



Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Final Report

Overall, low-income students who were awarded vouchers to attend private schools through the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP) were performing at similar levels in reading and math 4 to 5 years later as students who also applied to the OSP, but were not awarded scholarships. However, students awarded vouchers (and old enough to have graduated from high school) graduated at significantly higher rates than did their counterparts, according to parent reports. The OSP also had a positive impact on parents' satisfaction with their child's school and their perceptions of the school's safety, but students themselves rated school satisfaction and safety the same whether they received a voucher or not.

The policy context

School choice remains an important part of the national discussion on education reform strategies and their benefits. A variety of policies encourage parent selection of public schools for their children—for example, charter schools, magnet schools, and district open enrollment. Programs that provide students with tuition vouchers to attend private schools are more controversial but have been introduced in several cities since the 1990s. These programs have generally been targeted to low-income students, with the goal of giving them access to higher performing schools. That was the stated purpose of the District of Columbia School Choice Incentive Act of 2003, passed by Congress in early 2004, which provided the first federal funds—about \$13 million each year—for private school vouchers.

The program details

Called the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program since its inception, the federally funded program provided scholarships (vouchers) of up to \$7,500 for low-income residents of the District of Columbia to send their children to participating private schools. The law specified that random selection, through lotteries, be used to award scholarships if there were more applicants than available funds or open slots in private schools. Congress also required that applicants attending public schools identified as "in need of improvement" (SINI) get the highest priority for entry to the program. Language in a federal appropriations statute closed the program to new applicants in the spring of 2009.

Nearly 5,500 students eligible for the program applied between 2004 and 2009 and more than 3,700 have been awarded scholarships. Each year, between 52 and 68 of the approximately 90 private schools in DC agreed to take OSP scholarship

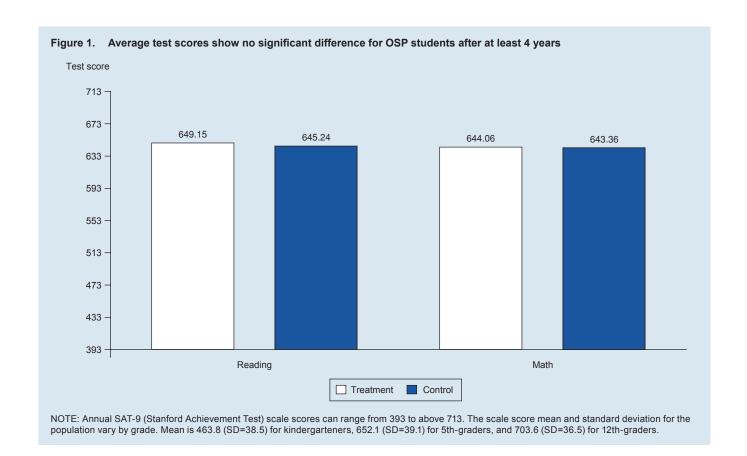
students, with a large drop in participation in 2009 when 7 former Catholic private schools converted to become public charter schools and therefore could no longer be part of the OSP. About 80 percent of students in the study attended a faith-based school and 14 percent attended a school that charged more than the \$7,500 scholarship.

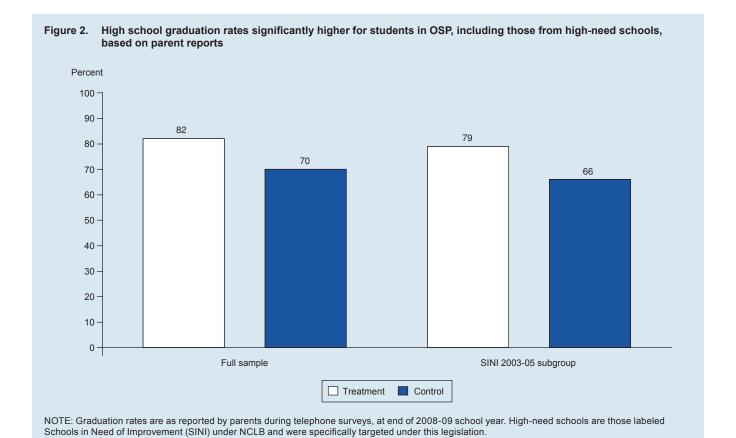
The study approach

The law that created the OSP also mandated an evaluation of its effectiveness. The evaluation, conducted by researchers from Westat, the University of Arkansas' Department of Education Reform, and Chesapeake Research Associates, focuses on 2,300 eligible applicants selected during the first 2 years of the program. These students reflect the OSP's income-eligibility criteria and priorities: When they applied, the students' average annual household income was below \$18,000; only 6 percent of their mothers reported having a bachelor's degree; and their average Stanford Achievement Test (SAT-9) scores placed them at the 33rd national percentile rank (NPR) in

reading and the 31st NPR in math. Just under half (44 percent) were attending Schools in Need of Improvement when they applied to the program.

