: a survey of research by the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice.⁷ Thus, the whole report is supported by a total of three endnote references citing a grand sum of four sources.

III. The Report's Use of Research Literature

The report's scant use of sources should be seen in light of the fact that the Fordham Institute, and the Walton Family Foundation, which funded the report, both "enthusiastically" support vouchers (p. 1). The Fordham Institute, for example, "[strives] to develop policies and practices leading to a lively, accessible marketplace of high-quality education options for every young American (including charter schools, magnet schools, voucher programs, and online courses) as well as families empowered and informed so that they can successfully engage with that marketplace."⁸ Likewise, the aim of the Friedman Foundation, which provides the key source of claims in the Foreword, is "to promote universal school choice as the most effective and equitable way to improve the quality of K-12 education in America."⁹

While the present report's overall goal is to examine the changes, if any, to the private schools accepting vouchers, the premise that vouchers are a positive force for students is asserted as a foregone conclusion, as the negligible effort to support the assertion suggests. Moreover, the use of these reports is both selective and sloppy.

Either due to intent or inattention to the broader literature, *Pluck and Tenacity* is an excellent case study in cherry-picking evidence.¹⁰ As noted, the author cites three reports on three different programs in support of her respective assertions that vouchers (1) improve college attendance rates, (2) improve high school graduation rates, and (3) cause gains in achievement. Yet what is not mentioned is that some of the citations Belcher uses to undergird one claim do not support, and in fact contradict, some of the other claims. For instance, Belcher cites Wolf *et al.*'s (2010) evaluation of the voucher program in Washington, D.C., in support of her second assertion (that vouchers increase graduation rates) while ignoring the fact that Wolf and colleagues' official evaluation of that program

found that those same students did no better academically when compared with the control group:

There is no conclusive evidence that the [DC voucher program] affected student achievement. On average, after at least four years students who were offered (or used) scholarships had reading and math test scores that were statistically similar to those who were not offered scholarships.¹¹

Yet this important finding is ignored in Belcher's report, as it contradicts her third assertion: that vouchers improve achievement.

Moreover, the Fordham report selects just two studies from what is actually a substantial literature on vouchers to support its assertions, ignoring the fact that the findings of the two studies selected have been called into question. For example, Belcher cites Chingos and Peterson, who argued that "using a voucher to attend private school increased the overall college enrollment rate among African Americans by 24 percent."¹² Yet Belcher cherry-picks the findings, failing to note that the same report found no statistically significant voucher impact for Hispanic student college enrollment, and, indeed found "no overall impacts on college enrollments."¹³ Moreover, in a NEPC review of the study, Sara Goldrick-Rab critiqued their methods and claims, noting that the "strong focus on positive impacts for a single subgroup of students is not warranted" because, "there are no statistically significant differences in the estimated impact for African Americans as compared to other students."¹⁴ Overall, "the most precise estimate in this [Chingos & Peterson] report does not provide evidence that vouchers were effective in advancing the participation of students in higher education."¹⁵

Similarly, the only other reference Fordham makes is to an older report from West *et al.* (2001) to support the claim that vouchers lead to achievement gains for voucher students—the first-order effect.¹⁶ Again, what is not mentioned is that the gains noted in the report cited by Fordham were evident only for one group of students in one subject area. Indeed, gains were more evident for reading, even though one of the report's authors has acknowledged that mathematics is a better measure of the school effects, and is not as susceptible to the confounding effects of a student's background factors.¹⁷ What is especially odd, though, is that Belcher chose to cite this one unpublished paper to support her assertion. Not only is there a much broader and more nuanced literature available on the first-order effects of vouchers,¹⁸ but members of the team that wrote the paper Belcher cites have themselves written and published multiple papers on this issue, covering a number of programs in different cities.¹⁹ Certainly, though, the findings on impacts of vouchers from that body of work depends on the city, subject area, grade level, and subgroup studied, and, again, those published papers have been challenged for their methodology and the advocacy efforts of the researchers.²⁰

A more comprehensive claim for vouchers comes not from the author of *Pluck and Tenacity*, but from the voucher advocates who wrote the Foreword for the report, in which they cite a summary of selected studies by a voucher advocacy organization to support the contention that "The empirical evidence consistently shows that choice improves academic

outcomes for participants . . . no empirical study has found a negative impact.”²¹ This report, from Greg Forster of the Friedman Foundation, repeats earlier, questionable claims.²² However, especially since the claims are repeated every few years by the Friedman Foundation,²³ and then taken up uncritically in the echo chamber of voucher advocacy, a couple of points bear repeating. The studies cited tend to be conducted or funded by voucher advocacy groups, are typically not subjected to independent peer-review, and are often challenged on serious methodological grounds.²⁴ Furthermore, the claims made on behalf of these studies by the Friedman Foundation

