

NEPC REVIEW: THE 123S OF SCHOOL CHOICE: WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS ABOUT PRIVATE SCHOOL CHOICE: 2019 EDITION (EdCHOICE, APRIL 2019)



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June 2019

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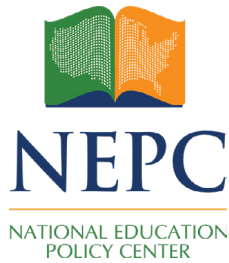
Suggested Citation: Brewer, T.J. (2019). *Review of “The 123s of School Choice: What the Research Says About Private School Choice: 2019 Edition.”* Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center. Retrieved [date] from <http://nepc.colorado.edu/thinktank/school-choice>.

Funding: This review was made possible in part by funding from the Great Lakes Center for Educational Research and Practice.



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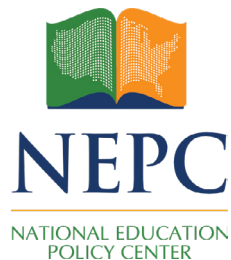
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Executive Summary

A new annual report from EdChoice (formerly the Milton and Rose Friedman Foundation), *The 123s of School Choice*, is designed to provide a yearly updated list and synthesis of empirical studies exploring the impacts of school vouchers across a set of outcomes. The organization describes itself thusly; “EdChoice is devoted to advancing educational freedom and choice for all...”¹ The organization presents itself as a clearinghouse of “evidence” that school vouchers “work” and that school choice is an effective and efficient reform. Along those lines, the report showcases the purported personal and community benefits that arise from voucher implementation, such as an increase in test scores (for both voucher users and voucher non-users remaining in public schools), educational attainment (e.g., graduation rates, college enrollment, and college completion), parental satisfaction, increased civic values, improvements in racial segregation, and fiscal benefits through governmental cost savings. However, the report is a limited collection of cherry-picked studies chosen from an “overwhelming” number, largely from sources that are not peer-reviewed (68%) and primarily authored by voucher advocates. For these reasons, the report is so misleading that it is not useful for decision-making or research purposes.



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I. Introduction

School vouchers remain one of the most controversial forms of school choice initiatives in domestic and international efforts to reform schools. Given the contentious nature of the discussion, a thorough, balanced and objective consideration of the research literature is essential in creating evidence-based policies. Thus, on the face of it, *The 123s of School Choice: What the Research Says About Private School Choice Programs in America* by Andrew Catt, Paul DiPerna, Martin Lueken, Michael McShane, and Michael Shaw,² should be a welcomed resource. Parents and policymakers often do not have the time or expertise to sift through academic literature. In fact, the report’s authors note that the amount of literature is “overwhelming” in volume. With this in mind, the new EdChoice 123 report seeks to sift through the literature and provide an easy and simplified analysis of the findings while promising to update the synthesis each year as subsequent research is published, noting that “We hope [the report] can be your single, most-trusted resource for understanding the rigorous research on private school choice programs in America” (p. 2). While it does not provide the same level of detail, this new report seemingly works in tandem with the organization’s annual *The ABCs of School Choice* report³ – which has been reviewed previously.⁴

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

In sum, the report makes very few overarching declarative statements in terms of conclusive findings in the report’s summary of studies – notably, the report does not contain a conclusion section. Rather, the report largely relies on making vague commonsensical statements such as “parents, policymakers, and other stakeholders ultimately care about the long-run ef-

fects of education programs” (p. 20) and then presents surface-level summaries that should, apparently, be understood as proof that vouchers, in fact, provide those types of long-run outcomes. The report divides study findings into seven categories: (1) Program Participant Test Scores; (2) Educational Attainment; (3) Parent Satisfaction; (4) Public School Students’ Test Scores; (5) Civic Values and Practices; (6) Racial/Ethnic Integration; and (7) Fiscal Effects, each discussed in turn below.

Test Scores

The report provides a synthesis of 16 studies, from an “overwhelming” body of literature, exploring the impact of vouchers on test scores. Of all of the seven outcome categories, the synthesis of findings here is presented as the most mixed in terms of results. While the findings of the underlying studies in other impact categories are charted across three simple effects (Any Positive, No Visible, and Any Negative Effects), the Test Score Outcomes of Participants from Experimental Studies category further divides effect categories into “all students” and “some students” for each overarching category of effects. There are 15 underlying positive effects on student test scores, eight underlying findings of no visible effects, and five underlying findings of any negative effect across the 16 studies.

