

**Voucher students do less well in academics than their peers in the school districts in which they reside.**

Michigan State University professor Josh Cowen\*, a decades-long voucher researcher has concluded that vouchers take a bigger toll on academic learning than the COVID-19 pandemic. He cites four independent evaluations of tax-funded vouchers in Washington, D.C., Indiana, Louisiana, and Ohio as evidence.

Politicians in charge of education policy in Ohio, including the Governor's education director, are avid promoters of school choice (privatization) in spite of the evidence that vouchers have a negative effect. School privatization is a plague that has a strangle-hold on politicians of a particular ilk throughout the nation. They merely cohere to their party line, totally ignoring the damage being inflicted on the current generation of students. One could only hope that this infatuation with education privatization will soon dissipate.

\*Dr. Cowen is a consultant for the attorneys representing the Plaintiffs in the EdChoice voucher lawsuit in Ohio.

**Opinion: School vouchers won't get your kid an elite education**

**Josh Cowen**

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The COVID-19 pandemic took a big toll on academic learning for American kids. On the scale of impacts that disasters have had on children in school, the pandemic exceeds even the damage done by Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. But these are events beyond human control.

What if I told you there's a man-made policy that's caused pandemic and Katrina-sized learning loss?

Over the last decade, four independent evaluations of school vouchers — taxpayer-funded private school tuition — in Washington D.C., Indiana, Louisiana and Ohio have each found some of largest negative impacts on test scores researchers have ever seen in education policy. In Indiana and Ohio, the two states sharing our Michigan border, those negative impacts meet or exceed the academic loss caused by Katrina and the pandemic, respectively.

Republican gubernatorial nominee Tudor Dixon has argued we need to go back to the basics of math and reading in Michigan schools. The centerpiece of her plan to do so is a taxpayer-funded private tuition program modeled on the school vouchers programs across the country that have had such negative impacts on learning. That plan is called Let MI Kids Learn.

And recently a writer for the American Federation for Children — the 501(c)(4) school choice advocacy group founded and at one time chaired by Betsy DeVos — published an [op-ed in the Detroit News](#) arguing that parents want more school choices, including private school, to “to direct their children's education.”

The problem with both the Dixon voucher-like plan, and the argument that parents want more choices, is that taken together, they are based on the idea that providing tax support for private school helps children in families that choose it achieve academic success.

Nothing could be further from the truth. And that's a problem, because parents want anything but pandemic-sized learning loss.

Parents do look beyond academics in choosing schools, but study after study shows that at minimum, parents want good academic outcomes, too, in addition to values, discipline, character or other educational building blocks for their kids.

In New Orleans for example, my research team [examined data](#) from private school applications and found that parents ranked schools — even private schools funded by vouchers — based first on the academics those schools produced. Closer to home, a 2017 Mackinac Center [survey of families](#) also found “academic program, educational philosophy or teaching method” and “academic performance or test scores” were the top two reasons parents chose schools.

It's not just parents. The Detroit Regional Chamber published a “[State of Education](#)” report this past spring calling the state’s academics “not a really great picture,” and worrying that academic outcomes would leave Michigan’s talent pipeline further behind other states.

Bringing voucher-like plans to Michigan would create even more leaks in that talent pipeline. Not only do those programs have devastating effects on learning, their curriculum choices — adding creationism to science teaching in voucher schools in Wisconsin, for example — have left kids in those private schools near the bottom of science standards.

Research shows much support for private school vouchers is due to perceptions of school branding, especially the idea that private schools offer elite academics that parents aspire to for their kids. It's true that there are a few elite schools like Cranbrook and Detroit Country Day out there, but the idea that tax-funded tuition gets families into those schools is just rhetoric. The reality is most private schools only offer an academic step back.

The data are clear, and if voters and taxpayers are going to consider public support for private tuition, this is the evidence they need to know.

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