

WWC Quick Review of the Report “Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Final Report”¹

What is this study about?

The study examined whether winning a lottery for the Opportunity Scholarship Program, which offers vouchers to students to attend private schools, improved low-income students’ reading and math achievement and their probability of graduating from high school.

The study analyzed data on more than 1,300 K–12 low-income students in the District of Columbia who participated in the spring 2004 and 2005 lotteries and were followed through spring 2009, resulting in four or five years of follow-up data.

Key outcomes were reading and math achievement on standardized tests for the full sample and, for a subset of 500 students scheduled to complete 12th grade by spring 2009, parent reports on whether their children earned a high school diploma.

The study measured the effect of winning a scholarship by comparing outcomes of students who won a scholarship lottery to those of students who did not.

Features of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program

To apply for a scholarship within the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program, students must have resided in Washington, DC, and had a family income at or below 185% of the federal poverty line. If there were more applicants than scholarships, scholarships were awarded by lottery.

Students who won a scholarship received up to \$7,500 to cover the costs of tuition, school fees, and transportation to attend a participating private school located in Washington, DC.

Scholarships were renewable for up to five years, as long as students remained eligible for the program and in good academic standing.

Seventy-three different private schools participated in the program for at least one year from 2005 through 2009.

Twenty-seven percent of students offered the scholarship used it all years it was available to them. Fifty-one percent used the scholarship for some, but not all, years, and 22% never used the scholarship.

¹ Wolf, P., Gutmann, B., Puma, M., Kisida, B., Rizzo, L., Eissa, N., & Carr, M. (2010). *Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Final report* (NCEE 2010-4018). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education.

Quick reviews examine evidence published in a study (supplemented, if necessary, by information from author queries) to assess whether that study’s design meets WWC evidence standards. Quick reviews rely on the effect sizes and significance levels reported by study authors. The WWC rating applies only to the summarized results, and not necessarily to all results presented in the study.

What did the study find?

The study found that winning a lottery for a private school scholarship did not have statistically significant effects on reading and math achievement. However, students who won the scholarship lottery were significantly more likely to graduate from high school: 82% for the group that won the lottery compared with 70% for the group that lost the lottery, an effect size of 0.26.

Similar results were found for the subset of students attending schools designated as “in need of improvement” under the *No Child Left Behind Act* when they applied for a scholarship. Winning the lottery did not have a statistically significant effect on reading or math achievement, but it increased the likelihood of high school graduation from 66% to 79%, an effect size of 0.28.

WWC Rating

The research described in this report meets WWC evidence standards²

Strengths: This study was equivalent to a randomized controlled trial because the groups of students contrasted in the study were formed by lottery.

² Although the version of the report reviewed by the WWC did not contain unweighted analytic sample sizes, the study authors subsequently provided them to the review team.