Attainment

In its summary of six studies focused on the impact of vouchers on attainment outcomes (high school graduation, college acceptance and college persistence), the report shows six underlying findings of positive effects, five underlying findings of no visible effects, and zero negative effects from voucher use across the six studies cited.

Parent Satisfaction

The most consistently positive finding across the report’s seven outcome categories centers on parent satisfaction. The report synthesizes 26 studies that all purport to find positive effects. Unlike the previous two categories, this impact category is reported simply as Any Positive, No Visible, and Any Negative Effects. Of the studies included in this category, none show no visible or negative effects from the use of school vouchers.

Competition (Test Scores)

Because school voucher use is couched in the theory of competition, the report provides an analysis of 26 studies exploring the impact that vouchers have on public school student test scores due to the competitive threat that vouchers represent to public schools. Of the 26 studies, 24 are reported as finding positive effects as a result of competition while one found no visible effect and one found negative effects for public school student test scores.

Civic Values and Practices

In addition to academic outcomes, the report provides a summary of findings regarding effects that voucher use has on civic values defined by the report as “tolerance for the rights of others, civic knowledge, civic participation, volunteerism, social capital, civic skills, voter registration, voter turnout and patriotism” (p. 40). Of the 11 cited studies included in this section of the analysis, six report positive effects, five found no visible effects, while zero studies have found negative impacts.

Integration

The authors of the report point out that questions surrounding racial/ethnic integration and segregation in schools are important considerations. First noting that public schools have a history of racial/ethnic segregation (p. 46), the report finds that “the body of the research to date indicates that the existing choice programs are promoting integration” (p. 46). Of the seven studies included in this category, six are reported to have found positive effects towards integration, one with no visible effect, and zero findings of negative effects (i.e., there are no studies finding that vouchers exacerbate racial/ethnic segregation, according to the report).

Fiscal Effects

The final category of studies synthesized is the largest and focuses on the fiscal effects of school vouchers – primarily their ability to save public tax dollars. There are 50 studies included in this category across which 45 found positive effects, four found no visible effects, and only one found negative effects. The report’s authors note that school vouchers are often criticized for siphoning away financial resources from public schools. Further, the authors argue that “there are cost savings associated with students who leave the public K-12 system” because while a school will experience a reduction in funding as students leave using vouchers, “that school also has a reduction in educational costs, as it has fewer students to educate” (p. 52). In short, the marginal reduction in costs associated with the departure of students is just a portion of overall costs, some of which are relatively fixed in nature.

III. The Report’s Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

The report suggests that its selection of these particular studies warrants representation as the best form of existing evidence that vouchers work largely due to the focus on studies that employ Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs). While the report suggests that studies “must be put in the context of values and priorities that exist outside of the realm of the measurable and quantifiable” (p. 4), they then go on to suggest that “even the best-designed studies are limited to things that we can measure and count” (p. 4). Despite this contradiction between context and positivism, as well as the innate limitations of RCTs, particularly surrounding school vouchers, the report’s reliance on using as many RCT studies when possible serves as

the rationale for the findings, as RCT is presented as the “gold standard” for research. The authors note that for any given outcome category, nonexperimental studies are included in each category if there are not at least 10 RCT studies available and in the case of 10 or more RCTs, the report only cites RCT studies for that given category. Prior to each separate category, the authors provide a note to the reader on whether or not the subsequent studies include non-RCT findings; however, the report never identifies or labels which studies are RCT or studies that are or are not peer-reviewed.

