

THE 2007 URBAN SCHOOL CHOICE PILOT PROGRAM IS GOOD FOR TEXAS PUBLIC EDUCATION

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Introduction

This policy paper reviews the research evidence on the benefits of voucher programs and public-school alternatives for disadvantaged urban school children. Specifically, the paper reviews the research on the impact of these programs on racial isolation, graduation rates, and academic achievement.

Five years ago, in *Zelman v. Harris-Simmons* (2002), the United States Supreme Court removed all federal constitutional barriers to voucher programs that allow public funding for private and religious schools. In that case, the Court upheld the constitutionality of a voucher program for Cleveland school children that allowed students in Cleveland's crumbling school system to attend private schools at public expense—either secular or religious.

Senate Bill 1506, currently before the Texas Legislature, would permit voucher programs to operate in 9 districts Texas school districts located in five of the state's largest metropolitan areas: Austin, Dallas, Fort Worth, Houston, and San Antonio. Called the Urban School Choice Pilot Program, this program is specifically targeted to assist the State's poorest urban school children—children from families with household income that does not exceed 200 percent of the income guidelines for the Federal Reduced Price Lunch Program.

I. Texas' Inner-City Schools: Racially Isolated, Low Graduation Rates and Low Achievement

Racial isolation. The Texas Urban School Choice Pilot Program (USCPP) offers school choice to disadvantaged children in nine urban school districts. The majority of students in all nine districts are minority and disadvantaged, as the chart below shows.

Racial and Ethnic Profile of Nine Urban Texas School Districts
Percentage of Total Enrollment

District	Hispanic	African American	Non-Hispanic White	Other	Economically Disadvantaged
Dallas	63	30	6	1	82
Fort Worth	54	27	17	2	72
Austin	55	13	29	3	59
Houston	59	29	9	3	83
North Forest	26	74	1	Less than 1	95
San Antonio	88	9	3	Less than 1	93
South S.A.	96	2	3	Less than 1	90
Harlandale	95	Less than 1	4	Less than 1	91
Edgewood	98	1	1	Less than 1	94

Data taken from 2004-2005 AEIS Reports

In eight of the nine districts, a majority of the students are Hispanic. Indeed, Texas schools serve about one fifth of all the Nation's Hispanic students. In seven of the nine districts, the non-Hispanic white student enrollment is less than 10 percent.

Low graduation rates. The Texas Education Agency reports graduation rates for all Texas school districts, based on the percentage of ninth graders who graduate on time. According to TEA, the graduation rate for the state as a whole was 84 percent in 2005.

However, according to a recent study by the Harvard Civil Rights Project (Losen, Orfield, & Balfanz, 2006), the officially recorded graduation rates for Texas school districts and the state as a whole are artificially high. These scholars argue that the Texas process for calculating graduation rates takes too many students out of the analysis, resulting in a graduation rate that is misleading. Utilizing a computation model they call the Cumulative Promotion Index (CPI), the Harvard study concluded that a more accurate graduation rate for Texas in 2005 is 73.7 percent, not the 84 percent rate that TEA reported (p. 16).

The Harvard study also found that graduation rates are particularly inflated in school districts with large populations of minority and disadvantaged students (p.23). The study compared TEA figures with a more accurate calculation for five of the state's largest urban districts—Dallas, Houston, Fort Worth, San Antonio, and Austin. Their findings show that graduation rates in these districts are shockingly low.

Graduation Rates in Five Texas School Districts: Official and Adjusted

District	Official All Students	Percentage point difference between TEA Official & CPI	CPI All	CPI White	CPI Black	CPI Latino
Dallas	81.3	35	46.3	54.5	48.6	43.6
Houston	71.3	22.4	48.9	69	48.7	43.3
Fort Worth	76.5	27.6	48.9	59.4	45.5	45.7
San Antonio	79.2	27.3	51.9	46.3	46.5	53
Austin	78.8	23.7	55.1	77.3	44.7	42.8

Chart adapted from Losen, Orfield, & Balfanz (2006), p. 23. Losen, Orfield & Balfanz's chart is based on data reported in Swanson (2006)

As reflected in the table above, the graduation rate in Dallas, Houston, and Fort Worth was below 50 percent in 2003: The graduation rates for Austin and San Antonio were only slightly better—about 55 percent and 52 percent respectively. For minority students—Hispanics and African Americans—the graduation rate was below 50 percent in all five districts, with the exception of San Antonio, where 53 percent of a cohort of Hispanic students graduated on time in 2003 (p. 23).

