



EVIDENCE THAT VOUCHERS ARE CANNIBALIZING PUBLIC SCHOOL BUDGETS



An ongoing concern about using public funds for private schools is that public education will suffer financial consequences as a result. A new report from Public Funds Public Schools, the Southern Poverty Law Center and the Education Law Center suggests that this is indeed happening and quantifies the apparent losses to public schools, which 90 percent of the nation's students attend.

Co-authored by NEPC Fellow [Samuel E. Abrams](#) and [Steven J. Koutsavlis](#), both of Teachers College, Columbia University, the report is titled, *The Fiscal Consequences of Private School Vouchers*. It finds that the share of gross domestic product allocated to K-12 education declined in the seven U.S. states with the longest-running private school voucher programs between 2008 and 2019, even as private school voucher spending more than doubled and public school enrollment rose.

The report examines overall spending on public K-12 education during that period, comparing the seven states with 43 comparison states that either did not permit vouchers or have voucher programs that are newer than those in the focal states.

In one of the focal states (Arizona), spending on public education declined 5.7 percent as voucher spending grew by 270 percent. In another (Florida), public school spending declined by an even greater amount (12 percent) and voucher spending grew even more (313 percent). Neither state experienced an economic downturn during this time, with GDP growing 3.2 percent per annum in Arizona and 3.4 percent per annum in Florida.

“These developments underscore the importance of documenting and understanding the increasing levels of public funding diverted to private education through voucher programs,” Abrams and Koutsavlis conclude. “The seven states highlighted here provide crucial lessons about the likely patterns of voucher expansion—and the accompanying dramatic increases in voucher spending—that may continue if such privatization is not significantly curbed.”

That expansion is happening at a time when the research evidence counsels strongly in favor of a retraction. “Recent high-quality research has repeatedly shown voucher use to have a very harmful impact on students’ academic achievement, particularly their math scores,” warned NEPC director and CU Boulder professor Kevin Welner, adding,

In fact, two of the programs recently studied have shown a harm in the neighborhood of half of a standard deviation—comparable to the effect of natural disasters like the COVID pandemic and Hurricane Katrina. The politicians who keep adopting and expanding voucher policies are doing so in the face of that overwhelming evidence.

NEPC Resources on Vouchers

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