

**AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF
GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS
Press Release 961
STATE AID TO PRIVATE SCHOOLS
HAS DEVASTATING EFFECT ON STUDENT OUTCOMES
FULL STOP**

Since 1964 the DOGS have opposed State Aid to private schools in Australia. We have argued that it not only divides children on the basis of class, creed and colour, undermining our cohesive democratic society.

State Aid to private schools also undermines the education system itself, leading to a less educated, less skilled citizenry.

Again and again, the DOGS predictions of 1964 have come to pass.

In America funding of private schools has taken place under what is known as a Voucher system. And the pattern of results is similar to that in Australia. Here is an article by Joshua Cohen *Professor of Education Policy at Michigan State University* that proves the point.

A Guide to Research on Vouchers

School vouchers have devastating effects on student outcomes. Full stop. .

Large-scale independent studies in D.C., Indiana, Louisiana, and Ohio show that for kids who left public schools, harmful voucher impacts actually meet or exceed what the pandemic did to test scores. That's also a similar impact in Louisiana to what Hurricane Katrina did to student achievement back in 2005.

Think about that next time you hear a politician or activist claim we need taxpayer support for private schools to offset what the pandemic did to student learning. Here, their cure would in test score terms be quite literally worse than the disease.

There's another data point you need to know up front: vouchers overwhelmingly fund children who were already in private school without them. In states that have released those numbers—Arizona, New Hampshire, and Wisconsin—we know more than 75% of voucher applicants came from private schools.

The bottom-line: most kids using vouchers didn't need them to go to private school, and the few kids who actually did use vouchers to transfer sectors schools suffer average test score drops on par with what a once-in-a-generation pandemic did to test scores too.

So how did we come to this?

1. A Quick History of Voucher Research

First let's talk about the evidence.

I came into the school voucher research community early. It was around 2001 or so, as a young graduate student assistant for a study of privately funded vouchers led by the conservative professor Paul E. Peterson who was based at both Harvard and the conservative Hoover Institution at Stanford (never heard of Hoover? Think Condoleeza Rice.)

Peterson and his protégé Jay Greene had already done one study of Milwaukee's publicly funded voucher program, as well as the one in Cleveland that was about to be the subject of the U.S. Supreme Court's first favorable ruling on voucher funding. That work generally showed positive results for vouchers. As did the research of a young academic named Cecilia Rouse, who is now President Biden's chief economist.

But they were small programs. What policymakers and researchers call a "pilot phase." Back then when both parties cared at least nominally about evidence, you wouldn't expand a program like vouchers without testing it. So those early tests seemed somewhat positive.

The first research I joined was Peterson and team's next project: multi-site studies in Dayton, New York City, and Washington D.C. Those programs were also pilot-size. And the New York site in particular showed some limited evidence of voucher success. But overall the lead researchers focused as much on things like parental satisfaction and measures of civic engagement as metrics. That work resulted in a book called *The Education*

Gap. You can find my name in the credits if you own a copy. If you don't own one, don't waste your money.

No one knew it at the time, but the mixed results documented in The Education Gap were to be the best vouchers were ever going to do—and ever have done since by an academic based team looking at voucher test scores.

Just a short time later in 2005, I joined a new voucher evaluation led by Patrick Wolf, another Peterson protégé and contributor to The Education Gap. Wolf was by then ensconced with Jay Greene at the University of Arkansas Department of Education Reform, a Walton Family-funded academic group that was about to train a new generation of voucher advocates. Most notably Corey DeAngelis, now at Betsy DeVos's 501(c)4 voucher lobbying group American Federation for Children.

The Milwaukee evaluation, which was officially done for the state of Wisconsin, lasted from 2005-2010. We found no evidence in five years that voucher kids outperformed public school kids. Two exceptions: we found limited evidence that graduation rates and college enrollment were somewhat higher for the voucher kids. We also found that voucher kids improved when the state required private schools to participate in the same No Child Left Behind-style accountability systems as public schools. In particular once voucher schools knew their performance would be made public they—shockingly!—improved their outcomes.

