

Arkansasadvocate.com: Arkansas school voucher money would be better spent on public schools

Arkansas is now moving down the path Ohio took a few years ago. That state is starting to sacrifice public education on the altar of school vouchers. The June 6 [article](#) excerpt is attached. Michigan State University professor, Dr. Joshua Cowen (expert witness for the Ohio EdChoice voucher case) is quoted extensively in the article.

Arkansas school voucher money would be better spent on public schools

by [Rich Shumate](#) January 6, 2025 11:24 am

Gov. Sarah Sanders [sold her LEARNS Act](#) to Arkansas legislators — particularly its centerpiece voucher program — as a way to improve educational outcomes in a state where school performance scores have lagged behind other states: “I believe giving every child access to a quality education is the civil rights issue of our day.”

That talking point satisfied pliable legislators, who spent a mere 17 days deliberating far-reaching changes in our educational landscape before passing them into law. Had they done more due diligence, they could have found compelling evidence that far from helping students perform better, large statewide voucher programs can actually harm the academic achievement of participating students.

Indeed, these negative results started showing up more than a decade ago, with researchers finding detrimental effects in programs in Louisiana, Washington, D.C., Ohio and Indiana that were statistically larger than the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic or Hurricane Katrina.

More recently, [an evaluation of a vouchers pilot program](#) in Tennessee found that students in voucher schools lagged behind their public school counterparts in proficiency in language arts and math — by nearly 12% in language arts and by 19% in math.

And as Arkansas legislators consider Sanders’ request to [pour \\$180 million](#) more into the vouchers program next year, they might also consider an array of research that shows investing that money into our most vulnerable public schools could increase both test scores and graduation rates, particularly for lower income kids — something Sanders says she wants to see but which vouchers haven’t been proven to do.

Josh Cowen, an educational policy expert at Michigan State University, makes a devastating case against vouchers in his book, [“The Privateers,”](#) which explores how a small group of committed billionaires and conservative think tanks have pushed vouchers for theocratic and ideological reasons, despite evidence showing that the students opting into vouchers programs may be harmed academically.

“The evidence against vouchers isn’t one-sided, but it’s as one-sided as social science gets,” Cowen said in an interview. He was part of a group of researchers who early on found small beneficial effects for targeted vouchers programs in communities where public schools were resource poor — positive effects that disappeared when programs scaled up to cover entire states.

The reasons for these negative effects are twofold, according to Cowen. First, in most states, there are not enough high-quality private schools available to serve students entering the program, which leads to substandard schools picking up the slack. And second, many of the religious-oriented private schools “are not actually interested in educating kids in any sort of academic mission-oriented way.”

Even more troubling is the fact that recently enacted voucher programs, including in Arkansas, don’t require the kind of robust, periodic, independent evaluations that turned up profound academic declines in other states. According to Cowen, voucher proponents who once embraced this kind of academic scrutiny changed course once negative results came rolling in.

“Post-pandemic, all of the voucher bills that have been passed ... don’t contain anything like the early days’ reporting requirements.” he said. “And the reason is they did not want to know the answer after repeated failures over the last decade.”

In addition to the lack of follow-up research, another issue with vouchers is lack of information about the performance of participating private schools. Vouchers are based on the premise that competition will improve school performance, but competition requires data for parents to make choices. And voucher programs, by design, make meaningful comparisons all but impossible.

In Arkansas, private schools participating in the vouchers program are required to assess student progress. But they get to pick their own test, rather than using the ATLAS test used by public schools. Even the pro-voucher Arkansas Department of Education, in its [latest report on the program](#) in October, conceded that because of the hodgepodge of assessment methods “aligned results were not available across all participating students.”

“The whole argument [vouchers proponents] are making implicitly relies on the idea that parents will have meaningful ways to consume and to access information about private school performance,” Cowen said. “There is no way for parents to do that; you’re at the mercy of what the private school is telling you.”

According to Cowen, voucher programs don’t incentivize private schools “to participate in performance monitoring plans that would allow parents to take their kids’ academic results and compare them to the neighborhood school down the street, or, for that matter, to another private school down the street.”

Researchers have found that vigorous oversight of voucher programs can reduce negative outcomes — but in Arkansas, as in other states, the programs are set up to limit government oversight in pursuit of “educational freedom” and “parental choice.” Indeed, in Arkansas, voucher proponents moved heaven and earth to stop the [Arkansas Educational Rights Amendment](#), which would have required private schools receiving vouchers to meet the same standards as public schools.

“The real way to see this is that they’re trying to set up a fully alternative sector, mostly of religious education,” Cowen said. “It isn’t really about improving quality of life or quality of academic experience for kids. It’s really just a subsidy for these private providers.”

While the case that voucher programs improve educational outcomes is mostly rhetorical, academic research has shown a correlation between investing more money in public schools and improved educational outcomes.

Voucher proponents often offer the talking point that pouring more money into public schools that aren’t performing well amounts to throwing good money after bad. But according to Cowen, “the debate among high quality researchers is essentially settled — money really does improve educational outcomes.”

A [meta-analysis](#) published last year by researchers C. Kirabo Jackson and Clair Mackevicius looked at 31 different studies examining the effects increased spending has on educational outcomes. They found that a \$1,000 increase in per pupil spending sustained over four years increased test scores, high school graduation rates and boosted college enrollment rates by 2.8 percent. Just imagine the good that \$180 million could do.

And who could be hurt first and most? The very students that Gov. Sanders claims to be rescuing with vouchers.

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