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Vouchers work in Florida, and they'll work here

By Marcus A. Winters

Gov. Chris Christie is pushing a bill to offer vouchers to poor students stuck in the state's worst schools. While few disagree that New Jersey's most disadvantaged students would benefit from a private education, opponents of vouchers warn about their impact on the public school system.

Skeptics should look to Florida's experience with a program similar to what the governor has proposed.

From the outset, traditionalists predicted vouchers would severely harm public schools. In fact, vouchers have helped improve Florida's school system while saving millions of taxpayer dollars.

Florida's Tax Credit Scholarship Program currently provides vouchers to nearly 25,000 students across the state. The program's funding comes from corporate donors who receive a dollar-for-dollar tax rebate. New Jersey's program would be funded the same way.

School choice critics often argue that vouchers rob public schools of scarce financial resources and take away the "cream" -- their most promising students. Advocates for choice, on the other hand, believe that it improves public schools by forcing them to compete for students.

The jury is in.

Last week, well-respected Northwestern University economist David Figlio released a study showing that

Florida's tax credit voucher program has helped to improve local public schools. The improvements caused by voucher competition were mild. But the effect of choice was undoubtedly positive for students who remained in the state's public schools.

The findings from Florida are consistent with a wide body of research evaluating school choice policies across the nation. Research consistently finds that public schools either improve because of voucher competition or, at worst, are unaffected by it.

There is no evidence -- not a single study -- suggesting that school choice programs harm student achievement in public schools.

Florida's experience shows that public schools can thrive in an environment of choice. In 1998, before the state adopted any choice policies, Florida's public school students ranked near the bottom in the nation on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, a standardized test administered by the U.S. Department of Education. Today, nearly 150,000 of Florida's students exercise school choice either through one of the state's two voucher programs or by attending one of its charter schools. Meanwhile, the performance of its public school students has risen to near the top in the nation on NAEP.

Not all of Florida's public school improvements are due to choice. But

it's crystal clear that expanding choice hasn't hurt.

Florida's tax credit voucher program has had another effect that should interest New Jersey's taxpayers: it's saved oodles of public dollars. The dollar amount of the voucher is much less than public school per-pupil expenditures, so each student who uses a voucher saves the state money.

A study mandated by Florida's legislature and conducted by the nonpartisan Office of Program Policy Analysis & Government Accountability found that Florida's program saves \$1.49 in education spending for every dollar lost in corporate income tax revenues. That translated to about \$38.9 million in savings for fiscal year 2007-2008 alone.

The savings could be even larger for New Jersey, which spends about 60 percent more per pupil on its public schools than does Florida.

Vouchers haven't hurt public schools anywhere that they've been tried. Unfortunately, critics of school choice have never let evidence stop them from making unsubstantiated claims about the dire effects of vouchers on traditional public schools. New Jersey's taxpayers shouldn't be fooled.

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