

Vouching for Vouchers

In Florida, education vouchers have resulted in improved public schools.

By Claudia Hepburn

When it comes to education reform, there's nothing the public school establishment hates more than pilot programs for school choice. You might think that they would welcome these experiments, because their failure would prove conclusively how foolish free-market extremists and their theories are. Not so.

Recently-released research from a Florida voucher program suggests the reason why champions of the status quo have reason to fear the impact of school choice experiments on their credibility and fiefdoms.

For decades, the two sides of this education debate have disputed the potential of school choice to improve or devastate public education. Those in favour have argued that choice for parents and competition for schools would lead to improvements in the quality and diversity of educational programs in public schools.

Those opposed have maintained that choice would lead to greater inequity by creating winner and loser schools. The loss of good students, valuable resources, and morale would make schools for the most disadvantaged students spiral downwards.

Five years ago, Florida implemented a policy that put school choice to the test. The A+ Program, which combines high-stakes testing with educational vouchers, is perhaps the most aggressive and most controversial education reform in the country. It has provided the opportunity for researchers to test the impact of the hardest of hard-nosed, "improve or lose" policies on troubled schools.

For the past five years, all public school students in the state in grades 3 to 10 have had to take the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT). Each school has been assigned a letter grade, A to F, based on "the percentage of students exceeding certain performance goals as well as year-to-year improvement in student performance".

If a school receives an F twice in any four-year period, its students receive an "Opportunity Scholarship" at any public or private school. This bold policy is anathema to those who believe that society owes failing schools an infusion of resources.

If their theories are justified, F-rated schools should deteriorate faster or improve more slowly than the average, as they struggle to cope with the flight of the most able and savvy student families to other schools.

Jay P. Greene and Marcus Winters, researchers at the Center for Civic Innovation at the Manhattan Institute, developed an ingenious study to test the validity of these fears and of the claims made by the policy's champions that tough love would work.

Greene and Winters established five categories of poorly-performing schools. These categories were:

- **Voucher Eligible Schools**, which had failed at least twice;
- **Voucher Threatened Schools**, which had failed once;
- **Always D Schools**, which had never failed but were always skating close to the line;
- **Ever D Schools**, which included all schools that had received at least one D but never an F; and
- **Formerly Threatened Schools**, schools that had received an F in 1998-99 but not one since.

The researchers then hypothesized that the schools that faced the most competition from vouchers would improve the most on the 2002-2003 FCAT, and that the four groups that faced some, but less, competition from vouchers would improve significantly, but in proportion to the immensity of that competition.

How accurate was that hypothesis? Dead on. The more likely their students were to be offered vouchers, the greater was the school's improvement on the state test.

Schools that performed very poorly but had never received an F, improved far less than did schools with the voucher incentive, or not at all relative to the average. Formerly threatened schools backtracked slightly, once the threat of vouchers had passed.

What are the implications of this research for Canada? The findings suggest that our provinces should encourage school choice both within the public system and outside it.

Though the Florida program targeted vouchers only at students in schools that failed repeatedly, the strength of its findings suggests that not just the worst schools would benefit from competition. These findings have been corroborated by a growing number of other international studies.

The evidence should encourage policy-makers like Ontario's new premier Dalton McGuinty both to persevere in his plan to open up public school choice to all families, but also to reconsider his plan to eliminate the province's tax credit for families of children who attend independent schools.

The refundable tax credit, though currently worth only a fraction of the value of Florida's Opportunity Scholarships, has injected a dose of competition into Ontario's public system. That tax credit and the direct public funding for private schooling, worth up to approximately one-third of the cost of public school education in BC, Alberta, Manitoba and Quebec, are Canada's closest approximations of Florida's program.

Greene and Winter's innovative new study should encourage Canadian policy-makers to provide families with school choice, which may lead to improvement in public education.

(Adapted with permission from the Fraser Forum, November 2003.. Mrs. Hepburn is Managing Director of the Ontario Office of the Fraser Institute.)