



NEWS

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University of Arkansas Study of Voucher Program Finds Parents Satisfied, Say They Are More Involved

FAYETTEVILLE, Ark. – Parents report that having a choice of where to send their children to school boosts their satisfaction with and involvement in schools, a study of the publicly funded school voucher program in Washington, D.C., has found.

Researchers with the School Choice Demonstration Project based at the University of Arkansas have conducted focus groups with parents over the four years that the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program has operated. They found that parents whose children attend private schools on the vouchers describe moving from the margins to the center of their children's academic development.

"This study provides extraordinary insights into the experiences of families participating in a unique publicly funded education reform initiative," said Thomas Stewart, an independent consultant and lead author of the study. "Their reflections will help refine the District of Columbia Opportunity Scholarship Program and inform other efforts to help low-income families secure quality school options for their children."

"The greatest source of satisfaction reported by parents was simply in being able to choose their child's school," added Patrick Wolf, director of the School Choice Demonstration Project and holder of the Twenty-First Century Chair in School Choice in the department of education reform at the University of Arkansas. "Even D.C. parents whose children ended up returning to public schools tended to say that they were happy that they at least had a choice."

A summary as well as the entire report can be read online at <http://www.uark.edu/ua/der/SCDP.html>.

President Bush signed legislation in 2004 that included \$14 million annually for the program, which is the first federally funded K-12 scholarship program in the country. Eligible applicants were chosen by lottery to receive scholarships valued at up to \$7,500 per year. Families of

students who “won” a scholarship could use it to send their children at public expense to their choice of any of more than 60 District of Columbia participating private schools. The pilot program is up for reauthorization in 2009.

The U.S. Department of Education is sponsoring a quantitative evaluation of the D.C. program that involves researchers at the School Choice Demonstration Project. This qualitative study, in contrast, is funded by a grant from the Annie E. Casey Foundation and is focused on documenting the experiences of parents and students in the program.

A total of 110 families representing 180 students who applied during the first two years of the program volunteered to participate in this study. Their insights continue to shape the scope and direction of the program, and they will help inform other efforts to provide low-income families with access to high-quality school options, the report says.

The researchers examined the overall satisfaction of parents with the program and their child’s school, what factors they considered most important in choosing a school, whether they believed they had sufficient information to make an informed choice when choosing a school, whether they believed their children were welcomed into the new school and how they assessed student development and progress.

A high level of parent satisfaction found by the researchers stemmed from three major factors:

- Parents appreciated the fact that they made the choice.
- They reported their children were thriving in the different school environment.
- They gave the Washington Scholarship Fund, a nonprofit organization that managed the program, a great deal of credit for the way the program was managed and for the care and attention they received from the organization’s staff.

Some of the other findings:

- The factors these parents considered most important in making a choice included smaller class sizes, school safety, religious or values-based environment, rigorous academic curriculum, opportunity to learn foreign languages, racial diversity and proximity to home. By the third year of focus groups, class size remained a crucial characteristic while school safety was less of an issue, in part because parents were confident that their children now were in safe schools.

- Families appeared to increasingly demand and appreciate the importance of extensive and reliable information about schools as they progressed through the program. The families placed a high premium on site visits and conversations with school and program personnel, with Hispanic families putting the most emphasis on these, possibly because of language and cultural gaps between home and school.
- Many parents placed greater emphasis on attitudes and behavior of their children, rather than test scores, as a basis for evaluating their progress. None of the parents polled considered standardized test scores to be the predominant measure when assessing their children's progress, but one-quarter used student grades to chart their child's educational improvement.

Several concerns parents expressed during the first three years of the program have been addressed, according to the report. Two that have not are the request for an independent entity to evaluate and monitor the schools and strategies that would open up more slots for students at the middle and high school levels.

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CONTACTS:

Patrick Wolf, Twenty-First Century Chair in School Choice
College of Education and Health Professions
479-575-2084, pwolf@uark.edu

Thomas Stewart, independent consultant
443-865-5049, qwakulive@aol.com

Heidi Stambuck, director of communications
College of Education and Health Professions
479-575-3138, stambuck@uark.edu

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