

The Research Facts About Parental School Choice

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Policy Questions

1. Do choice programs – public charters and voucher/scholarship initiatives -- primarily serve disadvantaged students?
2. Do participating students benefit?
3. Do non-participating students benefit?
4. Do parents benefit?
5. Do communities benefit?
6. Conclusions



Question 1

Do school choice programs primarily serve disadvantaged students?



Public Charter Schools Serve Disadvantaged Students

- Over 54% are poor, compared to 41% of all public school students (CER 2010; NCES 2010)
- Over 52% are minorities, compared to 44% of all public school students (CER 2010; NCES 2010)
- Charter students tend to be behind educationally
 - Students in grade 3 of independent charters in Milwaukee start out about 7 percentiles lower in reading and math (Witte et al. 2010)
- Charters overwhelmingly locate in poor urban areas so that they can serve disadvantaged students



Voucher Programs Serve Disadvantaged Students

- Of the 9 tax-credit scholarship programs
 - 7 means-tested by law (AZ1, AZ2, FL, IN, IA, PA, RI)
 - 1 means-tested by practice (GA)
 - 1 limited to students with disabilities or in foster care (AZ3)
- Of the 11 government programs:
 - 6 only for students with disabilities (FL, GA, LA, OH, OK, UT)
 - 4 means-tested (Cleveland, DC, Milwaukee, New Orleans)
 - 2 limited to students from “needs improvement” schools (New Orleans, OH)
 - Note -- New Orleans targeted by income and failing school
- At least 14% of students in voucher programs have disabilities compared to 12% in public schools (NCES 2010)



Profile of DC Opportunity Scholarship Program Recipients

- 90% African American
- 9% Hispanic
- Average family income of \$17,356
- 6% of mothers with college degrees
- 44% from schools designated in need of improvement
- 17% with diagnosed disability
- Average student at 33rd percentile in reading and 31st in math (Wolf et al. 2007)



Question 2

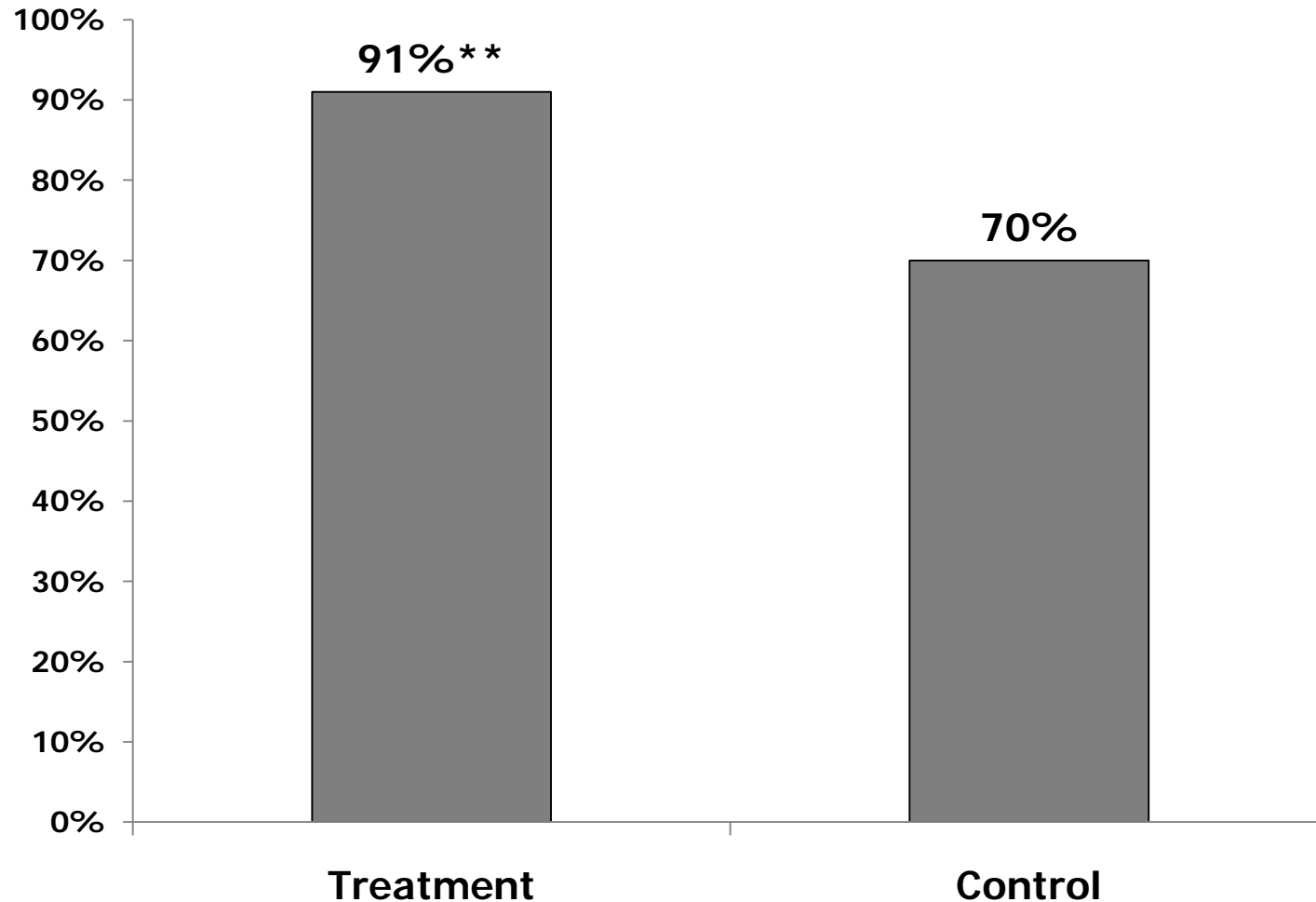
Do participating students benefit from school choice?