At the same time as the Milwaukee evaluation, Patrick Wolf and other Arkansas colleagues were working on a new evaluation of Washington D.C.'s federally funded voucher program. That study showed no difference in test scores, but large positive graduate results.

That pattern of "no test score benefits, some attainment benefits" has stuck in the research narrative even among voucher skeptics. But as I recently explained in a piece for the Brookings Institution, it's just that: a narrative. Other studies in New York, Louisiana and Florida all show no real advantages for vouchers on educational attainment.

And certainly nothing to offset the cataclysmic results that began to come out after the early-stage evaluations I just described. The newer D.C., Indiana, Louisiana, and Ohio studies that took place after 2013

and have showed pandemic and Katrina-sized harm to student test scores are all of at-scale voucher programs.

What do I mean by “at scale?” I mean that despite limited evidence in those pilot programs, vouchers have been steadily expanding across the country, and within states. So those D.C., Indiana Louisiana and Ohio studies represent our best understanding to date of what happens when you expand vouchers beyond the initial test phase. The answer: horrific impacts on student outcomes.

There are a number of reasons this could be, but I tend to argue we need not overthink this. Vouchers just don’t work. The kids who stand to gain from private schooling were and are already there. For the vast majority of kids, they’re better off in public schools. That’s what the latest voucher research shows.

As an example of what I mean: consider that in Wisconsin (which has not had a statewide study since ours ended in 2010), 41% of voucher-receiving schools have opened and then closed and failed since public funding began in the early 1990s.

That’s what happens when policymakers divert tax dollars to private schools: it’s like venture capitalism for education. It’s like Theranos but for private schooling. New providers race to gobble up new taxpayer money, but most of them have no business near kids.

Now, to fully understand why these terrible policies exist and in fact have never spread faster and further than they are today, we need to understand the politics. And to understand the politics, we need to understand the money.

On the one hand it’s pretty simple. Once you understand that the same people pushing vouchers are the same people funding groups that insist Donald Trump won the election and are now organizing a similar “Big Lie” for 2022’s results, you understand a lot. But read on.

2. Funding Vouchers, Funding Election Lies

It’s difficult to tell how much money has been spent to advocate for school vouchers over the years. But we know perhaps the biggest single funder—perhaps even larger than Betsy DeVos herself—is the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation. The Bradley Foundation is a little-known group based

in Wisconsin and they've given tens of millions of dollars to voucher activism over the years.

Bradley not only funds voucher activism, it funds voucher research too. It was a major funder of the Milwaukee evaluation I was part of and described above. I don't think they directly influenced our results, but generally speaking you don't want activism and research funding to mix. Think about it this way: should the Sackler family fund research on the addictive properties of oxycontin? Should Exxon fund studies about the existence of climate change?

For me though, the real problem today is that the Bradley Foundation is hardly limiting itself to supporting research and political advocacy for private schooling. As the New Yorker's Jane Mayer has meticulously documented in her reporting on financing behind Big Lie activism sowing doubts about President Biden's 2020 victory, the Bradley Foundation is the convening funder around those activities—the "extraordinary force", in Mayer's words, funding and coordinating the Big Lie and other efforts to undermine the integrity of democratic elections.

Bradley is not alone. The Heritage Foundation, a right-wing organization known for its pro-voucher advocacy is, according to Mayer, "working with the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC)—a corporate-funded nonprofit that generates model laws for state legislators—on ways to impose new voting restrictions."

In recent months, Heritage has also distributed talking points that under the guise of objective research attack school diversity and inclusion and directly question health care support for LGBTQ children. Heritage has recently released a report-card style rubric rating state laws on a so-called "Education Freedom" index for tax-supported private tuition. That report card includes the extent to which issues like diversity or sexual preference are components of public school teaching curricula.

The author of each of these documents is a Heritage Senior Fellow named Jay P. Greene. The same Jay Greene who while a conservative scholar at the University of Arkansas was co-director of that Bradley-funded voucher project that hired me back in 2005.

