

VOUCHERSIND.C.

WHY D.C. FAMILIES AREN'T CHOOSING VOUCHERS

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AUGUST 2017

FutureEd
GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

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Why D.C. Families Aren't Choosing Vouchers

In May, after the Republican-controlled Congress renewed the private school voucher program for Washington, D.C., President Donald Trump heralded the program's "tremendous successes." Vice President Mike Pence went further, calling it "a case study in school choice success."

But an in-depth look at the nation's only federally funded vouchers program suggests that many families are rejecting the choices the program provides.

While applications for the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program were up in the 2016-2017 school year, the number of students who actually used vouchers fell to 1,154, down from 1,638 four years earlier. A third of the students already awarded vouchers didn't use them. And more than half of the new students who won vouchers in the 2016 lottery didn't end up going to private school.¹ With the new legislation and an infusion of cash, advocates are hoping numbers will increase in the new school year.²

Why did D.C. voucher use decline when voucher programs elsewhere were expanding rapidly? The answer reflects both the flaws in the program's design and the wide array of educational choices the city offers. And it provides insights into how to design school choice systems that best serve students and taxpayers effectively.

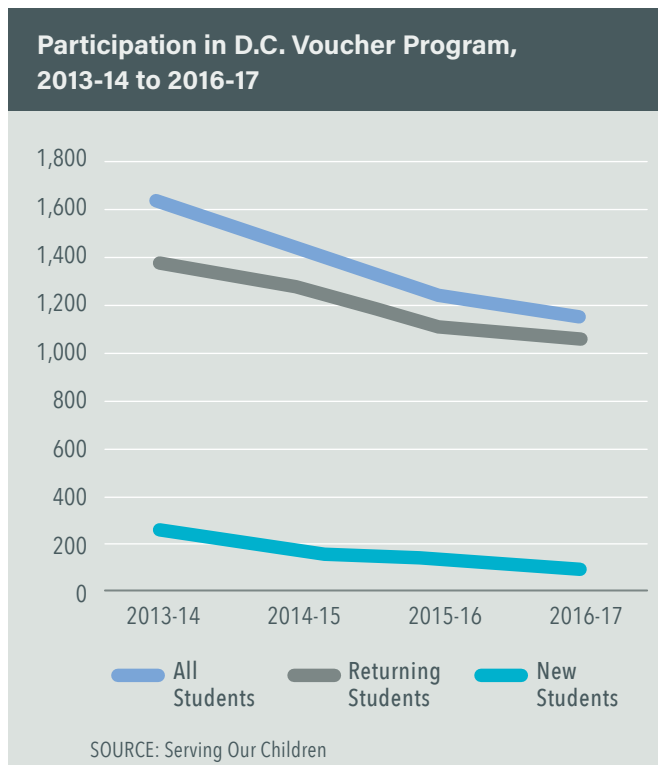
The D.C. voucher program exists at the pleasure of Congress, causing concern for some parents and school administrators about whether funding will continue. Until recently, the program did not give preference to siblings of students using vouchers, making it challenging for some families to participate. Also, unlike many other voucher programs,

it provides no way for parents to assess the quality of the schools involved. Instead, federal law calls for independent research to assess the progress of participating students, who so far have shown little improvement in test scores.

Beyond the legislative constraints of the D.C. program lies a certain amount of administrative chaos. Vouchers are awarded after many private schools have finished their admissions process, leaving some students and parents still scrambling to find a spot after the start of the school year. Private schools can choose which students to take and how much to charge parents beyond the voucher amount, meaning many schools are out of reach for struggling students from low-income families.

Consequently, the majority of the voucher students are concentrated in religious schools with lower tuition costs. Others wind up at start-up campuses with little tradition of academic excellence. While voucher supporters point to parent satisfaction and early evidence of higher graduation rates, many families are still not sold on the program.

Perhaps the D.C. voucher program's most significant challenge is the stiff competition it faces from traditional public schools and the charter sector, each serving more than 40,000 students compared to the 1,100 using vouchers. Both the public and charter systems have seen growth in enrollment and test scores in recent years, as voucher use has declined.