In making claims about voucher studies, the report reflects a substantial lack of research expertise and does not adhere to general expectations for scholarly work, such as independent peer review.

often don’t reflect what the researchers actually found. For instance, despite being listed as finding positive effects for public schools facing competition, Carnoy, *et al.* (2007) describe results that are mixed and not decidedly positive.²⁵ That is, despite an initial bump in public school performance in some schools, “students in Milwaukee schools facing more competition from private voucher schools made no greater gains” (p. 3).

It is important to note a serious methodological deficiency that plagues many of the studies used to support vouchers, including those in the Friedman survey and hence in the Fordham report. “Gold standard” studies typically rely on randomization to address selection bias issues. But this does not mean that any measurable difference between treatment (voucher) and control (non-voucher) groups are necessarily due to vouchers. Thus, voucher advocates often neglect the possibility that differences can be caused by other factors at a school, such as the peer effect—a possibility suggested by a General Accounting Office critique of these studies.²⁶ As was noted with reference to the famous Coleman Report:

(T)he socioeconomic characteristics of a student’s peers also had a powerful effect on Coleman’s data. Ironically, these peer effects were weakest for the very advantaged groups whose parents might be most conscious of choosing the “right” schools for their children. But for disadvantaged students, the socioeconomic background of other students at the school they attended was of considerable importance.²⁷

Yet many randomized studies of voucher impacts suffer from a failure to account for peer effects. That is, students who use vouchers are not simply placed in private schools, they are placed in a more fertile peer environment enriched by children whose parents are willing to shoulder costs (search costs, transportation, uniforms, tuition/fees) to send their children to a private school. Thus, these studies typically do not tell us the extent to which a voucher (or type of school) accounts for any gains (if there are any) because they do not tell us the extent to which the enriched peer effect in the voucher school may account for

any gains.²⁸ Thus, as voucher advocates argue to focus less on student achievement and more on other academic behaviors—as reflected in the Fordham report—such as graduation and college attendance rates, research should be sensitive to the possibility that such outcomes are sensitive (and possibly more so) to the social mix of a given school.

IV. Review of the Report's Methods

In making claims about voucher studies, the report reflects a substantial lack of research expertise and does not adhere to general expectations for scholarly work, such as independent peer review. Further, as the key source for the report's Foreword, the Friedman Foundation website claims that “school choice [i]s the most effective and equitable way to improve the quality of K-12 education in America.”²⁹ Reflecting this ideological orientation, it is therefore not surprising that the paper shows marked prejudice in selecting and interpreting sources.

Moreover, the glowing accounts of the five schools, which form the bulk of the report, reflect a blind advocacy for vouchers. Presenting generally celebratory case studies of these schools, the journalistic approach Belcher uses is not positioned to tell readers the extent to which vouchers are causing these schools to embrace effective practices. The dedicated, passionate educators profiled in the report exhibit admirable characteristics, but ones that are not exclusively the domain of voucher schools or even private schools. Examples of such dedication and zeal are apparent in many different types of schools. So the focus on these five amounts to little more than cheerleading for vouchers.

V. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

While the purpose of the Fordham report was to examine how and if voucher-accepting private schools changed as a result of enrolling public school students, little attention is given to the underlying research on the academic effects of vouchers. As we have shown, the assertions that serve as the basic premise of the report are highly problematic and should be interpreted not as empirical findings, but as highly selective readings of the literature to support Fordham's agenda with respect to vouchers.

VI. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

While the report lacks research expertise, it does serve as yet another example of how cherry-picked evidence is too often used to support or reinforce the agendas of various advocacy organizations.

Notes and References

1 Lubienski, C. (2012, June 28-29). *First order effects of school choice programs: Research on academic achievement in vouchers programs*. Invited presentation at the conference on Housing, Human Capital, and Inequality, Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland.

See, for example:

Peterson, P. E. (1999, January/February). Vouchers and test scores. *Policy Review*;

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Carnoy, M., Adamson, F., Chudgar, A., Luschei, T. F., & Witte, J. F. (2007). *Vouchers and public school performance: A case study of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program*. Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute. Retrieved February 18, 2014, from http://www.epi.org/publication/book_vouchers/;

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3 Belcher, E. (2014). *Pluck & tenacity: How five private schools in Ohio adapted to vouchers*. Columbus, OH: Thomas B. Fordham Institute. Retrieved February 18, 2014, from <http://www.edexcellence.net/publications/pluck-and-tenacity-how-five-private-schools-in-ohio-have-adapted-to-vouchers>.