Greene is not alone in the Heritage-Bradley nexus. Clela Mitchell, a lawyer who participated in Donald Trump's infamous phone call to the Georgia Secretary of State demanding evidence that would overturn the state's election results, was actively training poll watchers to question voters leading up to the 2022 midterms in places like my own state of Michigan. The night before the election, the New York Times even ran a story about Mitchell's work in Michigan. The headline read: "Fueled by Falsehoods, a Michigan Group is Ready to Challenge the Vote."

Mitchell is a known elections conspiracy theorist, according to CNN, and figures prominently in Mayer's New Yorker reporting on broader election-related organizing. In her spare time Mitchell is on the Board of Directors of—wait for it!—the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation. She's actually an officer on the Board too.

Michigan is important because we have a voucher proposal waiting to go to the state legislature—even though voucher opponent Gretchen Whitmer has won reelection. That proposal, backed by billionaire and privatization advocate Betsy DeVos, exploits a quirk in the state law allowing lame-duck Republicans to pass the voucher plan without the governor's signature.

The spokesman for the DeVos voucher campaign is a man named Fred Wszolek. Wszolek is also the strategist for a group that tried unsuccessfully to prevent abortion access from becoming enshrined in the Michigan state constitution. And he heads a political action committee (PAC) called Michigan Strong, which has worked to elect now-defeated DeVos-backed GOP gubernatorial candidate Tudor Dixon.

Also working for Dixon was Kyle Olson of the Education Action Group, an entity devoted to right-wing education reform that's received money from Charles Koch, the DeVos Family and Harry Bradley—he of the Bradley Foundation.

That's just one example, but you get the idea: the same people working to push school vouchers are the same people working to undermine elections. And in some cases even reproductive rights.

3. So Why Now?

I've spent the last six months writing column after column in opinion pages across the country trying to warn ordinary readers who aren't education

lifers about the dangers of vouchers. You can read samples [here](#) or [here](#) or [here](#) or [here](#) if you like. There are more than 10 in all.

Because of my long career working in the middle of all these voucher advocates and researchers, I've been asked multiple times what changed my mind. Or, more specifically, why am I speaking out today?

I hope the story I've told you above answers some of that. But the reality is, I was also doing other things. I had a young family, other research interests, and other professional tasks like editing the country's premier education policy journal.

Most of all I had a naïve sense that the facts would speak for themselves. Remember, those pandemic-sized voucher failures began appearing back in 2013. I was an associate professor then, newly arrived at Michigan State University after receiving tenure at the University of Kentucky.

To me, after a decade of mixed-at-best results that I outlined here, I assumed that catastrophic results like those in Louisiana—and then confirmed in Indiana, Ohio, and D.C.—would have killed vouchers a thousand times over.

It's sort of quaint now, that assumption of mine. In my research community, which is centered in the Association for Education Finance and Policy, we talk a lot about using evidence to inform policy. It's a nice idea, but vouchers are the big, glaring and alarming counterpoint. We have never seen such one-sided, consistently negative research results as we have for school vouchers in the education research community.

And yet they thrive.

To me, the piece to that puzzle is politics. Negative voucher results aren't the only thing to happen since 2013.

2016 happened. Donald Trump happened. January 6th happened. Dobbs v. Jackson happened.

Voucher advocates are overwhelmingly on one side of those events. And they've racked up some wins.

We know voucher programs exist today not for how they might help some kids, but for how they might exclude others. We know private schools taking public money can and often do discriminate against certain children. In Florida for example, one private school barring LGBTQ kids has received \$1.6 million so far in taxpayer funding. In Indiana, more than \$16 million has gone to schools refusing to admit LGBTQ kids—or even kids with LGBTQ parents!—or about 1 out of every 10 private schools on the taxpayer dime.

I wish I had come around earlier to the level of alarm I'm raising today. Others have even without having to take a kind of road to Damascus like I did.

I'm a tenured full professor now. I've had a successful career working hard to bring evidence to public policy. I firmly believe that school vouchers are a fundamental threat not just to student learning, but also to democracy and to human rights.

So on vouchers I've come to the same view any number of us would if we stumbled onto a massive fraud in our workplace, or if we saw a young child being bullied simply for being who they are. None of it is okay.

And if you see something, you have to say something.

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This article was originally published on Diane Ravitch's blog.

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