Thus the private school choice program, which cost the federal government \$183 million between 2004 and 2015, is far from the “case study” Pence describes. Rather, it calls into question whether vouchers can meaningfully increase the number of high-quality classroom seats for disadvantaged students in a district with so many public sector options.

The Politics of D.C. Vouchers

When the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program was initially authorized in 2003, it promised “to provide low-income parents residing in the District of Columbia, particularly parents of students who attend elementary or secondary schools identified for improvement, corrective action...with expanded opportunities for enrolling their children in higher-performing schools in the District of Columbia.”³

The law creating the program, passed by a Republican-controlled Congress and signed by a GOP president, secured funding from 2004 to 2009. President Barack Obama and a Democratic Congress let the program expire in 2009, while allowing voucher students already in private schools to finish their education. When Republicans took back control of Congress in 2011, they reauthorized the program, providing money for new students to receive vouchers. In May 2017, Congress renewed the program and added elements that could boost enrollment, such as giving preference to siblings of students already in the program and making it easier for students already attending private schools to participate.

Voucher supporters contend the fluctuating levels of political support have contributed to waning participation in the program.

Requirements for Participation in D.C. Voucher Program

Voucher applicants must be:

- D.C. residents;
- K-12 students;
- Children whose families qualify for SNAP benefits (food stamps) or have an income at or below 185% of the poverty level. (Students can remain in the program as long as their family income remains below 300% of the income threshold.)

Preference is given to:

- Students from public schools in need of improvement;
- Students with siblings holding vouchers.

“Remember last year, we were still under the cloud of uncertainty,” said Kevin Mills, manager of family and community affairs at Serving Our Children, a nonprofit that administers the D.C. vouchers program. “And families are just not sure, ‘Where am I going with this?’ And so, if you’re not sure the program’s existing, schools fill up quickly, seats are gone, the school in your neighborhood is not available...you just resort back to the public school.”⁴

With an earlier schedule for awarding vouchers and a renewed commitment from Congress, Mills said his organization is working to double the number of students in the program by the fall of 2018. Even before the new legislation was approved in May, the Trump administration released about \$20 million in unused funds from past years, allowing Serving Our Children to increase the number of scholarship offers to about 2,400 for the 2017-18 school year. Mills said it’s too soon to say how many students will use vouchers in the coming year, but by mid August about 1,300 had been placed in

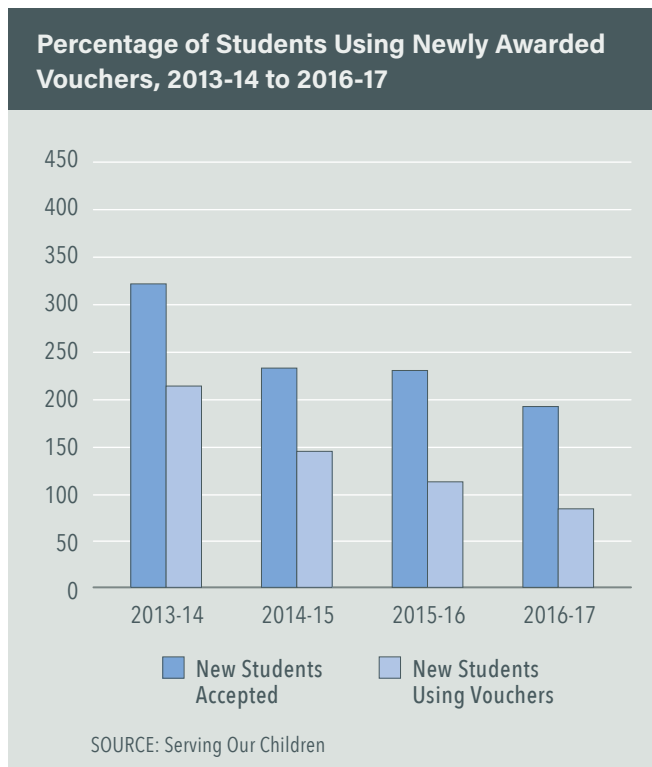
private schools. The nonprofit is hoping to persuade policymakers to provide the funding necessary to further expand the program.

