ACCOUNTABILITY POLICY YIELDS SUBSTANTIAL ACADEMIC GAINS FOR SCHOOL CHOICE STUDENTS

Accountability and school choice are hot-button topics in educational policy. These topics are examined together by Michigan State University Associate Professor Joshua M. Cowen and colleagues in their 2014 article in Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis. The researchers evaluated the impact of a high-stakes testing and reporting policy on students in the nation's oldest school voucher program.

A NATURAL EXPERIMENT

During the course of the researchers' multi-year evaluation of Wisconsin's Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP), new legislation was passed that required private schools participating in the program to annually test all school choice students. Taking advantage of this opportunity to study the new law's influence, the objective of their study was to test the impact of a high-stakes testing and reporting policy on students who were using vouchers to attend private schools. Cowen and his colleagues analyzed the achievement data of 437 MPCP students and 792 Milwaukee Public School (MPS) students enrolled in Grades 7 and 8 in the first high-stakes testing year of 2010. They found that the high-stakes testing law affected voucher student performance by comparing the achievement differences between MPCP and MPS students. Additionally, the researchers analyzed growth in the mathematics and reading achievement levels of MPCP students in the first year that the high-stakes policy took effect. Substantial achievement gains were found for voucher students in the first high-stakes testing year, particularly in mathematics and for students with higher levels of earlier academic achievement.

WHAT IT MEANS TO YOU

This is the first major empirical analysis of the impact of a test-based accountability law on voucher students attending private schools. This study shows the power that research can have to help legislators understand the positive impact that their legislation can have on students. In this case, the impact of a high-stakes accountability law was analyzed, but a similar approach could be applied to any educational policy. State and local policymakers should consider the value of data to follow up on their policy decisions to track the consequences of any given policy. In addition to demonstrating the value of data to policymakers, this study also shows the value of data and choice to parents. Increased transparency and information to parents can help inform their educational decisions about where to send their children to school. In the broadest sense, the findings of this study suggest that building greater accountability and oversight through policy can yield positive academic gains for school choice students.

READ THE ARTICLE

Witte, J.F., Wolf, P.J., Cowen, J.M., Carlson, D.E., & Fleming, D.J. (2014). High-Stakes Choice: Achievement and Accountability in the Nation's Oldest Urban Voucher Program. Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis. DOI: 10.3102/0162373714534521

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