



Parental "Choice," School "Choice," and School Vouchers

Position Statement:

GLSEN opposes school voucher and other privatization programs. Public money should be spent on improving our nation's public schools rather than diverted to private institutions that may not be accountable to local educational policies and may not provide equal access or treatment for all students.

Background

As part of his proposed education plan, "No Child Left Behind," President George W. Bush advocates for increased parental "choice" with regard to the school his or her child attends. The president believes that increasing parental "choice" will hold public schools more accountable for their successes and failures and will assure that the children receive "the best, most effective education possible."

Parental "choice" or school "choice" is often talked about in terms of school vouchers. In school voucher programs, students are able to attend private schools, often religious-affiliated institutions, and the school tuition is paid for by the government. Two U.S. cities, Milwaukee and Cleveland, and one state, Florida, currently have school vouchers programs in place. In the two citywide programs, any school-age child is eligible to participate in the program. In Florida, only children who have attended a public school that received a failing grade on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test two years in a row may participate. The money used to pay for the private school tuition is typically taken from the school district or from the public school that the child had previously attended or would have attended.

Thus, the more children who use the voucher system, the more money taken from the public school system.

The constitutionality of all these programs have been challenged in the courts. Most recently, in December 2000, the 6th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals upheld a District Court ruling that the Cleveland voucher program violates the First Amendment and the separation of church and state.

Are voucher programs effective?

At this time, there is no clear evidence that voucher programs improve children's educational achievement. Because private schools are not accountable to the state or local educational authorities in the same way as are public schools, systematic on-going evaluations of these voucher programs less likely to be done. However, Cleveland and Florida contracted with outside researchers to evaluate their programs.

Although the voucher program in Cleveland is only a few years old, two evaluation studies were conducted that evaluated the effectiveness of the program after its second year. The first, conducted by the Indiana Center for Evaluation at Indiana University, examined differences in fourth-grade achievement between students attending private school scholarship (voucher) students and comparable students attending public school.¹ The study found that students who were attending existing private schools had slightly greater improvements in language and science than did students in public schools. There were no differences found in reading, math or social stud-

ies achievement or in the score on the total battery of tests. The study also found that students who were attending newly established private schools (schools opened on an entrepreneurial basis in response to the creation of the scholarship program) had declining achievement across all subject areas.

The second evaluation study was conducted by the Program on Education Policy and Governance at Harvard University.² Although it is difficult to make conclusions from this study regarding improvements in student achievement³, the study did find that parents of children in the voucher program were more satisfied with their child's school than parents of children in the public schools. It is not surprising that parents using the voucher program would be more satisfied – the parents chose to leave the public school system for some reason and chose the particular private school for some other reason. However, without knowing whether the program resulted in greater academic achievement for the students, it is unclear how relevant parental satisfaction is. For example, the largest difference between parents using the voucher program and parents using the public schools was regarding the teaching of moral values. Fifty-five percent of parents in the voucher program were "very satisfied" with the teaching of moral values compared to thirty percent of public school parents. It is possible that parents using the voucher program were more satisfied because the private school included religious teaching. Parents may or may not have enough information to objectively rate the schools of certain dimensions. Typically, teachers in public schools have more education

than do teachers in private schools. (Whereas a public school teacher must meet certain state requirements, a private school teacher does not necessarily have any teacher training.) Yet, more parents using the voucher program were satisfied with the teachers' skill level than parents using the public schools were.

The "evaluation" of the Florida voucher program⁴ did not examine whether student performance improved for students who switched to a private school under the voucher program.⁵ Thus, it is really not an evaluation of the voucher program at all. Instead, the researchers focused on whether failing schools improved more than low-performing schools that were not failing. The study found that those schools that had received a failing grade, based on the students' performance on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test, had slightly greater improvement in test scores than other low-performing schools in writing and math but that there were not significant differences in reading. The results from this study say nothing about the success of the voucher program.

There is a fundamental flaw in the president's logic with regard to vouchers or parental "choice." Believing that vouchers will improve the education of America's children puts the sole blame for failing students on the school itself – an "if the child fails, the school is bad" mentality. There are many factors that affect the academic success of children and quality of the school is just one factor. Also, quality of the school is intertwined with many other factors. Low-performing schools are often in low-income neighborhoods or in poorer school districts. Family poverty and lack of school resources also play a role in child academic achievement. Wealthier school districts can attract better quality teachers with higher salaries. Research has shown, in fact, that parental involvement in children's schooling, not school "choice," is the largest predictor of academic success.⁶ School voucher programs will likely do nothing to increase public

school resources, improve teacher quality, affect family poverty or increase parental involvement in children's education.

Are private schools accountable?

