

Case Western Reserve assistant professor Benjamin Helton's July 9 Guest Column in the Columbus Dispatch--The case for Ohio school vouchers has many cracks—identifies some of the flaws in a research study sponsored by a prochoice advocacy organization.

Regardless of how many studies the pro-voucher crowd sets forth in an attempt to make vouchers look good to the public, upon close scrutiny, the results don't favor the voucher scheme. Benjamin Helton, in his July 9 column, exposes the flaws in a study released by one of the largest pro school choice organizations.

The fact of the matter is that the pro-choice crowd cannot demonstrate that private school vouchers improve educational results, nor can they demonstrate to the judiciary that EdChoice vouchers are legal.

The lawyers in the Coalition/Vouchers Hurt Ohio lawsuit squared away in the 10th District Court of Appeals on the issue of constitutionality on May 12. One media outlet wrote that the State's Defense in court was "embarrassing."

Ohio's illegal EdChoice voucher scheme drains funds from the constitutionally-required common school system to fund a private school system that does not compete favorably with the public common school system and is completely unaccountable to the public.

Helton's column is a compelling vase against this illegal expenditure of the tax money on private school vouchers.

The case for Ohio school vouchers has many cracks

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The case for Ohio school vouchers has many cracks

Your Turn

Benjamin Helton

Guest columnist

The devil is in the details, as they say.

In a recent summary of studies released by EdChoice, one of the largest school choice advocacy organizations in the United States, authors present a mountain of studies and label them as showing the positive, neutral or negative effects of school choice policies.

But a closer look at the cited studies reveals either a wild misunderstanding of empirical outcomes or just flat-out lies about research findings.

Either way, it appears the authors of this report, John Kristoff and Martin Lueken, hoped nobody would take a closer look at their mountain of research because one would only have to tap it lightly to discover it was just a plywood theater set, a Potemkin mountain.

As one glaring example of this chicanery, Kristoff and Lueken label a 2025 report on the Ohio EdChoice scholarship program as 'Any Positive Effect.' The cited report headed by Matthew Chingos of the Urban Institute compared the likelihood of college acceptance and graduation between Ohio students who participated in the EdChoice Scholarship program and those who remained in public school.

The final line of that report's executive summary reads, 'But because students who remained in the program for at least four years have characteristics that make them more likely to have graduated from college absent the voucher, we caution that these results are at a greater risk of bias than our main findings.'

Labeling this study as showing positive results for school choice policy, and not neutral, suggests that Kristoff and Lueken either did not read the entire study, understand its findings, or care to represent its results accurately.

The Urban Institute authors further hedge any of EdChoice vouchers' supposed positive effects on students' college acceptance and graduation later in their report by clarifying that '[W]e characterize the evidence as suggestive, given that the long-term participants are positively selected in terms of their pretreatment characteristics' (p. 11). In other words, the students who performed better than their peers likely would have done so regardless of participating in the EdChoice program due to established predictors of student success that have been consistent in education research for decades (e.g., parental education level, household income and community resources to name a few).

Ohio voters who do not have the time to comb through dozens of research papers often rely on quick summaries for guidance on issues. But school-choice advocates tend to exaggerate what are, at best, mixed results of empirical research.

Kristoff and Lueken's work follows similar patterns to school choice advocates who clearly know the research is not on their side, particularly when it comes to test scores.

Tellingly, in a recent webinar, Kristoff conceded that 'test scores...are not the best measure of [educational] success.'

School choice advocates obfuscate and exaggerate actual research findings because they also know the educational outcomes are not on their side. They actively push for policies they know will make education overall worse for the majority of children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds – and that includes those from low-income rural areas.

The best organizations like EdChoice can hope for is marginal positive outcomes. In a study featured on their research page, researchers found a positive relationship between private education and measures of students' civic tolerance compared to publicly educated students, but the difference in scores was 4.6% of a standard deviation on a grouped civics measure. For a well-constructed assessment, that means about a third of one point on a 50-point scale. While not nothing, that difference may be difficult to sell given the spikes in Ohio's education spending thanks to these vouchers.

I am not suggesting that Ohioans dedicate a substantial amount of time reading and digesting education research.

Instead, I encourage all of us to just be very wary of any claim that 'the research' supports the expansion or prolongation of school choice policies, especially when it is presented as a mountain with few details. As was evident with Kristoff and Lueken's research summaries, a light kick was enough to knock over their mountain of supposed evidence.

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