A 1999 study by the Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA) reached similar conclusions about graduation rates of Texas high schools. That report concluded

that about half of all the Hispanic and African American students who were Texas ninth graders in 1994-95 did not complete high school three years later (IDRA, 1999, p. 13).

Research consistently shows that graduation rates for Hispanic and African American males fall below the rates for their female counterparts (Orfield, Losen, & Wald, 2004, p. 2). In addition, research shows that dropout rates are higher in urban school districts than in other districts (IDRA, 1999, p. 8). Thus, it is safe to say that the graduation rates for minority males in the five Texas school districts that were highlighted in the Harvard report are shockingly low—perhaps as low as 40 percent.

As the Harvard Civil Rights Project Report stated, this state of affairs is both a civil rights crisis and a crisis for the Texas economy. These rates are “incompatible with Texas’ hope for a secure economic and social future” (p. 8). Surely anyone who is interested in improving educational opportunities for inner city students is willing to explore any option that would improve educational outcomes for these students.

Low student achievement. Texas has made great strides in improving student achievement. Nevertheless, the evidence is clear that our State’s urban students—particularly our Hispanic and African American students—are not doing as well as they should be. According to a report by the Fordham Foundation (2006), “upwards of four-fifths of Texas’s poor and minority students [are] failing to achieve reading or math proficiency.” According to the same report, only 8 percent of African-American eighth-graders scored proficient or above in science; and only 11 percent of the Hispanic eighth-graders scored at the proficient level.

II. Research on Vouchers Indicates They Can Reduce Racial Isolation, Improve Graduation Rates, and Raise Student Achievement Levels

Across the country, school-choice programs still form only a small part of most states’ school reform efforts. Nevertheless, research compiled so far shows that such programs can have a positive impact on the problem of racial isolation, student achievement levels for minority students, and graduation rates.

Improving Graduation Rates. Will the proposed Urban School Choice Pilot Program improve graduation rates for urban minority students? Research on the Milwaukee school voucher program suggests that it will. A recent report prepared by Jay Greene (2004) of the Manhattan Institute found that Milwaukee’s private school students had a graduation rate of 64 percent compared to only 36 percent for students in Milwaukee’s 37 public high schools. Even Milwaukee’s six academically select high schools had a graduation rate of only 41 percent—far lower than the private schools participating in Milwaukee’s voucher program.

Reducing Racial Isolation. Students in all nine school districts that are included in the Urban School Choice Pilot Program attend school in racial isolation. Student populations are overwhelmingly minority—Hispanic and African American. As stated above, in 7 of the 9 districts, Anglo students make up less than 10 percent of the total school population. Tragically, in the years since the Supreme Court’s school desegregation decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), urban school districts—including Texas districts—have become more racially isolated over time—not less. According to the Harvard Civil

Rights Project, Texas is one of the most segregated states in the country with regard to Latino students (Orfield & Lee, 2004, p. 28).

Will the Urban School Choice program help break down racial isolation in the targeted Texas districts? Again, research suggests that it will. Gregory Forster's 2006 study of the Milwaukee school choice program showed that students attending private schools experienced significantly more racial integration than students attending Milwaukee's public schools. The report, which was supported by the Milton and Rose D. Friedman Foundation, concluded:

Contrary to widespread claims, empirical research finds that school vouchers do not put students into more segregated schools. In fact, all the available empirical research finds that vouchers in Milwaukee—like vouchers in Cleveland and Washington, DC—are moving students into private schools that are substantially less segregated than the local public schools. The daily classroom experience of students in private schools exposes them to better racial mixing than the experience of students in the public schools. (p. 18)

Forster's report explains why vouchers tend to increase racial integration compared to public school counterparts. "Private schools have a much greater potential to desegregate students because they break down geographic barriers, drawing students together across neighborhood boundaries in a way that the government school monopoly cannot match even when it tries to do so." For poor families, the integration potential of private schools cannot be realized because of the monetary barrier. Voucher programs overcome the monetary barrier for poor families, "enabling private schools to make desegregation a reality" (p. 18).

Forster's study echoes a study prepared in 2000 by Marquette University researchers (Fuller & Mitchell, 2000). That study found that in 1999-2000, about half of the students in Milwaukee's public schools attended schools that were racially isolated (90 percent white or minority). In contrast, only 30 percent of students attending Milwaukee's religious choice schools attended racially isolated schools.

