

Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Impacts Three Years After Students Applied

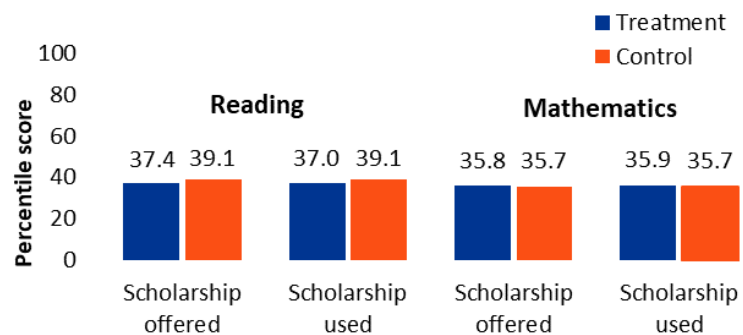
The District of Columbia (DC) Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP) is the only federally funded private school voucher program in the United States. Created in 2004, the OSP aims to provide low-income families with access to higher quality schools than those otherwise available to them. Congress' 2011 reauthorization of the OSP required an independent evaluation of its effectiveness. The study included almost 1,800 student applicants who entered lotteries from 2012 to 2014 and compared the achievement and other outcomes of those who were and were not offered scholarships. The use of random lotteries to award scholarships means that both groups of students were very similar when they applied and later differences reflect only the effects of the OSP. This report presents final findings, three years after students applied.

KEY FINDINGS AND NEXT STEPS

- **Three years after students applied, the OSP had no effect on student achievement** (exhibit 1).

In the first two years after applying to the OSP, students offered and using scholarships performed worse in math than those not offered scholarships. But between years two and three students offered and using scholarships had faster growth in math test scores, and those not offered scholarships experienced slower growth, so that the two groups performed similarly by year three. While there were

Exhibit 1. OSP's effects on student reading and mathematics achievement



no differences in achievement at that point, students offered and using scholarships had lower rates of chronic absenteeism (22 and 20 percent, respectively) than did students not offered scholarships (29 percent). Questions about the longer term effects of the OSP on academic outcomes will remain unanswered, as Congress mandated that the current evaluation conclude.

- **After three years, the OSP had improved student – but not parent – satisfaction with schools and perceptions of school safety.** Students offered and using scholarships were more likely to give their school a grade of A or B and more likely to report that their school was “very safe” three years after they applied to the program. However, parents of students offered or using scholarships and not offered scholarships reported similar levels of satisfaction with their child’s school and perceptions of school safety. In both groups, over 80 percent of parents gave their child’s school a grade of A or B, and nearly two-thirds reported that their child’s school was “very safe.”

The next OSP evaluation will focus on program improvement. It will examine how families experience applying for scholarships and to private schools, and the support they receive, in order to provide insights about how to increase program effectiveness. It will also assess whether participation in the OSP affects other important indicators of the program’s success, such as college enrollment and completion.