

Studies weigh impact of Louisiana's voucher program

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The Louisiana Scholarship Program has widely varying effects on students, according to a series of studies released jointly by the School Choice Demonstration Project at the University of Arkansas and the Education Research Alliance for New Orleans at Tulane University.

The studies address the effects of the Louisiana voucher program on the achievement and non-cognitive skills of voucher recipients, as well as broader effects on school segregation and public school students. It is the first evaluation to examine such a wide range of outcomes, or to consider the effects over the first two years of this specific program. Key findings include:

Students who use the voucher to enroll in private schools end up with much lower math achievement than they would have otherwise, losing as much as 13 percentile points on the state standardized test, after two years. Reading outcomes are also lower for voucher users, though these are not statistically different from the experimental control group in the second year.

There is no evidence that the Louisiana Scholarship Program has positive or negative effects on students' non-cognitive skills, such as "grit" and political tolerance.

The program reduced the level of racial segregation in the state. The vast majority of the recipients are black students who left schools with student populations that were disproportionately black relative to the broader community and moved to private schools that had somewhat larger white populations.

The program may have modestly increased academic performance in public schools, consistent with the theory behind school vouchers that they create competition between public and private schools that "lifts all boats."

“Prior studies of vouchers have been much more positive and generated modest positive effects on achievement,” said Patrick Wolf of the University of Arkansas, who led the studies. “Something very different appears to be going on in Louisiana at least during the first two years of program operation.”

“While the results did improve from the first to the second year, this is still a cautionary tale,” said Jonathan Mills of the Education Research Alliance for New Orleans. “We need to learn more about why the results are so different in Louisiana compared with voucher programs in other states.”

The reports are online at <http://educationresearchalliancenola.org/>