Waning Enrollment

Voucher programs elsewhere have seen steady growth. In Indiana’s statewide program, for instance, enrollment surged from 3,900 students in the 2011-12 school year to 34,000 in 2016-17, in part because of changes that allowed moderate-income students and children already in private school to participate.⁵ In Louisiana, the number of scholarships climbed from 5,296 in 2012-13 to 7,110 in 2015-16⁶ after a New Orleans pilot program went statewide. North Carolina’s Opportunity Scholarship expanded from 1,216 students in 2014-15, its inaugural year, to 5,432 in 2016-17.⁷

By contrast, in 2016-17 D.C.’s program had 30 percent fewer students than it did four years ago. The number of applications to the voucher’s lottery actually rose—from 3,343 in 2013 to 3,898 in 2016—but once the vouchers were awarded, the number of student choosing to use them fell sharply.

This isn’t a new problem. Between 2004 and 2009, for instance, 22 percent of D.C. students receiving vouchers never used them. The most common reason cited was that students couldn’t get a spot at a preferred private school, according to a survey conducted by researchers for the U.S. Education Department. Other parents cited a lack of resources at private schools for students with special learning needs or admission to a preferred charter school. Some students simply didn’t want to leave their friends.⁸



But the downward trend in participation has become more pronounced in recent years. Since 2013, the percentage of new students using vouchers has declined steadily. In the 2013-14 school year, a third of students didn't use their vouchers. The following year, it was 38 percent, then 51 percent in 2015-16. Last year, about 58 percent chose not to use their private school scholarships.⁹

Among "returning" students—including those already enrolled in private schools and those who received vouchers in earlier years but never used them—a full third did not take advantage of the program in each of the past three academic years.¹⁰ In some cases, students applied for and received vouchers two or three years in a row and never used them.

Mills explained students leaving private school in a number of ways, including families moving out of D.C. to nearby suburbs in Virginia and Maryland and families seeing their incomes rise above the program's cut off.

Some churn is to be expected, school administrators say. At a recent panel discussion at the Urban Institute, Beth Blaufuss, the principal of Archbishop Carroll High School in Northeast Washington, remarked, "We have some families who try our school for a year or two, and then think the better choice for their child is the public school."

Cracking the "Higher-Performing" Schools

Beyond the issue of declining voucher use, the initial Congressional promise of allowing students to attend "higher-performing schools" appears elusive. Few voucher students attend the District's most successful private schools, and parents have no way to assess the quality of many of the alternatives.

Serving Our Children would not provide information on how many students attend each of the 47 private schools participating in the program, citing student privacy. Several schools contacted by FutureEd also declined to provide information. However, a 2013 U.S. General Accounting Office report sheds some light on the distribution of students during the 2011-12 academic year.¹¹

Only 51 of the 1,677 vouchers used that year, or about 3 percent, went to students in the District's high-performing independent schools. By contrast, 47 percent of the vouchers went to Catholic schools and another 21 percent to other religious schools. To be

sure, some of the parochial schools—including Georgetown Visitation Preparatory School, Gonzaga College High School, St. Anselm's Abbey School and St. John's College High School—are quite competitive, but voucher students made up a small percentage of the population in those schools. About a quarter of all voucher students attended fairly new private schools, some operated out of storefronts or in shopping malls, some relying on voucher students for more than half of their population. The program provides parents with no information on how any of these schools perform.

Nor does receiving a voucher scholarship guarantee a student a spot in a private school—or the money to pay any remaining tuition. The voucher program provides \$8,653 a year for elementary and middle school students and \$12,981 for high school students.¹² Some of D.C.'s private schools have annual tuition rates topping \$40,000.

