

Claims for School Voucher Success in Florida not Justified

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Recently, much public debate has focused on the use of accountability systems and on vouchers as means to improving education. Advocates of vouchers believe that the adoption of a school-voucher system, in which families can use vouchers to send their children to either public or private schools, will spur schools to improve their performance in order to succeed in a competitive education market. In early 2001, the Manhattan Institute published a widely disseminated report that supported this view by claiming that Florida's voucher system had generated significant improvements in the performance of the state's lowest performing schools. However, according to Duke University researchers Dr. Helen F. Ladd and Dr. Elizabeth J. Glennie, the improvement of Florida's low-performing schools probably had more to do with the implementation of that state's accountability system than with the threat of students leaving the schools via the voucher system.

Ladd and Glennie used North Carolina to replicate the Manhattan Institute study. North Carolina is similar to Florida in that it has a school-based accountability system that rates schools, but it doesn't have a voucher program. Ladd and Glennie found that, as was the case in Florida, North Carolina's low-performing schools showed significant improvement after receiving their negative label. They concluded that the increased scrutiny and shame associated with being a low-performing school and the receipt of additional state assistance were likely the driving forces for school improvement in Florida, not its voucher program.

Background—The Florida Study

Under the Florida system, schools receive grades of A, B, C, D, or F, but only the lowest performing schools (those rated F) are subject to the threat of a voucher. If a school receives two Fs within four years, its students may receive vouchers, which they can use to attend private schools. The Manhattan Institute study (Jay P. Greene, "An Evaluation of the Florida A-Plus Accountability and School Choice Program," February 2001, at www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr_aplus.htm) compared the higher-scoring F schools with the lower-scoring D schools, under the assumption that the schools were similar in academic performance. After receiving one failing grade, the higher-scoring F schools showed greater improvement based on standardized student tests than did the lower-scoring D schools. Noting that the schools were otherwise similar, the report claimed that the one significant difference between them—the threat of vouchers—accounted for the greater gains among the F schools.

Results—The North Carolina Study

Believing that Greene inappropriately attributed the differential gains to the voucher program rather than to the accountability program, Ladd and Glennie replicated his study as closely as possible for North Carolina, a state that rates schools but does not have a voucher program. The analysis differs only in that the North Carolina accountability program uses a somewhat different rating

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system. In North Carolina, the four main categories of schools are Exemplary, Meets Expectations, No Recognition and Low Performing. Ladd and Glennie view the Low Performing schools as comparable to Florida's F-rated schools and No Recognition schools as comparable to Florida's D-rated schools. Low Performing schools receive increased scrutiny and assistance from state teams of experts.

The Duke researchers found that after the first year of the program, from 1997 to 1998, North Carolina's Low Performing schools exhibited greater gains in both of the state's standardized performance indicators than the schools in any of the other categories. Following Greene's logic that high-performing F schools are very much like low-performing D schools in terms of the incentives to improve their performance and the challenges to doing so, Ladd and Glennie compared the high-scoring Low Performing schools to the low-scoring No Recognition schools. Repeating the analysis for this subset of schools generated the same result: high-scoring Low Performing schools had a higher gain than low-scoring No Recognition schools, and this difference was statistically significant.

Policy Implications

This and similar studies conducted elsewhere suggest that the results cited in the Florida study have little or nothing to do with vouchers. If vouchers were the explanation for the gains in the F-rated schools in Florida, it is unlikely that the Duke University study would have found comparable patterns of gains in the Low Performing schools of North Carolina.

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