

## School Choice: Disproportionately Negative Impact on Vulnerable Students

### What is school choice?

School choice (also known as “parent choice”) is a catch phrase for vouchers, tax credit scholarships, and education savings accounts, all of which funnel taxpayer dollars to private academies to cover the cost of tuition.

### What’s so bad about that?

Public schools are required by law to accept every child, including those who have learning deficits or disabilities. Private schools have no such obligation. The *lie of school choice* is that it is not parents who do the choosing, but private schools that get to select only the “right” children, those whose parents can afford to pay the cost of tuition and fees beyond that covered by a voucher and those who are a “good fit” culturally, socially, academically, and behaviorally. While public schools are subject to intense scrutiny and held to high standards, private schools have no accountability.

Vouchers and other privatization schemes divert scarce taxpayer dollars from public schools that are responsible for educating all children to unaccountable private schools that can pick and choose their students. Meanwhile, **public schools are left with fewer resources with which to serve the students most in need, creating a disproportionately negative impact on the most vulnerable students** who remain in public school classrooms. And high poverty public schools suffer most, lacking a local tax base that can make up for the funding that is diverted to private academies.

### Who supports school choice?

National organizations that stand to profit from public tax dollars are running aggressive campaigns across the country to privatize public schools. They include the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), Americans for Prosperity, the Foundation for Excellence in Education, and the American Federation for Children.

Locally, Empower Mississippi is the organization that fronts some of these groups, supporting legislation to privatize our education system. In the 2015 election cycle, Empower Mississippi spent almost \$600,000 to elect pro-school choice candidates and defeat incumbent lawmakers who support public education. They were successful in several districts, essentially removing the voice of the voter in exchange for lawmakers who will rubber-stamp a national school choice agenda here in Mississippi. The same lawmakers who support school choice measures also oppose full funding of public schools that accept every child and educate 90% of Mississippi children.

### But does school choice increase student achievement?

An April 2017 report<sup>1</sup> on the federally funded District of Columbia voucher program which serves a high poverty population, notes that for three consecutive cohorts of voucher recipients, all measured after their first year of attending a private voucher school, math achievement was 7.3 percentile points lower than that of those who applied to the program but were not selected to receive a voucher. Voucher students in elementary grades performed worse both in math and reading than their peers in traditional and charter public schools (14.7 percentile points lower in math and 9.3 points lower in reading).

According to a comprehensive evaluation<sup>2</sup> of longitudinal data on Ohio’s EdChoice Scholarship (voucher) Program, private school voucher students “fared worse academically compared to their closely matched peers attending public schools.” The study finds persistently lower achievement for voucher students relative to public school peers in both math and English language arts, with the greatest disparity in math (longitudinal data, 2003-2004 through 2012-2013).

Research<sup>3</sup> found “strong and consistent evidence” that Louisiana voucher students performed significantly worse in math after using their voucher to attend the private schools that participate in the Louisiana Scholarship (voucher) Program. Private school voucher students scored 27 points below their public school peers in math in the first year of the voucher program, and 16 points below in the second year. In reading, voucher students trailed their public school peers by 9 points in year 1 and 8 points in year 2.

**Prior studies revealed little to no academic advantage:**

Long-term studies of voucher programs in Milwaukee<sup>4</sup>, the oldest school choice/voucher program in the U.S., Cleveland<sup>5,6</sup>, and the District of Columbia<sup>7</sup> found no advantage in academic achievement for students attending private schools with vouchers.

Milwaukee, which introduced vouchers in 1990 and by 2014 provided them to 25,000 students annually, requires its voucher students to take the same Wisconsin state tests used in the public schools. Performance results from the 2013-2014 school year showed slightly lower proficiency rates for voucher students in both math and reading as compared to their public school peers.<sup>8</sup>

Annual studies of Florida’s tax credit (voucher) program showed negligible changes for private school voucher students. Of the 158 private voucher schools reporting more than 30 students, only 18 schools achieved statistically significant, though small, gains in reading and math from 2011 – 2014. Another 31 schools produced statistically significant losses over the three-year period. Most schools’ voucher students performed about the same as they had in previous years, neither gaining nor losing ground when compared to their peers nationally (Florida no longer reports comparative scores for in-state public school and voucher students).<sup>9</sup>

1 Evaluation of the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program (reauthorized under SOAR Act of 2011): Impacts After One Year, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, U.S. Department of Education, April 2017 [See report](#)

2 Evaluation of Ohio’s EdChoice Scholarship Program, Thomas B. Fordham Institute, July 2016 [See report](#)

3 How Has the Louisiana Scholarship Program Affected Students? A Comprehensive Summary of Effects After Two Years, Education Research Alliance of New Orleans and School Choice Demonstration Project, February 2016 [See report](#)

4 Comprehensive Longitudinal Evaluation of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program: Summary of Fourth Year Reports, 2011

5 Evaluation of the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program: Summary Report, Indiana University, 1998-2004, 2006

6 The Evidence on Education Vouchers: An Application to the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program, City University of New York, 2006, commissioned by the National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education

7 Evaluation of the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program: Final Report, University of Arkansas and Georgetown University, 2010, commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education

8 Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2014

9 Evaluation of the Florida Tax Credit Program, Florida State University, 2015