Because voucher schools are private schools, they are not mandated to follow state or local education policies. Typically, teachers in private schools do not need to have the same state certification that teachers in public schools do. These schools also are not required to conduct or report achievement scores for their students. In Milwaukee, the largest of the publicly funded voucher programs, any private school is eligible to become part of the voucher system as long as it has at least 40 hours of instruction per week. In a 2000 audit of the Milwaukee program, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction found that because not all schools administer the same achievement tests, no comparison could be made between students in public schools and students in voucher schools. Thus, in voucher programs, private schools can receive public money but they may not held accountable to public policies.

What would voucher programs mean for LGBT students?

The foremost issue regarding voucher programs and the LGBT community is that public money is being given to private institutions, most of which are religiously affiliated. In Milwaukee, over 62% of the voucher schools are religious schools accounting for about 66% of the total dollars spent on students in voucher schools – approximately \$30 million dollars.⁷ The majority of the religiously affiliated schools have policies based on religious principles, and these policies are often discriminatory toward LGBT teachers or youth. For example, an openly gay teacher in a Catholic school could be terminated and an openly gay student could be expelled, both because of their sexual orientation. Catholic schools in Milwaukee could receive over \$15 million dollars from the

voucher program this academic year.⁸ In most of the current voucher programs, a private school must accept any voucher student who applies if there is space available or must randomly choose the students if the number of voucher student applications exceeds the number of available spaces. Thus, a school cannot reject any voucher student based on any personal characteristic, which would include gender, race or sexual orientation. However, a private school could theoretically expel a student because of his or her sexual orientation or gender identity/expression and the school would not be required to protect any LGBT student from in-school harassment. Thus, federal funds could be given to a school that creates a hostile climate for LGBT youth – one in which teachers or staff berate LGBT youth because their sexual orientation or gender expression does not conform with certain religious standards.

If a state or local district has a non-discrimination policy protecting LGBT students from harassment or violence, private schools have no legal obligation to abide by this policy. The state of Wisconsin includes sexual orientation in its non-discrimination policy, yet an LGBT student could be attending a voucher school in which his or her rights will not be protected. Because of this lack of accountability, Wisconsin state Representative Christine Sinicki introduced a bill in the 1999-2000 legislature (Assembly Bill 342) that would have required private schools in the voucher program to develop and implement non-discrimination policies for students that includes sexual orientation.

What would voucher programs mean for LGBT parents with school-age children?

LGBT parents may not be comfortable sending their children to religiously affiliated schools that discriminate based on sexual orientation or gender identity/expression or that promote negative attitudes toward homosexuality. Thus, these parents may not have the same choices as

other parents in these parental "choice" programs. LGBT parents may be forced to keep their children in a low-performing public school, a school that may be losing additional monies and resources because of the voucher program, if the only other option is a school that is unwelcoming of their family.

What is GLSEN's stance on school vouchers?

School voucher programs are not the answer to America's low-performing schools. Research has demonstrated that school resources and parental involvement are major factors in child academic success, not school "choice." Voucher programs also take money away from public schools that are already too low on resources. For LGBT students, voucher schools may likely fail to protect them from discrimination, harassment and violence. For LGBT parents, school "choice" may result in little or no actual choice for finding the best publicly funded education for their children.

Endnotes

1. Metcalf, K. K., Muller, P., Boone, W., Tait, P., Stage, F., & Stacey, N. (1998). Evaluation of the Cleveland Scholarship Program: Second-Year Report (1997-1998). The Indiana Center for Evaluation, Indiana University, 174 Smith Research Center, Bloomington, IN, 47408.
2. Peterson, P. E., Howell, W. G., Greene, J. P. (1999). An Evaluation of the Cleveland Voucher Program after Two Years. Program on Education Policy and Governance, J. F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA 02138.
3. This study examined achievement test scores for only those students attending the two newly established private schools in response to the Indiana University study. The Harvard study had contradictory findings that demonstrated improved achievement by the students in these two schools. However, because the study only examined two of the 59 private schools participating in the voucher program in the 1998 school year, the results are not representative of the entire Cleveland voucher program.
4. Greene, J. P. (2001). An Evaluation of the Florida A-Plus Accountability and School Choice Program. The Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, New York, NY.
5. Very few students have been eligible to use the Florida voucher program and even fewer of those eligible students switched to a private school. Thus, it would be difficult to determine improvements in academic achievement.
6. Shumow, L., Vandell, D. L., Kang, K. (1996). "School choice, family characteristics, and home-school relations: Contributors to school achievement?" Journal of Educational Psychology, 88, 451-460.
7. These percentages are based on data available from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. The number of schools participating in the program was taken from the initial count at the beginning of the school year.
8. This figure is based on approximately 3,000 full-time equivalent students @ \$5,000 per student.



GLSEN is the leading national organization working to end anti-gay bias in K-12 schools. Established nationally in 1995, GLSEN has become one of the premiere voices for safety and equality in the education system. For more information visit www.glsen.org.