IV. The Report’s Use of Research Literature

The central focus of the report is its purported systematic review of the extant empirical research surrounding the impacts of school vouchers. Scholarly reviews of research, as presented in publications such as the *Review of Research in Education* and the *Review of Educational Research*, are syntheses—using analytic, deep dives into the literature to understand the main findings and understandings that arise from an overall body of research. In contrast, the EdChoice report uses an approach called vote counting, which merely tallies findings from a collection of studies. The report lists a set of underlying studies, primarily authored by advocates of vouchers, and then counts the findings by category. However, in a field where publication volume has been dominated by a small group of researchers who are staunch voucher advocates, such vote counting leads to predictable results that favor market-oriented reforms such as vouchers. Accordingly, this method raises concerns about bias, cherry-picking, and an overlooking of the broader peer-reviewed research literature – some of which has provided direct critiques of the report’s underlying cited sources and/or raised alternative explanations for the findings within the studies included in the vote-counting analysis.⁵ A separate publication, by different authors, might list and tally up a different collection of studies, using different criteria (e.g., inclusion of research on fully developed voucher programs overseas), and reach different conclusions; and a reader of those two reports would walk away uninformed and confused.

Though randomized design studies are potentially powerful, this does not relieve the analysis from the task of carefully addressing issues of causality. In fact, these types of studies often have limited external validity. Moreover, if an intervention has constituent parts, the question is: to which of the parts (one or more) is the putative effect attributable? Little consideration in the report is given to factors within schools that may partially or entirely explain the seeming effects of choice, factors such as academic course-taking or peer effects.⁶ Related, issues of theoretical mechanisms are not addressed. Little discussion is given to how school choice dynamics are purported to filter down into the daily work that teachers’ do.⁷ The presentation of literature that arises from vote counting naturally limits a transparent and robust treatment of the literature as sample sizes, strength of design, and trends over time are not reported.

While the report claims to review 142 separate studies, there are, in fact, only 94 underlying published sources. The report informs the reader that the authors treated a single source as multiple studies if the underlying source examined more than one geographic context and/

or employed various methodological techniques. The results of these studies are reported as duplicate findings within the same outcome category and/or reported as findings across one of the other seven outcome categories. Perhaps most notably, the report lists two studies by Lueken⁸ (who is a co-author of the EdChoice report) as 25 separate studies/findings – all of which, but one, show positive outcomes for vouchers.

Of key concern here is that the report relies primarily on studies and sources that are not peer-reviewed, with heavy reliance on EdChoice’s own internally produced documents. In fact, 68% of the cited sources (n=97) are not peer-reviewed while only 32% (n=45) come from a peer-reviewed source (though it is important to note that not all of the peer-review studies underwent double-blind peer review). Of particular note is that the report – published by EdChoice – relies primarily on EdChoice itself as a source for the underlying studies, documents subject only to its own editorial lens rather than the scholarly community broadly. As explicated in Table 1 below, the report cites itself 45 times – which is equal to the total number of peer-reviewed sources (n=45) cited in the report.

Table 1. Top 15 Sources Cited within Report

Publication	Peer Reviewed?	Citations
EdChoice	No	45
University of Arkansas Department of Education Reform	No	11
Journal of School Choice	Yes	8
Book (The Education Gap) - Brookings	No	5
Journal of Policy Analysis and Management	Yes	5
Journal of Public Economics	Yes	5
Program on Education Policy and Governance (PEPG)	No	5
State Website / Report	No	5
Manhattan Institute	No	4
Education Next	Yes	3
Education Research Alliance	No	3
Urban Institute	No	3
Book (Learning from School Choice) - Brookings	No	2
Cato Institute	No	2
Dissertations	No	2

Further, examination of the top 15 sources that are cited in the report show that the vast majority of the non-peer-reviewed sources come from think tanks and organizations that have a stated interest in promoting school choice.

Of the seven outcome categories, Table 2 below illustrates the report’s use of peer-reviewed or non-peer-reviewed literature for each category, showing in particular that the discussion of Fiscal Effects (the category with the largest number of citations) relies overwhelmingly on sources that are not peer-reviewed.