A 2006 study of the Cleveland voucher program, also conducted under the auspices of the Milton and Rose D. Friedman Foundation, found that the private schools participating in Cleveland's voucher program were less segregated than the Cleveland Public Schools (Forster, 2006). And a Manhattan Institute paper issued in 2006 reached a preliminary conclusion that Washington DC's voucher program also contributed positively toward desegregation (Greene & Winters, 2006). The authors found that the District of Columbia's "voucher-accepting private schools have populations whose racial demographics more accurately mirror those of the surrounding metropolitan region than do public schools in the District."

Jay Greene, in a 2000 report on school choice programs, found that private schools participating in school choice programs promoted integration. "Private schools," Greene wrote, "are more likely to be integrated (having a racial composition that resembles the composition of the broader community) and less likely to be segregated (having a racial composition that is almost all white or almost all minority) than are public schools."

When one looks at the racial and ethnic profiles of the Texas districts that are slated to participate in the Urban School Choice Pilot Program, it is clear that a voucher program

will very likely allow students to attend schools that are less racially isolated than the public schools. Edgewood ISD, to cite the most extreme example, is 98 percent Hispanic. A voucher program for Edgewood students seems certain to place voucher students in schools that are more racially integrated than the schools they came from.

Improving Educational Outcomes for Disadvantaged Students. Of course, the most important question with regard to any school reform initiative is this: will the reform improve student achievement? This is an especially critical question for Texas inner-city schools, where student performance, measured by any indicator, is far below what it should be.

In a 2005 report, Gerald Robinson, a Senior Fellow at Marquette University's Center for the Transformation of Learning, summarized all the available research on school choice, including research on the Milwaukee voucher program, the Cleveland voucher program, and several privately financed voucher programs.

Evaluating this research is not easy because the validity of research findings is often challenged by one side or the other in the school choice debate. Nevertheless, the Robinson survey is useful, and its conclusions about the educational outcomes of voucher programs are positive. With regard to the Milwaukee voucher program, Robinson summarized as follows:

[A]n overview of MPCP research [the Milwaukee voucher program] shows three important and consistent conclusions. First, Hoxby, Witte, Rouse and Greene et al. belief that the MPCP is an important educational alternative for poor families. Second, no scholar has found that student participation in the MPCP resulted in reduced academic performance. Third, parent satisfaction was strong. (p.3)

Regarding the Florida voucher program (which was declared unconstitutional under the state constitution by the Florida Supreme Court in *Bush v. Holmes* (2006)), Robinson summarized these findings: "[A]n overview of Florida school choice research shows that the A+ program provides important educational options for poor minority students trapped in Florida's failing public schools The research also proves that competition from vouchers improved student outcomes in the public school sector" (p. 5). Robinson also noted the findings of Greene and Winters (2003) that 88 percent of the Florida voucher participants qualified for free or reduced lunch and that most of the voucher students were minorities. "These findings," Robinson noted, "undercut the claim that choice 'creams' the advantaged students" (p. 4).

Robinson also summarized two studies that had been done on the Cleveland voucher program. [R]esearch revealed at best, either gains in student achievement, or at worse, no difference between voucher and non-voucher students. Neither study indicated an adverse effect on student achievement for voucher participants" (p. 5).

Closer to home, Jay P. Greene and Greg F. Forster, scholars at the Manhattan Institute, evaluated a voucher program funded by a private organization for the benefit of students in the Edgewood Independent School District of San Antonio (2002). In essence, the program permitted Edgewood students to attend a private school or another public school district at the private organization's expense. Edgewood's students are predominately Hispanic and a majority (over 90 percent) are economically disadvantaged. (The same research report also evaluated Milwaukee's voucher program.)

Greene and Forster ranked Texas school districts according to the difference between expected gains in student achievement and actual gains over a period of time. They found that Edgewood school district ranked at the 85th percentile regarding gains for all students. In other words, Edgewood's performance relative to its expected gain was equal or superior to 85 percent of all Texas school districts. For Hispanic students, Edgewood ranked in the 73rd percentile, and for impoverished students, the district ranked in the 75th percentile.

Based on their analysis, Greene and Forster reached these conclusions:

[A]fter the effects of population demographics and local resources were isolated and removed, Edgewood performed well above the average Texas school district among all students, Hispanic students, and low-income students. This is consistent with the hypothesis that public schools are responding to competition from school choice by improving educational services. Of course, other factors may be at work, including random chance. However, given Edgewood's unusually strong performance, the data suggest that school choice probably made an important difference in student outcomes.

Voucher opponents cite work by two scholars to support their claims that voucher programs are not beneficial, but the studies themselves are nuanced. Kim Metcalf, in a 2003 report on the Cleveland voucher program, reached this conclusion regarding academic achievement: "After adjusting for students' minority status and family income, there is no consistent pattern either of enhanced or diminished academic achievement for students who have used a scholarship to attend public schools from kindergarten through fourth grade."