School Choice Boosts Educational Attainment

- How far you go matters more than how much you know
- Key benchmarks: high school graduation, college enrollment, college graduation
- Florida charter high schools increase:
 - High school grad rates by 7-15 percentage points
 - College enrollment rates by 8-10 percentage points (Booker et al. 2008)
- DC Scholarship use boosts high school grad rate by 21 percentage points (Wolf et al. 2010)

Impact of DC Scholarship Use on High School Graduation Rates (Wolf et al. 2010)



**Statistically significant at the 99 percent confidence level.



School Choice and Student Test Scores

- Three truisms about test scores:
 1. They are lower in new schools
 2. They drop slightly when kids switch schools
 3. They are hard to move a long ways quickly
- Choice schools must deliver high and sustained value-added to have a clear positive effect on test scores in the short run



Charter Schools and Test Scores

Results are mixed but best when:

1. School is well-established (e.g. Tuttle et al. 2010 KIPP study)
2. Student has been there awhile
3. Student is disadvantaged (CREDO 2009)
4. Study was done recently
5. Study was more rigorous (Betts & Tang 2008)

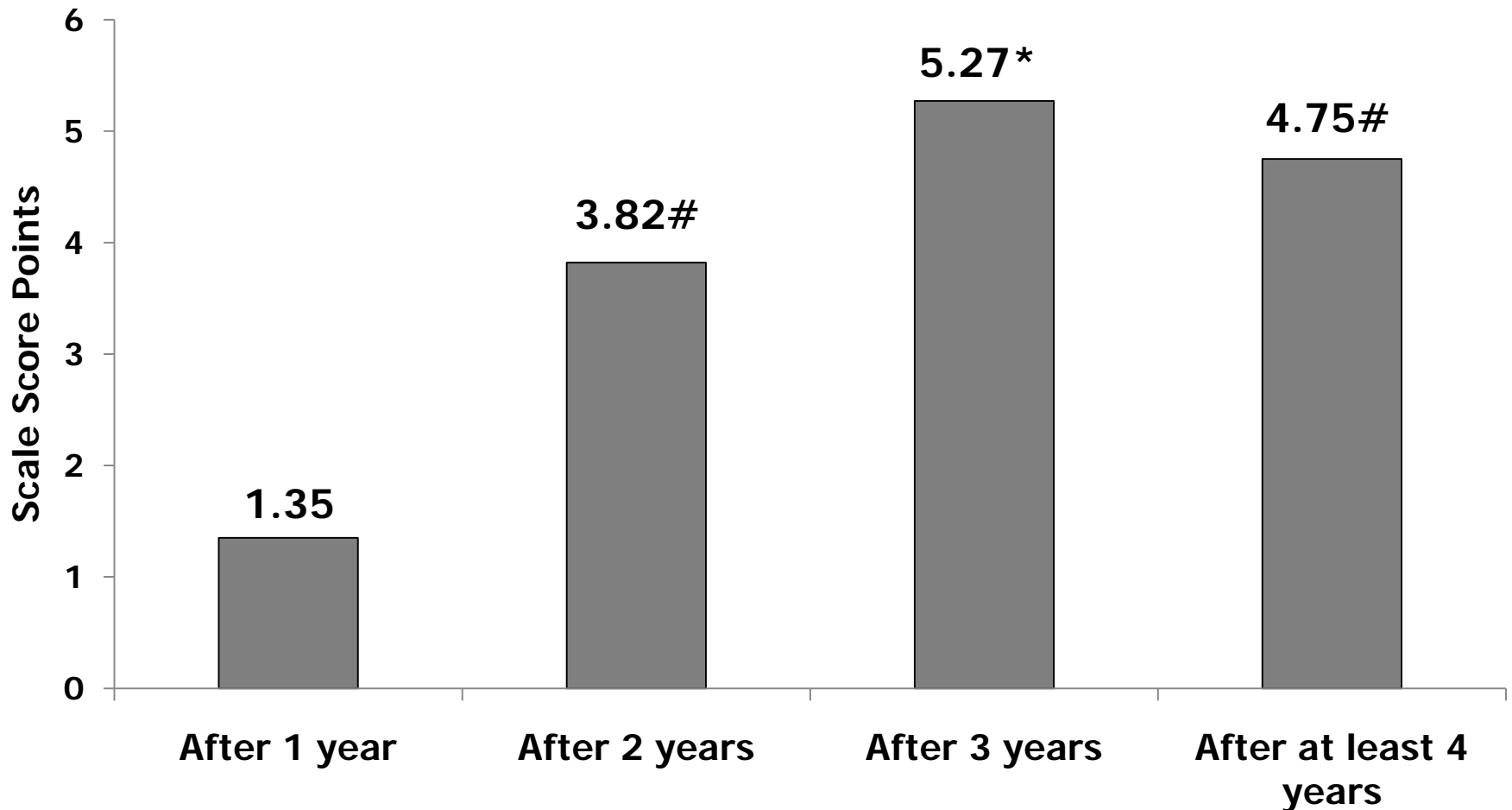


Vouchers and Test Scores

- All or some subgroups of students tend to show gains eventually
- Confirmed in 9 of 10 “gold standard” studies of 6 cities by 7 different research teams (Wolf 2008)
- Equal to about an extra month of learning per year
- Exact pattern of positive results varies but no negative effects found

Impact of DC Scholarship Use on Reading Test Scores (Wolf et al. 2010)

Note: Sample after at least 4 years excludes 289 students who graduated out of study



*Statistically significant at the 95 percent confidence level.

#Statistically significant at the 90 percent confidence level.



Question 3

Do choice programs induce competitive effects that benefit non-participating students in traditional public schools (TPS)?



Competitive Effects of Charters on Achievement in TPS

- Relatively few studies
- Vary dramatically in quality
- More rigorous studies generally show that competition boosts achievement in TPS (Gray 2009; Sass 2006)
- Positive effects are modest in size



Competitive Effects of Vouchers on Achievement in TPS

- **6 studies in Florida – All positive** (Greene & Winters 2003; West & Peterson 2005; Chakrabarti 2004; Figlio & Rouse 2004; Rouse et al. 2007; Figlio & Hart 2010)
- **5 studies in Milwaukee – All positive** (Hoxby 2001; Greene & Forster 2002; Chakrabarti 2008; Carnoy et al. 2007; Greene & Marsh 2009)
- **2 studies in Arizona – Mix of positive and no effects** (Hoxby 2001; Greene & Forster 2002)
- **1 study in DC – no effects** (Greene & Winters 2006)



Overall Assessment of the Competitive Effects of School Choice

- Meta-analysis of 200 studies by choice skeptics Belfield and Levin (2002):