Table 2. Type of Source by Category

Outcome	Peer-Reviewed Sources	Non-Peer-Reviewed Sources	Total Citations
Participant Test Scores	15	1	16
Educational Attainment	2	4	6
Parent Satisfaction	24	2	26
Public School Students' Test Scores	11	15	26
Civic Values and Practices	5	6	11
Racial/Ethnic Integration	2	5	7
Fiscal Effects	8	42	50

Additionally, there are problematic claims within the research literature cited that are taken for granted by the report's authors. For example, a 2007 report published by EdChoice makes numerous misleading claims, based on seemingly ideological half-truths that distort the underlying study's findings. The report states:

In nearly every school choice program, the dollar value of the voucher or scholarship is less than or equal to the state's formula spending per student. This means states are spending the same amount or less on students in school choice programs than they would have spent on the same students if they had attended public schools, producing a fiscal savings.⁹

As a hypothetical to that point, the report claims that "If a state spends \$6,000 per student in public schools and offers a \$5,000 voucher, every student who uses a voucher saves the state \$1,000."¹⁰ And while this simple math may appear to be correct on the surface, it overlooks that the majority of private schools do not provide, among many other things, transportation, full services for students with disabilities, or English language learners. The reduced "cost" of attending a private school is often a direct result of reduced services that, as in the case of the cited 2007 report, seek to claim private schools as more efficient, thus saving money. By way of example, vouchers save money much in the same way that governments would save money by disbanding police or firefighting departments and supplying some citizens with a smaller sum in the form of a voucher to help offset the costs for a private security firm or private firefighting insurance. The "savings" can be illusory, undermine a notion of the common and public good, and because the funding burden is shifted to individual families, such educational opportunities are often not available to all students.

Further, to the question of negative fiscal impacts that vouchers have on public schools, the 2007 report goes on to suggest that, "school choice programs therefore do not generally remove any local funds from public schools, even though students and their associated costs are being removed from those schools."¹¹ While this is a bit of hair-splitting, it is misleading since vouchers shift monies away from public schools, directly or indirectly, thus reducing their overall budgets. However, the logic, as it were, is that the removal of a student's tax-funded support should be acceptable as the school is no longer responsible for providing services for the student; thus, the reduction in the budget is warranted as the costs go down as students leave. This ignores the fact that such realities generally increase the total

cost-per-student for the services that public schools provide and the public is funding or subsidizing two separate school systems instead of one where one, the private option, is not accountable to the public. The cost to operate the electricity, for example, in a school building is generally the same whether there are 1,000 or 1,500 students. With less funding, the cost to provide services to students becomes higher as a per-student expenditure and creates the possibility that school districts would struggle under such financial constraints to the point where it may impact educational outcomes in the long run.

Further, the shifting of financial responsibilities away from the collective to the individual family reimagines education as an individualistic commodity rather than a public good and, as a result, may limit equitable access and distort the ancillary costs borne by families not accounted for in the fiscal calculations of the report's underlying studies. When parents are responsible for transportation, "topping up" private school tuition (the difference between what a voucher covers and the full price of tuition), and/or forced to deal with additional imposed costs,¹² vouchers become financially accessible only to more affluent families who are historically White – which was one of the initial rationales for the genesis of vouchers in the post-*Brown* era¹³ and a reality acknowledged by Milton Friedman himself.¹⁴ Additionally, the report fails to consider the impact of vouchers on racial/ethnic segregation in the broader global context and the possible negative impacts that have been documented.¹⁵

It is worth noting that there are some referenced studies that are presented in ways that are misleading. For example, while the report concludes that Rouse¹⁶ found positive effects for "All Students" and "Some Students" when it comes to participant test scores, the report is misleading as Rouse only analyzed Black and Hispanic students and the results were statistically significant differences in math but not in reading scores. While the EdChoice report only summarizes Rouse's findings as positive, Rouse noted that while there were positive impacts in math; "on the other hand, the effects on the reading scores are as often negative as positive."¹⁷ Additionally, Rouse noted that the positive impacts on math outcomes may be attributable to smaller class sizes and not necessarily the voucher use and private schooling.¹⁸

To that point, there exists no detailed disaggregation of the impacts of each cited study in terms of content area or grade-level impacts. This is the type of nuance that is often blurred with the use of simplistic vote-counting methods.

V. Review of the Report's Methods

In sum, the report's methodological decisions raise serious concerns. As previously noted, the report draws heavily, and without any apparent skepticism or critique, on a majority of reports published by EdChoice itself and also relies heavily on other studies conducted by ideologically driven organizations such as The Buckeye Institute for Public Policy Studies that has a stated mission "to advance free-market public policy,"¹⁹ the CATO Institute, the Program on Education Policy and Governance, and others.

