

The Empirical Evidence on Cleveland's School Vouchers

By Drew Catt

The city of Cleveland has long been at the forefront of school choice discussions. In 2002, a U.S. Supreme Court decision on Cleveland's publicly funded voucher program, known as the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program (CSTP), resulted in federal approval of the inclusion of religious schools in voucher programs.¹ This policy brief will look at conclusions found in empirical studies on the CSTP program.

BACKGROUND

Launched in 1996 in what is now the Cleveland Metropolitan School District (CMSD), the CSTP program allowed parents of students within the district the opportunity to apply for either a tutoring grant or a scholarship.² The program focused on serving primarily low-income students and gave top priority to students whose family income was at or below the federal poverty level, followed by students whose family income was less than 200 percent of the federal poverty level and students whose family income was greater than 200 percent of the federal poverty level.³ In order to be "race neutral," the CSTP program intended to reflect the proportion of African-American students within the district.⁴

In the spring of 1997, the state of Ohio reimbursed families of 245 K-3 students up to \$234 per student for the cost of tutorial services.⁵ That same year, 1,994 students⁶ from the maximum 1,500 families used vouchers to attend a private school approved by the state.⁷ When the program started, the state added one grade level each year until the program served K-8 students. Prior to the start of the 2003 academic year, the Ohio legislature decided to expand the program into high school by adding one grade level per year.⁸

Operating in its 17th year (2012-13), the CSTP program focuses solely on providing vouchers and caters to 6,001 K-12 students and 35 private or public schools.⁹ The CSTP program still gives primary priority to students whose families are in the lowest income level, but available scholarships go first to kindergarten students, second to

students in first through eighth grade, and third to high school students.¹⁰

FINDINGS

Studies show evidence that the CSTP program serves low-income families. In Cleveland, the 1997 average family income of voucher recipients that previously attended public school was \$20,091; the average family income of their public school peers was \$25,545 that same year.¹¹ During the same year, 49.9 percent of Cleveland voucher recipients' mothers had some college training compared to 43.5 percent of their public school peers' mothers, and voucher recipients had smaller families on average, compared to the families of their public school peers.¹²

In 1997, Cleveland voucher parents were more satisfied than public school parents were with such school characteristics as academic quality, safety, school discipline, the teaching of moral values, the amount of private attention to each child, overall parental involvement, and class size.¹³ Studies show evidence that "school vouchers do not put students into more segregated schools. In fact, all the available empirical research finds that vouchers in Cleveland...are moving students into private schools that are substantially less segregated than the local public schools."¹⁴

Regarding academics, studies show that students who remain in the CSTP program had higher levels of achievement across all subject areas when compared to the students who left the program.¹⁵ However, when controlling for differences in prior achievement, student mobility, and minority status, there is not a statistically significant difference between the overall achievement scores of students from the public school control groups and those that take advantage of the program throughout their academic careers.¹⁶ Although the aforementioned difference is not statistically significant, a comparison of students utilizing the CSTP program and all students in CMSD show that the former group has outperformed the peer group for all Ohio Graduation Test categories that had scores reported by both parties for the past three academic years.

TABLE 1

Percent of students at or above proficient on the Ohio Graduation Tests

		Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program ¹⁷	Cleveland Metropolitan School District ¹⁸
READING	2011–12	96.0	63.1
	2010–11	85.4	67.6
	2009–10	86.3	63.8
MATH	2011–12	76.2	55.5
	2010–11	62.8	58.7
	2009–10	62.3	58.2
SCIENCE	2011–12	70.6	44.4
	2010–11	52.3	44.3
	2009–10	59.6	44.4

CONCLUSION

A total of 16 separate empirical studies (some building on previous versions) have concluded as a body of evidence that the CSTP program (1) serves low-income families, (2) serves families in which a higher percentage of mothers attended some college, compared to their public school peers, (3) serves families that are smaller on average than their public school peers, (4) makes voucher parents more satisfied with characteristics of the schools their children attend when compared to their public school peers, and (5) moves students into private schools that are significantly less segregated than the local public schools.

The best sources of information on the CSTP program include evaluations conducted by Kim Metcalf and his teams (“Evaluation of the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program: 1996-1997,” 1998; “1997-1998,” 1999; “1996-1999,” 2000; “1998-2000,” 2001; “1998-2001,” 2002; “1999-2002,” 2003; “1998-2003,” 2004), an evaluation conducted by Jonathan Plucker and his team (“Evaluation of the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program: 1998-2004,” 2006) and evaluations conducted by Jay Greene, William Howell, and Paul Peterson (“Lessons from the Cleveland Scholarship Program,” 1997; “New Findings from the Cleveland Scholarship Program: A Reanalysis of Data from the Indiana University School of Education Evaluation,” 1998;

“An Evaluation of the Cleveland Voucher Program After Two Years,” 1999).

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NOTES

1. Clive R. Belfield, “The Evidence on Education Vouchers: An Application to the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program,” (paper presented at the Conference on Education and Economic Development, Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland, November, 2005), 8-9.
2. Kim K. Metcalf et al., “A Comparative Evaluation of the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Grant Program: Year One: 1996-1997,” (Bloomington, Ind.: School of Education, Smith Research Center, Indiana University, 1998), 10.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., 11.
6. Ohio Department of Education.
7. Kim K. Metcalf et al., “A Comparative Evaluation of the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Grant Program: Year One: 1996-1997,” (Bloomington, Ind.: School of Education, Smith Research Center, Indiana University, 1998), 12.
8. Jonathon A. Plucker et al., “Evaluation of the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program: Summary Report 1998-2004” (Bloomington, Ind.: Center for Evaluation and Education Policy, Indiana University, 2006), 3.
9. The Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, “The ABCs of School Choice” (Indianapolis: The Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, 2013), 57. Public schools must be in districts bordering CMSD.
10. Jonathon A. Plucker et al., “Evaluation of the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program: Summary Report 1998-2004” (Bloomington, Ind.: Center for Evaluation and Education Policy, Indiana University, 2006), 4.
11. Jay P. Greene, William G. Howell, and Paul E. Peterson, “Lessons From the Cleveland Scholarship Program,” (paper prepared for presentation before the Association of Public Policy and Management, Washington, D.C., November, 1997), 29.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., 34.
14. Greg Forster, “Segregation Levels in Cleveland Public Schools and the Cleveland Voucher Program,” The Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, (2006), 17.
15. Jonathan A. Plucker et al., “Evaluation of the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program: Summary Report 1998-2004” (Bloomington, Ind.: Center for Evaluation and Education Policy, Indiana University, 2006), 25.
16. Ibid., 28.
17. Ohio Department of Education, “School Year 2011-2012,” Cleveland Scholarship Assessment Data, last modified January 2013, <http://www.ode.state.oh.us/GD/DocumentManagement/DocumentDownload.aspx?DocumentID=141605>
18. Ohio Department of Education, “District Rating Data,” Download Data, accessed March 31, 2013, http://ilrc.ode.state.oh.us/Downloads/2012/1112_LRC_building.xls