These applicants were randomly assigned by lottery to either receive an offer (treatment group) or not receive an offer (control group) of an OSP scholarship. Since only chance determined who participated, the evaluation researchers could compare the outcomes of the two groups and conclude that any difference was caused by the program rather than previously existing differences in the students. Although data on most of the outcomes studied-scores on researchadministered achievement tests, high school graduation, perceptions of school safety and satisfaction—were collected annually over 4 to 5 years, each year's estimated impacts are cumulative and represent students' entire educational experience between their application to the program and the year the data were collected. Therefore, the impacts described in the final report represent the longer term effects of the program.





The findings

- The study found no conclusive evidence that the OSP affected student achievement overall, or for the high priority group of students who applied from "Schools in Need of Improvement." On average, after at least 4 years, students who were offered scholarships had reading and math test scores that were statistically similar to those who were not offered scholarships (figure 1). The same pattern of results holds for students who applied from Schools in Need of Improvement (SINI), the group Congress designated as the highest priority for the program. Although some other subgroups of students (female and higher achieving students) appeared to have higher levels of reading achievement if they were offered a scholarship, those findings could be due to chance.
- The program significantly improved graduation rates for those students expected to have graduated during the study period. Although students may not have raised their test scores in reading and math as
- a result of the OSP, they graduated from high school at higher rates. Most students who applied to the OSP were in grades K-5, but by 2009, about 500 of the 2,300 students in the study were old enough to have graduated from high school. Parents of these students were surveyed about their child's progress through school. Based on parents who responded, the offer of an OSP scholarship increased students' probability of completing high school by 12 percentage points overall (figure 2). The graduation rate was 82 percent for the treatment group compared to 70 percent for the control group. The offer of a scholarship improved the graduation prospects of students from SINIs by 13 percentage points (79 percent graduation rate for the treatment group versus 66 percent for the control group).
- for students who actually used their voucher, instead of just being awarded one. About 22 percent of students awarded a voucher and still eligible to use one after 4 or 5 years never used it to attend a private school. For those who used the vouchers, there were

no significant effects on reading and math achievement. The improvement in graduation rates, however, was even higher for those who used the voucher.

• Student departures from DCPS to OSP were probably too few to be noticed by public school officials. This issue was explored because Congress wanted to understand whether the program affected District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS). About 3 percent of DCPS students during the study period (from 2004 to 2009) left the district to attend a private school through the OSP. During the same period, DCPS enrollment declined by more than 30 percent and the estimated annual mobility rate (students' switching schools or leaving the district) was 20 percent.

The study in context with other research

This final report on the impacts of the OSP adds to the growing body of evidence on private school voucher programs in the United States. Before this study of the OSP, there were more than 10 analyses of six voucher programs in urban areas (Milwaukee, Cleveland, Charlotte, New York City, Dayton, and a privately funded Washington, DC program). There is no clear consensus, however, on whether such programs have meaningful effects. Some scholars have examined the research literature and determined that there is little conclusive evidence of achievement impacts (see, for example, Rouse and Barrow 2008; Gill et al.

2006). Other researchers have reviewed the same literature and concluded that voucher programs do show promising effects, particularly for African American students (Wolf 2005; National Working Commission on Choice in K-12 Education 2003). To date, no other study has assessed the impact of vouchers on high school graduation using the kind of rigorous evaluation methods employed in the OSP evaluation.

As is the case with previous evaluations of such programs, our study had some limitations. We studied early program applicants, and not all of the students in the study participated in the data collection each year. In addition, some of our measures, including high school graduation and school safety, are based on respondents' recall and perceptions and not on more conclusive administrative records. It is also important to note that these findings are based on a very specific set of program rules established by Congress and the specific circumstances in DC. The same program implemented in another city might yield different results, and a different scholarship program administered in DC might also produce different outcomes.

Looking ahead

At this time, the OSP has been closed to new applicants. This report serves as the final analysis of the effects of the DC program, but it is certainly not the last voucher study. Currently, a new evaluation of the Milwaukee program is underway, along with a new study of the statewide voucher program in Florida that is funded by tax credits.

The Institute of Education Sciences develops these snapshots to offer short, accessible summaries of complex technical evaluation reports. For the full report with technical details, see http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/20104018/.

Wolf, Patrick, Babette Gutmann, Michael Puma, Brian Kisida, Lou Rizzo, Nada Eissa, and Matthew Carr. (2010). *Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Final Report.* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance.



U.S. Department of Education