“The above evidence shows reasonably consistent evidence of a link between competition (choice) and education quality. Increased competition and higher educational quality are positively correlated.”
- Strongest when choice is extensive, options are high-quality, and dollars all travel with student (Moe 2008)
 - All apply to choice environment in Florida and Milwaukee
 - Not in DC -- program capped and public system held harmless



Question 4

Do parents benefit from school choice?



Voucher Programs Increase Parental Satisfaction with Schools

- Especially regarding curriculum, safety, parent-teacher relations, academics, and religion
- Confirmed by all five “gold standard” studies that asked the question (e.g. Wolf et al. 2010; Howell & Peterson 2006; Greene 2001)
- Impacts are large but decrease somewhat over time
- DC parents who graded schools A or B:
 - After 1 year -- 80% of voucher users compared to 50% of control group (Wolf et al. 2007)
 - After 4 years -- 78% of voucher users compared to 68% of control group (Wolf et al. 2010)



Question 5

Do communities benefit from expanded school choice?



Choice *Can* Improve the Fiscal Health of States & Localities

- Charters generally receive 61% of per-pupil operational funding, no capital costs (CER 2010)
- Vouchers cost states 30-50% of per-pupil funding, also with no capital costs
- Detailed studies show that school choice saves money when the funds follow the child (Costrell 2010; Aud 2007)



Choice Programs Often Advance the Public Purposes of Education

- 21 empirical studies reveal private or charter school advantage in promoting civic values (Wolf 2007)
- Evidence strong for political tolerance, voluntarism, political knowledge
- Parents report being empowered by the DC OSP (Stewart & Wolf 2011)
- Effect of choice on racial segregation in schools depends heavily on circumstances:
 - Urban voucher programs -- minorities move from more segregated public schools to less segregated private schools
 - Urban charter schools -- minorities are overwhelmingly attracted to them, creating some voluntary segregation



Summary of the Research on School Choice

1. Choice programs disproportionately serve disadvantaged students
2. They deliver a variety of educational benefits to students under most circumstances
3. They tend to spur affected public schools to improve
4. Parents love them!
5. They deliver education more efficiently and tend to enhance and not undermine the public purposes of education



The Best Evidence for School Choice

“When my son dressed in that uniform with that green blazer, the white shirt, tie, gray trousers and he looked like a gentleman and a scholar and he had his hair cut and his glasses and he was just grinning from ear to ear that he was going to be a part of that [private school culture] and he went to school that day and he was excited about going to school.” (DC Scholarship High School Parent, 2005)



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