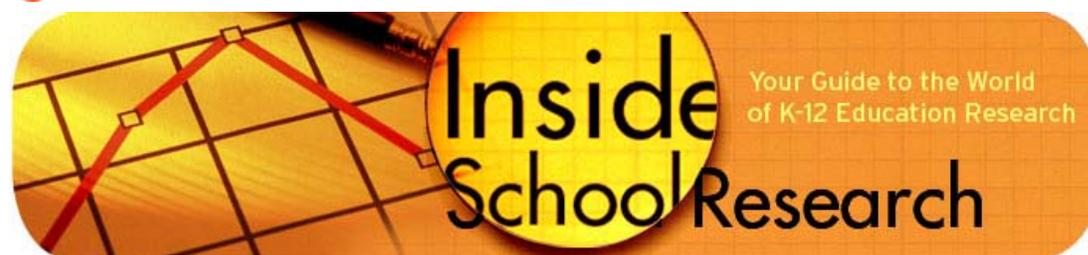


June 13, 2010



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Veteran reporter Debra Viadero has written more than 1,400 stories for *Education Week* and most of them have been about research. Not bored yet, she translates, shares, and dissects research findings on schools and learning, along with news about education research, for audiences that extend far beyond the Ivory Tower.



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## Study: Do Vouchers Spur Public Schools to Up Their Game?

By [Debra Viadero](#) on June 11, 2010 10:59 AM | [1 Comment](#) | [No TrackBacks](#)

An intriguing new study out of Florida suggests that public schools tend to improve their game when competition from nearby private schools heats up.

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David N. Figlio and Cassandra M.D. Hart at Northwestern University's Institute for Policy Research draw that conclusion from a study of the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship program. Begun in 2001, the state-run program initially provided low-income families with vouchers of \$3,500 to cover the cost of tuition and fees at private schools. To qualify, a student had to have spent the entire previous year in a public school, or be on the cusp of entering kindergarten or 1st grade.

Before you read any further, though, there's one thing you have to know about most research that attempts to gauge the impact of school choice programs on public schools: It's very tricky stuff. That's partly because, when a voucher program launches, the demographics tend to shift at both the private and public schools. The most motivated or the most able students, for instance, might abandon the public schools to head for private ones. That could skew results from any study looking to see how public school students' achievement changed after the introduction of the voucher program.

The way Figlio and Hart get around this problem is to focus on measuring achievement changes in the public schools in the year *before* students actually move to private schools. In that year, even though students are just applying to the private schools, the threat is already looming large for public school educators. In Florida's case, the pressure may have been especially intense because the vouchers were particularly generous. On average, they covered nearly 90 percent of the cost of attending nearby religious schools, which made them a realistic option for many families, according to the study.

In all, though, the researchers collected achievement data across a lot of years—from 1999-2000 to 2006-07—for nearly 3 million students throughout the Sunshine State. They also gauged competitive pressure four different ways. They looked, for instance, at whether there was a competing private school within five miles as the crow flies from a public school, how many private schools lay within a five-mile radius, how many different "types" of private schools were nearby, and how many schools there were of each of those types.

The bottom line: The nearer or more intense the competition, the more the test scores rose in that transition year. And scores continued to rise over time.

Of course, it's entirely possible that public school students' performance was

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already on an upward trajectory. To some extent, the researchers concluded, that was true. But the magnitude of that growth was much smaller before the tuition program materialized. Also, the report says, during the 2000-01 school year, before the program officially came to be, the researchers could find no relationship between any changes in test scores and the intensity of competition from nearby private schools. (For the record, Florida introduced its statewide student-testing program in 1998-99—the year before researchers began collecting achievement data.)

One caveat here is that this study focuses on Florida; there are no guarantees that the results would generalize to other states. Ninety percent of Florida students live in metropolitan areas, which means that students tend to have a lot of private schools from which to choose—possibly more than students elsewhere do.

"Nevertheless," the researchers write, "this study indicates that private school competition, brought about by the infusion of means-tested scholarships aimed at low-income families, could have sizable effects on the performance of traditional schools."

The gains don't look huge to me, but that's a matter for real researchers to debate. You should also know that this is technically a working paper, published by the National Bureau of Economic Research, which means it's still a work in progress. You can find the full study [here](#). It could make for interesting weekend reading.

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