



Indiana Non-Public Education Association Response to Brookings Institute Article

In May 2016 the Brookings Institute published an article by Mark Dynarski called “On negative effects of vouchers.” The article uses various pieces of research to examine how school choice affects students in Louisiana and Indiana. The article’s main premise is,

“[r]ecent research on statewide voucher programs in Louisiana and Indiana has found that public school students that received vouchers to attend private schools subsequently scored lower on reading and math tests compared to similar students that remained in public schools.”

The article later goes on to conclude that,

“[i]n education as in medicine, ‘first, do no harm’ is a powerful guiding principle. A case to use taxpayer funds to send children of low-income parents to private schools is based on an expectation that the outcome will be positive. These recent findings point in the other direction.”

The Indiana Non-Public Education Association (INPEA) disagrees with the analysis conducted in the article, and believes that vouchers and school choice, are in fact, benefiting over 32,000 students across the state.

The Brookings article in itself has issues with clarity and factual analysis. The Brookings Institute did not conduct their own research on the effects of vouchers. Therefore the article cannot be called a “Brookings Institute study.” It is only a review of research done by others and analyzed by Mr. Dynarski. Additionally, much of the Brookings article addresses school choice in Louisiana, which is a very different choice program compared to the Choice Scholarship Program in Indiana. Indiana and Louisiana have vastly different legislation, manners of carrying out the programs, and regulations ensuring quality and accountability. The Brookings article unfairly uses research done in another state to generalize Indiana’s program. It should also be mentioned that the article only contains one statement that factually focuses on Indiana. “In Indiana, a student who had entered a private school with a math score at the 50th percentile declined to the 44th percentile after one year.” This statement is made from one study, of one year’s testing results, in one subject area. The limitations of this statement are too high to make a valid claim that vouchers have a negative effect on students.

A broader look also needs to be taken at the study used for Indiana. The study used was “Vouchers in the Crossroads: Heterogeneous Impacts on Student Achievement and Attendance across Private Schools in Indiana” by R. Joseph Waddington and Mark Berends. This study is currently on going and has yet to be published. The information Dynarski used is not finalized and was not intended for widespread use. The Waddington-Berends study examines students who use the voucher to transfer from a public school to private school in elementary and middle school during the 2011-12 school year through 2013-14 school year. This data is during the initial first three years of the Choice Scholarship Program, and uses ISTEP, the Indiana standardized test. Waddington and Berends find there is a decline in math scores in the first two years, and then find no decline in student performance in the third year. While INPEA believes it is important to acknowledge this data and to address the decline, we also believe it is critical

to understand that this study is still ongoing, the study is not a complete look at all Indiana voucher students, and the study does not use a test that is held in high regard.

Another crucial point that needs to be addressed in both the Brookings article and the Waddington-Berends study, is that students using the voucher to switch from a public school to a non-public school go through a transitional period. Families who choose to switch their child often have a reason behind it, whether it's bullying, the child's needs not being met, a lack of fit, and/or underachievement, they make the switch to better serve their child. Like in most situations, it will take students time to fully adjust to expectations, and even more time to thrive under their new school environment. INPEA firmly believes that parents are the best equipped to choose the school that best fits their child's educational needs, even if that means taking into consideration that the student will need time to catch up to their peers academically. It will take more time than the initial three years of the study to fully understand how the Indiana Choice Scholarship Program affects students and their ability to compete academically.

The Brookings Institute article claims also come as a jarring shock when pitted against accepted research, as Indiana is a leader in school choice and non-public schools, on average, outperform their public school counterparts in ISTEP testing and graduation rates. In 2015, 91.6 percent of non-public school students graduated compared to 88.7 percent of public school students. Moreover, in 2015 non-public schools had an ISTEP passage rate of 64 percent, while public schools had a rate of 53 percent. Non-public schools who participate in school choice are also held to higher accountability standards than their public school cohorts, and cannot continue to accept new voucher students if they consistently perform poorly, ensuring that voucher student will receive the highest quality of education at the school they choose.

"On the negative effects of vouchers" is a preemptive attempt to color vouchers and school choice as bad for education and bad for students. Its sweeping generalizations and rogue analysis will not be tolerated or supported as fact. The article paints with too broad a brush to conclude that school choice does not work for Indiana. INPEA, our schools, our teachers, our families, and our students all voice a resounding "yes," school choice does work! Everyday INPEA sees student who are succeeding, learning, and thriving in the schools they choose to attend. School choice and vouchers are relatively new to being implemented in the education world, and it will take time to fully understand their impact, but at INPEA we are hopeful for future study results and for families to find the school that best serves their child's unique educational needs.