

St. Petersburg Times

Florida's Best Newspaper

 tampabay.com

Tuesday, June 30, 2009 | 50¢

Study finds vouchers don't make difference Backers and critics both spin the results

By Ron Matus
Times Staff Writer

Supporters often say school vouchers are lifelines to low-income students trapped in subpar public schools.

But academically, students using vouchers to attend private schools in Florida are doing no better and no worse than similar students in public schools, says a study ordered by the state Legislature.

"We consider the report a validation of what we've always said," said Mark Pudlow, a spokesman for the state teachers union. "There is no quick fix for struggling students."

Northwestern University economics professor David Figlio compared test scores of students in the voucher program, which served 23,259 students last year, to eligible public school students who opted not to participate.

Figlio said it's too early to draw hard-and-fast conclusions, and outlined some technical complications he expects to resolve with another year's worth of data.

But he said more data isn't likely to change the bottom line.

"I'm confident that it's highly unlikely that we're going to see huge differential positive test score gains from this program" or negative results either, he said after the report was released Monday. "My hunch is, when all is said and done ... it's going to be a wash in terms of test scores."

But voucher supporters said the findings prove private schools are educating voucher students as well as public schools, and for a lot less

money. Per-pupil spending in Florida is about \$7,000 a year. A voucher costs taxpayers \$3,950.

"The fact that we're keeping (pace) and we're spending 57 cents on the dollar is a good first step," said Doug Tuthill, president of Step Up For Students, the Tampa nonprofit group that oversees the voucher program.

But critics said the findings show vouchers have failed to deliver. And to a point, one voucher researcher agreed.

Backers "promised the moon, and public policy almost never delivers the moon," said Jay Greene, a University of Arkansas professor who has studied Florida vouchers. "It doesn't mean that these programs can't be a lifeline." But don't expect to see that instantaneously.

The report comes as the tide in Florida's decade-long vouchers war seems to be turning.

In the last two legislative sessions, GOP supporters have successfully expanded the program, which offers businesses a dollar-for-dollar tax credit in return for donations. And a growing number of Democrats have signed on. Voucher students don't have to take the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test. But since 2006 the state has required that they take a comparable test

Figlio compared test results from 2006-07 and 2007-08.

Vouchers are available to any student who qualifies for free or reduced lunch. But he found that students who accept them are more likely to be minorities, and be poorer. And

while in public schools, they tended to be among the lowest performers. The latter finding undermines an argument by anti-voucher critics.

"Opponents have always said that you're picking off the best and brightest," said Rep. Will Weatherford, R-Wesley Chapel, who spearheaded last year's voucher expansion.

Figlio does not offer an exact comparison. The 2006-07 data was incomplete, and the applicant pool appears to have been skewed by a high number of families who applied for free or reduced lunch even though they did not qualify. Higher-income families usually correlate to higher-performing students.

With those caveats, Figlio concluded that voucher students made slightly smaller gains than similar nonvoucher students in reading and math, though the difference was not statistically significant.

Monday's report did not dissuade voucher parents, or provoucher lawmakers.

"I know my daughter," said Trinetta Hicks, whose 9-year-old daughter, Tekoa, attends Southside Christian in St. Petersburg on a tax credit voucher. In private school, Hicks said, "She gets more attention."

Parents "are passionate about the value of their choice," said Sen. Don Gaetz, R-Niceville.

But the new study's results shouldn't be ignored, said Sen. Dan Gelber, D-Miami Beach, a longtime voucher opponent.

"If the kids aren't doing better, then we really ought to reconsider why we're doing it," he said.