

School Choice in Dayton, Ohio: An Evaluation After One Year

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(Executive Summary)

In early 1998 the Parents Advancing Choice in Education (PACE) program offered low-income families an opportunity to win scholarships to send their children to private schools in Dayton and other parts of Montgomery County, Ohio. Students entering kindergarten through twelfth grade qualified. PACE offered scholarships to 515 students who were in public schools and 250 students who were already enrolled in private schools. The program began in September of 1998. This evaluation examines the program's impact on those students in grades 2-8 who had previously been attending public schools. In 1999 the program continued, augmented by resources made available by the Children's Scholarship Fund, a nationwide scholarship program.

PACE awarded scholarships by lottery, thereby making it possible to conduct an evaluation designed as a randomized experiment. This evaluation compares students test scores and questionnaire responses of families who received the scholarship with those who entered the lottery but did not receive a scholarship. All parents were invited to respond to the questionnaires; students took the Iowa Test of Basic Skills in reading and mathematics; and students in grades 4 through 8 responded to student questionnaires.

The main findings reported in this paper are as follows:

- Three-fourths of the students participating in the evaluation were African American, 23 percent were white, and 2 percent were of another ethnic background.
- After one year, African American students who attended private school scored 7 national percentile points higher on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) in math and 5 points higher in reading than did the African American students in the public-school control group. The difference in math scores is statistically significant, with a p-value of .04; the reading test score difference is just shy of statistical significance, with a p-value of .13.
- Non-African American students in private schools did not score significantly differently than their public-school counterparts in either mathematics or reading.
- Approximately 47 percent of private-school parents give their school an "A," as compared to 25 percent of all Dayton public-school parents, and 8 percent of public-school parents participating in the evaluation. Parents of students in private schools also are much more satisfied with specific dimensions of school life. For example, 51 percent of the private-school parents are 'very satisfied' with the academic quality of the school, as compared to 19 percent of all Dayton public-school parents, and 9 percent of the public-school parents

participating in the evaluation. Similar results hold for school safety, parental involvement and class size.

- Parents in public schools report many more discipline problems than those in private schools. Sixty-six percent of the parents with students in public school say fighting is a serious problem at their child's school, as compared to 16 percent of the parents with children in private school. Forty-one percent of the public-school parents report that property destruction is a serious problem, as compared to 8 percent of the private-school parents. Parents report similarly large differences between public and private schools in levels of cheating, tardiness, and truancy.
- Public and private schools appear to allocate their resources differently. A higher percentage of public school parents report that their school has counselors for children — 79 percent as compared to 56 percent. Private-school parents, by contrast, are more likely to report the availability of individual tutors — 79 percent, as compared to 48 percent. Private schools also have smaller classes. Private-school parents report an average class size of 21, while those in public schools report an average class size of 25.
- Parents of students in private schools report closer communication with school officials. Ninety-two percent say they receive notes from their children's teachers, as compared to 76 percent of public-school parents.
- No differences in the amount of time spent on homework are reported by public and private school parents.
- Public schools are about 40 percent larger than the private schools, parents say. The average enrollment at a public school is 434 students, while that at a private school is 260 students.

The evaluation provides additional information relevant to the following issues that have been raised in debates over vouchers:

- Critics of school-voucher programs often argue that school choice destabilizes students' education both during a given school year and from one year to the next. In Dayton, however, no differences in school mobility were observed between public and private schools either within the school year or in parental plans for the following year. Suspension rates were also similar.
- Some critics have suggested that low-income families may base their school decisions on factors having little to do with their child's education. To examine this issue, we asked private-school parents to list the three most important considerations in choosing the school the child attended. Seventy one percent said academic quality was the most important reason. The next two most important considerations, religious instruction and school discipline, were mentioned by about 45 percent of the

parents. Just 7 percent said child friendships were among the three most important reasons; hardly any mentioned the sports program.

- Some have said that private schools will skim the "best and the brightest" of student applicants, refusing to admit students who face serious educational challenges. One way to test this hypothesis is to see whether those who take the scholarship offered to them differ from those who do decline the scholarship, either because they are unable to identify private-school opportunities as easily or find it more difficult to gain admission or for some other reason. There is not much evidence to support the skimming hypothesis; if anything, the taker families were the more disadvantaged, both in terms of initial test scores and family income.

Initial math scores of the students who took the scholarship were 4 points lower than those who did not make use of the scholarship; initial reading scores did not differ significantly. Mothers of decliners were more likely to be employed full time, and the income of decliner families averaged nearly \$3,000 more than the income of taker families. The dependence on welfare of the two groups was similar. However, mothers of takers had, on average, one-half years more education than decliners did. Scholarship takers were more likely to be Catholic, more likely to be say they had no religious affiliation, and less likely to be Protestant or have another religious affiliation.

In early 1998, PACE offered lottery winners annual scholarships of up to \$1,200 for students to help pay tuition at a private school for at least four years. Telephone applications were received between October 1997 and March 1998. In response to invitations sent by PACE, over 1,500 applicants attended verification sessions, where eligibility was determined, students were tested, older students filled out short questionnaires, and adult family members completed longer surveys. The lottery selecting scholarship winners was held on April 29, 1998. Follow-up test and survey information was collected in March and April of 1999. The data reported in this paper are taken from responses from parents and students at verification and follow-up sessions. The PACE program is an on-going program.

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