See profiles in *Education Next*, retrieved February 18, 2014, from <http://educationnext.org/how-private-schools-adapt-to-vouchers-youngtown-christian-school/>;
<http://educationnext.org/how-private-schools-adapt-to-vouchers-immaculate-conception-school/>.

4 After publication, we were contacted by Aaron Churchill and Ellen Belcher, telling us that, contrary to what a normal reading of the document would suggest, it was Churchill and Chad Aldis who wrote the executive summary, not Belcher.

5 Citing Chingos, M. M. & Peterson, P. E. (2010). *The effects of school vouchers on college enrollment*. Washington, DC: Brown Center on Education Policy at Brookings;

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- 6 Citing West, M. R., Peterson, P. E., & Campbell, D. E. (2001). *School choice in Dayton, Ohio after two years: An evaluation of the Parents Advancing Choice in Education Scholarship Program*. Cambridge, MA: Program on Education Policy and Governance, Harvard University.
- 7 Citing Forster, G. (2013). *A win-win solution: The empirical evidence on school choice*, Third Edition. Indianapolis, IN: Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice.
- 8 Thomas B. Fordham Institute (n.d.). Quality choices. Retrieved February 18, 2014, from <http://edexcellence.net/policy-priorities/quality-choices> (parentheses in original).
- 9 Friedman Foundation (n.d.). Mission and history. Retrieved February 18, 2014, from <http://www.edchoice.org/About-Us/Mission---History>.
- 10 On cherry-picking, see:
- Seife, C. (2010). *Proofiness: The dark arts of mathematical deception*. New York: Viking.
- 11 Wolf, P. et al., (2010). *Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Final report*. Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, xv.
- 12 Chingos, M. M. & Peterson, P. E. (2010). *The effects of school vouchers on college enrollment*. Washington, DC: Brown Center on Education Policy at Brookings;
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- 14 Goldrick-Rab, S. (2012). *Review of "The effects of school vouchers on college enrollment: Experimental evidence from New York City."* Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center. Retrieved February 13, 2014, from <http://nepc.colorado.edu/thinktank/review-vouchers-college> (see summary of review).
- 15 Goldrick-Rab, S. (2012). *Review of "The effects of school vouchers on college enrollment: Experimental evidence from New York City."* Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center, 6. Retrieved February 13, 2014, from <http://nepc.colorado.edu/thinktank/review-vouchers-college>.
- 16 West, M. R., Peterson, P. E., & Campbell, D. E. (2001). *School choice in Dayton, Ohio after two years: An evaluation of the Parents Advancing Choice in Education Scholarship Program*. Cambridge, MA: Program on Education Policy and Governance, Harvard University.
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- Rouse, C. E. & Barrow, L. (2008). *School vouchers and student achievement: Recent evidence, remaining questions*. New York: National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education;
- Usher, A. & Kober, N. (2011). *Keeping informed about school vouchers: A review of major developments and research*. Washington, DC: Center on Education Policy.

19 See, for example:

Howell, W. G. & Peterson, P. E. (2002). *The education gap: Vouchers and urban schools*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press;

Howell, W. G., Wolf, P. J., Peterson, P. E., & Campbell, D. E. (2000). *Test-score effects of school vouchers in Dayton, Ohio, New York City, and Washington, D.C.: Evidence from randomized field trials*. Cambridge, MA: Program on Education Policy and Governance, Harvard University. Retrieved February 18, 2014, from <http://www.hks.harvard.edu/pepg/PDF/Papers/dnwoox.pdf>;

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26 General Accounting Office (2002). *School vouchers: Characteristics of privately funded programs*. Washington, DC: General Accounting Office. Retrieved February 18, 2014, from <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/do2752.pdf>.

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28 One notable exception to this is the Wolf *et al.* (2010) report, which acknowledged that a private school's "climate" or "environment" can include both faculty and peer influences. However, in their program evaluation of the DC vouchers, Wolf *et al.* see this as part of the treatment a voucher provides to families, which is accurate within the framework of such a program. Nevertheless, it also raises questions about the generalizability of such findings if voucher programs were to be scaled up, as in Ohio, since there would be diminishing returns from the peer effects of vouchers. If more disadvantaged students enrolled in a school with privileged peers, the effect would be diluted.

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