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Can't vouch for vouchers as answer to schools that don't work

By Kevin Cokley

One of the hot-button issues facing politicians is that of vouchers and school choice. In Texas, **SB 276** was recently introduced to give about 60 percent of the state funding school districts receive, roughly \$5,100 per student, directly to parents who want to send their children to private schools. Another bill, **SB 642**, proposes a tax credit for businesses that help fund scholarships so low-income students can attend private schools.

Underlying motivations for vouchers and school choice are ostensibly related to long-standing concerns about underperforming schools. Proponents of vouchers and school choice argue that all parents have the right to choose the school that will best educate their children, particularly when their child's school is underperforming.

This complicated issue is often viewed through a partisan, political lens (although Democrats and Republicans have both supported and opposed voucher legislation). It is sometimes viewed as a racial issue (although again there are Black, Latino, and White proponents as well as opponents). Any position taken on vouchers should be thoughtful, nuanced and supported by meticulous research rather than ideology and political expediency. In that regard, empirical research has been equivocal.

The first federally funded voucher program was established in the District of Columbia and passed in January 2004. The DC Opportunity Scholarship Program was subjected to a rigorous evaluation after five years. The outcomes of 2,300 applicants were evaluated, with some applicants being randomly assigned to a treatment group (those receiving a voucher) and other applicants being randomly assigned to a control group (no voucher). Outcome data included test scores and high school graduation, including:

- There was no conclusive evidence that vouchers affected student achievement. Reading and math test scores were statistically similar for students receiving vouchers and those not receiving vouchers. This pattern was also found among students identified from schools in need of improvement (SINI). The only students who experienced increased achievement were students not from SINI, those already higher performing and female students. Students who were male and/or had lower academic performance did not perform better, either.
- Vouchers did appear to significantly improve students' chances of graduating from high school. So while there was no improvement in reading and math test scores, the probability of students with vouchers graduating from high school increased by 12 percent.

Milwaukee's well-known voucher program was evaluated over several years. Like other programs, researchers found only small to modest gains on test scores. The accumulation of data suggests that at best, vouchers may result in small, modest gains for some students, some of the time. More often than not, there's no appreciable gain in test scores.

Is the emotionally charged debate simply about trying to help children in failing schools? Maybe, however, social psychology would suggest it is also about a deeply held, middle-class belief around the idea of choice. The social psychologist Hazel Markus has conducted research on the importance of choice among middle-class Americans, which she argues is central to one's identity. Using Hurricane Katrina as a case study, Markus observed that many people were puzzled why so many New Orleanians "chose" to stay despite evacuation orders. Markus' research indicated the importance of looking at people's contexts to understand what they can actually choose (transportation, money, friends in other states, etc.). In several studies Markus found the middle-class more likely to see choice as central to their identities, whereas working-class Americans are more accustomed to being affected by circumstances beyond their control.

This emphasis on choice can be seen in comments made by Texas State Sen. Donna Campbell: "There is not a greater accountability than someone who can make a choice by moving their business."

This means parents should be able to choose to send their child to a private school even if there is very little evidence their child's achievement will significantly improve. Of course parents have this right. The real question is should parents exercise it? And is there incontrovertible evidence that their child's academic achievement will significantly improve by attending a private school? The answer to that question appears to be no.

It doesn't matter what research actually shows about the efficacy of vouchers. As the saying goes, people can choose to see a glass half empty or half full. People in favor of vouchers do not care that the evidence in support of vouchers improving academic outcomes is inconclusive. People against vouchers tend to minimize any data that would suggest a modest positive impact. The available evidence suggests vouchers have a nominal effect, if any, on achievement test scores but a positive effect on high school graduation rates.

As with other education debates, it is important to determine the most important academic outcomes for underperforming schools. A scientific and non-ideologically driven stance should approach the use of vouchers for underperforming schools with caution and a measured skepticism.

Cokley, Ph.D., author of "The Myth of Black Anti-Intellectualism", is director of The Institute for Urban Policy Research & Analysis at The University of Texas at Austin and a Public Voices Fellow. Follow him on Twitter at @KevinCokley1.