In addition, students have to meet admissions standards at the schools to which they apply. Not surprisingly, the most prestigious participants in the D.C. voucher program also have the highest admissions standards, and many students coming from schools targeted for improvement have trouble meeting those standards.

Complicating matters, the schedule for awarding vouchers does not align with the admissions process at many D.C. private schools. Several schools require applications by November or December, while vouchers are not awarded until long after that. Often students are not placed in schools until September, when classes have already started.

Kevin Mills says Serving Our Children plans to address these timing issues by hosting private school fairs in the fall and by moving up the start of vouchers awards from July to March. But even that timeline comes after some private schools have made admissions decisions and allotted financial aid.

One admissions officer from an elite private school told us he counsels interested students to apply in the fall and gamble that they will receive a voucher in the spring lottery. If the school really wants the student, it will offer a scholarship—then deduct the amount of the voucher from the scholarship. In such instances, the voucher program is merely subsidizing the financial aid offices of elite schools.

If the school doesn't make up the difference in tuition, some low-income families simply can't afford to participate. The average income for families in the program is about \$22,000 annually.¹³ Cost is a particular problem in high schools, where tuition is generally higher. Poverty may play a role in another way: housing and job instability can disrupt a student's education, whatever type of school she attends. A study of parent perspective in North Carolina found that some families had trouble paying the extra costs that come with private school, such as breakfasts and lunches that their children received for free in public schools.¹⁴

Raynetta Jackson-Clay, who coordinates the voucher program at Georgetown Visitation, says the high school recognizes the challenges that low-income families face and works closely with them to ensure they know what extra costs may arise. The school, which will

have 10 to 15 voucher students in the new school year, boasts a 100 percent retention rate for voucher students.¹⁵

Another challenge, said Mills, is that, until now, the voucher program has had no sibling preference. Many families don't want to place one child in a private school and another in a public school across town. The reauthorization legislation that passed in May allows all siblings to receive vouchers if one wins the lottery. The legislation also makes it easier for low-income students already attending private school to receive vouchers. Such students were previously permitted to apply but were seeded behind those coming from public schools in need of improvement.

Competition from the Public Sector

All of these factors complicate the choice of private school for many families. But an even greater challenge to the voucher program may come from the array of choices available in the public school sector. D.C. Public Schools has 115 campuses, and an open enrollment system allows students to attend schools across the District with available space. While test scores remain low, the percentage of D.C. fourth graders scoring proficient in reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has doubled over the past decade. The percentage of fourth graders proficient in math has more than tripled, while eighth grade math proficiency has doubled.¹⁶ Test scores for all public schools are on the DCPS website for parents to compare.

The charter school sector now boasts 120 schools, many found in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty. Average test scores in the charter sector have risen steadily since 2006, and its 73 percent graduation rate

is slightly higher than that of the District's traditional public schools. The DC Public Charter School Board groups its schools into three tiers so that parents can assess the quality of the programs they are considering.¹⁷

While they compete for students, traditional public and charter schools now have a unified enrollment system that makes it easy for parents to apply to schools in both sectors. Two thirds of the students who applied to three schools for the coming school year through the system got one of their choices. The "My School DC" website provides detailed test score information on each school in its system.

By contrast, little information is available for parents about private school performance under D.C.'s voucher program. While *Serving Our Children* offers a handbook describing each of the schools involved, it does not provide information on performance. By law, private schools in the program must prove only that they are accredited and meet health and building codes, not that they are successfully educating students. The District's elite private schools, worried about devaluing their brands, made it a requirement of their participation that they would not have to disclose test score information on voucher students—despite the use of taxpayer funding to support the vouchers.

