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Study: Florida voucher students making slightly bigger gains than peers in public schools

Low-income students attending private schools in Florida with tax-credit vouchers appear to be making slightly bigger academic gains than similar students in public schools, according to standardized test scores analyzed for [the latest](#) in a series of state-ordered studies.

The best statistical estimates "indicate that participation (in the voucher program) is associated with small improvements in reading and mathematics, relative to public school students who applied for participation in the program, though these differences are not always statistically significant," writes well-respected Northwestern University researcher David Figlio, who was hired by the Florida Department of Education to study the program. "The results are consistent with a finding of small but positive differences between program participants and non-participants."

There isn't much difference between Figlio's latest findings on voucher student performance, released this morning, and his [earlier ones](#), which generated a lot of ink. And there probably won't be much difference in the reaction.

Critics will say there's more proof vouchers are over hyped. Supporters will say there's more proof vouchers are giving low-income kids a good education – for a fraction of the cost.

New state education commissioner Gerard Robinson was quick to tout the results in a press release put out by Tampa-based Step Up for Students, which administers the voucher program. "I am encouraged by the findings in the latest Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program report," Robinson said. "The upward trend demonstrated in the report illustrates that scholarship students are keeping pace with, and sometimes exceeding, their public school peers in both reading and mathematics. I look forward to continuing to offer support to a program that provides our lower income families with learning options they historically could not access." (The redefinED blog, run by the Step Up folks, offers its take on Figlio's report [here](#).)

Figlio offers a lot of caveats, nuance and words of caution. Among his other findings:

- * As a whole, voucher students tend to come from less advantaged families than students receiving free- and reduced-price lunches in public schools.
- * As a whole, voucher students tend to be among the lowest-performing students in the public schools they left, with significantly lower test scores than other voucher-eligible students. Figlio's report says that trend has become stronger, not weaker.
- * In 2009-10, the typical voucher student scored at the 45th national percentile in reading and the 46th national percentile in math, about the same as the prior year.