However, according to the Milton and Rose D. Friedman Foundation (undated), Metcalf had concluded in an earlier report (1993) that participation in the Cleveland voucher program appeared to substantially improve parents' satisfaction with their children's schools. The Friedman Foundation also quotes from an earlier report in which Metcalf concluded: "Available data indicate a small but statistically significant effect on students' achievement in two of five cognitive domains after two years in the program."

Voucher opponents also cite the work of John Witte as evidence that vouchers do not positively impact on student achievement. However, Witte (1999) has noted some positive outcomes from the Milwaukee voucher program:

There were beneficial results for both families and private schools. For example, we found that parents who responded to yearly follow-up surveys at the end of the school year were much more satisfied with the private schools than with their former public schools and nearly unanimously supported the continuation of the program. In addition, their relatively high levels of parental involvement tend to increase in the private schools. Finally, attendance was slightly higher than in the public schools.

And, Witte and Thorn's 1994 report on the Milwaukee program, the conclusions were equivocal but not negative:

One way to think about the program is to ask whether the majority of the students and families involved are better off because of this program. The answer of the parents involved, at least those who respond to our surveys, was clearly yes. This was despite the fact that achievement, as measured by standardized tests, was no different than the achievement of MPS students.

III. Research on Religious Education

In addition to research that is specific to voucher programs, there is considerable research that supports the conclusion that religious education is beneficial for disadvantaged students. Since religious schools are eligible to participate in the Texas Urban School Choice Pilot Program, these research findings are relevant. Coleman and Hoffer concluded in a 1987 study that Catholic schools were superior to public schools in educating African Americans, Hispanics, socio-economically disadvantaged children, and children from deficient (single-parent) families (pp. 118-148). And Bryk, Lee and Holland, in an influential 1993 study, found that Catholic schools, with their simple organizational structures and modest resources, did a better job of educating disadvantaged children than the public schools. Sociologist Andrew Greeley, in a 1982 study, reached essentially the same results. Not only did Catholic schools do a better job of educating disadvantaged students than public schools, Greeley wrote, they did so "at an amazingly low cost."

Although these research studies focused on Catholic schools, there is no reason to believe that the benefits of religious education for disadvantaged students would be any less in schools operated by other religious groups. One scholar who studied a religious boarding school for Inuit children in Alaska concluded that the religious school did a better job of educating these children than the state boarding schools. The religious school, this scholar found, was characterized by shared values, cohesiveness among staff members, informal personal relationships between students and teachers, and an intense academic atmosphere (Kleinfeld, 1979). It seems likely that these qualities will be present in most religious schools, regardless of denominational affiliation.

It should be noted that religious schools are generally quite diverse in terms of the religious affiliation of their students. Catholic schools, for example, enroll a significant number of non-Catholic students (Bryk, Lee & Holland, 1993, p. 182); and Protestant-affiliated schools generally have student bodies that reflect a wide range of religious affiliations.

In addition to the educational advantages that the Urban School Choice Pilot Program offers, the program addresses a basic issue of fairness. This legislation, if adopted by the Texas Legislature, will allow families of modest means to select a religious education for their children, a choice that more affluent families already have. Education historian and educational policy scholar Diane Ravitch, in a 1997 essay, remarked that the current state of affairs is fundamentally unfair. "What I argue," Ravitch wrote, "is that it is unjust to compel poor children to attend bad schools. It is unjust to prohibit poor families from sending their children to the school of their choice, even if that school has a religious affiliation. It is unjust to deny free schooling to poor families with strong religious convictions" (p. 257).

Conclusion

The Texas Urban School Choice Pilot Program provides opportunities for economically disadvantaged students in five Texas metropolitan areas to attend alternative private or public schools. Currently, these students attend schools in systems that have low graduation rates and low levels of student performance. Moreover, these systems are racially isolated with high concentrations of minority students.

Research shows that voucher programs currently in place have the capacity to reduce racial isolation, improve graduation rates, and improve student achievement levels for disadvantaged students. Furthermore, research on religious education shows that religious schools do a good job of educating disadvantaged students. No research shows that students will be worse off for participating in a school choice program like the one contemplated in SB1506, although some studies find no significant improvement from voucher programs in terms of student achievement. This program provides poor families in urban Texas educational alternatives that show promise for improving their children's overall quality of education, and ultimately, the overall quality of their lives.

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