Voucher programs elsewhere are building in accountability that keeps schools from receiving public money if voucher students are not succeeding there. Indiana has removed at least 10 schools from its statewide program because of lagging achievement.¹⁸ Milwaukee, which has a 27-year-old voucher program, has seen weaker schools drop out of the program after instituting more accountability.¹⁹

In D.C., federal law calls for independent researchers to assess the progress of voucher students. The results suggest that the quality of many of the schools in the program is suspect. A study issued by the U.S. Education Department in April 2017 followed more than 1,700 students who took part in lotteries for private school vouchers from 2012 to 2014. Researchers tested the students and compared the performance of those who won vouchers and those who lost out in the lottery.

The results: Students who won vouchers to attend private schools had significantly lower math scores in their first year, on average, than students who didn't receive vouchers. Reading scores were also lower for younger voucher students, those in kindergarten through fifth grade, while there was no significant difference in reading ability among older students.²⁰ After the release of the findings, Congress added language to the renewed voucher bill forbidding researchers from using the sort of high-quality, "gold standard" comparative analysis employed in the 2017 study—perhaps in the hopes that the program might perform more favorably under a less rigorous evaluation.²¹

A 2010 study by the Education Department that tracked 1,300 students also found no significant difference in test scores among students using vouchers and those left out of the program. In many ways, the results in D.C. echo the findings for voucher programs elsewhere. In three statewide programs—Indiana, Louisiana and Ohio—students who used vouchers to move to private schools saw test scores decline in the first year, compared to students who remained in the public systems. Voucher students in Indiana and Louisiana rebounded after three years in

the program, but in many cases performed no better than those who stayed in public schools.²²

Graduation and Satisfaction

In D.C., the early findings were more promising when it came to high school graduation. About 82 percent of students who received vouchers graduated from high school, compared to 70 percent of those who lost the lottery, according to the 2010 study.

Those results were based on a very small number of students, since the majority had entered the voucher program in the early grades and were not yet ready to graduate. Researchers received feedback from the parents of 127 voucher students, compared to 189 students in the control group.²³

"It was very small group. That was the problem," said Nada Eissa, an economics professor at Georgetown University who was part of the research team conducting the 2010 report. "And so, statistically, it was just hard to get the analysis—to do the analysis."

Despite the small sample size, Eissa said she believes that students who move to private schools are graduating at higher rates. "I think the reason we find it is just because the expectations," she said in a recent interview. "I think that's where the biggest difference is between private and public schools for kids in low-performing schools. It's the peers, and it's the expectations."²⁴

Jon Shickler, head of Emerson Preparatory School, which has just moved from D.C.'s Dupont Circle neighborhood, said the voucher students he has accepted over the

past six years have graduated and gone to college at about the same rate as his other students. The differences come in the kind of support they need, he said. For instance, they often have unreasonable expectations for college admissions—aiming either too high or too low—and need more guidance from counselors. They also need more help navigating the college financial aid system.²⁵

Beyond the academic results, satisfaction, particularly concerning school safety, was higher among parents whose children used vouchers, according to the 2010 and 2017 Education Department studies. These findings are consistent with results from other studies of parent perceptions regarding school choice; in both the public and private sectors, parents are happier when they have a say in where their children attend school, regardless of the school's quality.²⁶

Students, however, did not consistently show higher rates of satisfaction in the D.C. voucher program. "Sometimes in the scholarship program, the parents want it more than the student," Shickler noted.

Congress has justified its multi-million dollar investment in the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program by claiming it gives parents the choice of a high-quality educational experience for their children. But the data on the 13-year-old program suggests there is neither robust demand for the private school choices on offer nor firm evidence of educational improvement for the students receiving vouchers.

Far from serving as a case study for expanded federal investment in private school choice, D.C.'s experience points to the shortcomings of voucher systems with complicated admissions processes, scant information on school quality, and little access to the best schools.

More broadly, it raises questions about why the federal government is spending tax money on private schools in the District of Columbia at a time when the city's charter schools are providing a range of no-cost options, the traditional public schools are improving, families are free to apply to schools citywide, and the public sector's performance is an open book.

ENDNOTES

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Acknowledgements

We are grateful to research associate Rachel Udabe and to Jackie Arthur and Molly Breen for their many editorial contributions.

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