This raises significant questions related to bias, the reliance on and creation of echo chambers, and self-certification. Additionally, the report generally accepts RCT as the “gold standard” of research while not acknowledging that little is random in social science, context matters,²⁰ and to the extent that a treatment group and control group appear to be identical, the non-use of a voucher (either by loss of a lottery or choice to not use) troubles the suggestion that the treatment and control group remain the same. That is, knowledge of being in the control group may very well change motivations, perceptions, and practices of those who did not receive or use a voucher – raising considerable concerns about drawing definitive conclusions using RCTs.

Further, and as also mentioned above, the report employs a simplistic vote-counting method for determining the impact(s) of vouchers. This method does not provide any meaningful insights into the quality of the underlying studies. It required the report’s authors to conflate findings that were statistically significant with those that were not statistically significant (and perhaps small in effect size). Reporting findings from within the underlying studies as “any positive” result, for example, may overestimate the findings, as many of the cited studies found positive effects but they were not statistically significant, or as explained above, may obscure findings that are not convenient to a preconceived ideological commitment to vouchers. The report notes that the authors choose not to include effect sizes because that “methodology is beyond the scope of our project here,” that they “have sacrificed a measure of specificity” and believe that such a “tradeoff is worth making.” The only rationale for this decision provided by the report’s authors is that an actual meta-analysis is too “difficult and complicated to do well” (p. 9).

In its exploration of existing studies on school vouchers, EdChoice employed Hanover Research to assist in the curation of studies making up the report’s underlying research literature. Hanover was tasked with discovering research focused on school vouchers that were published between 2016 and 2017 following “EdChoice’s last research review publication” (p. 8). It is not clear from the report why Hanover was not tasked with undertaking a comprehensive search, that is, searching for all extant literature including, but not limited to, those studies cited in EdChoice’s “last research review publication.” Hanover was tasked with searching through article databases and targeted publications such as *Education Next*, National Bureau of Economic Research, and *Journal of School Choice* using a number of search terms like “school choice,” “school voucher,” “tax credit scholarships,” “tuition tax credits,” “education savings accounts,” and “ESA.” The report notes that EdChoice, through its regular monitoring of research, conducted “searches on a quarterly basis using EBSCO and Google Scholar” (p. 40). Yet, it isn’t clear from the report why those specific journals were targeted or how EdChoice searched for subsequent studies post 2017. Finally, the report notes that, “Our inclusion criteria require at least 10 random assignment studies of a certain outcome to exist in order for us to exclude all other nonexperimental study types” (p. 14), yet no explanation is given for why 10 was the chosen cutoff benchmark.

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

Given that the underlying studies are likely the result of cherry-picking, questionable vote-counting methods that blur, obscure, and overstate findings, ideological echo chambers, and the use of non-peer-reviewed sources, the findings of the EdChoice report and the representation of the underlying studies are exceedingly questionable. The assumptions made by many of the underlying studies – for example, fiscal implications as explicated above – do not provide the reader with a full, accurate, and transparent accounting of the broader impacts of school vouchers. Overall, this report should be understood for what it is: a misrepresentation of what research has been conducted and what it has found through the use of questionable methodology that gives the appearance of stacking the deck to create an illusory compilation of studies that purport to bolstered the organization’s predetermined commitment to cheerleading school vouchers. While the report provides “additional research context” for each of the seven outcome categories and cites “systematic reviews” that also purport to show supportive and positive findings for vouchers, the report fails to acknowledge or mention additional reviews, studies, and findings that challenge many of the report’s underlying studies, assumptions, and overarching claims.²¹

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

The authors establish that studies in education can often be limited, messy, and not very meaningful. Rather than providing a clear, transparent, robust, and candid summary of the extant research literature on vouchers that works to provide some clarity for readers, the report instead provides a distorted summarization that is itself limited, messy, and not very meaningful at best and, at worst, outright misleading. Like its counterpart report that was awarded a Bunkum Award in 2007,²² rather than providing a robust, detailed, and honest accounting of the literature on school vouchers and the full range of positive and negative impacts, *The 123s of School Choice* suffers from significant cherry-picking, reliance on ideologically driven studies, and a general overstating of the benefits of vouchers through misrepresentation.

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