

# SAVE OUR SCHOOLS

## Education Policy Comment

### Voucher Advocate Recants – “Vouchers are dangerous”

In a welcome display of intellectual honesty, a leading US advocate of school vouchers has recanted. In a damning indictment, Professor Joshua Cowen now says that “vouchers are dangerous” and they “fail to deliver for the kids who are often most in need”. He says that “the evidence is just too stark to justify the use of public money to fund private tuition”.

In an opinion piece in the US education website, [The Hechinger Report](#), Professor Cowan unequivocally stated that voucher programs have failed in the United States:

They promise an all-too-simple solution to tough problems like unequal access to high-quality schools, segregation and even school safety. In small doses, years ago, vouchers seemed like they might work, but as more states have created more and larger voucher programs, experts like me have learned enough to say that these programs on balance can severely hinder academic growth — especially for vulnerable kids.

Not only have voucher programs failed to deliver, but Cowen says there is a moral case against them as well:

They promise low-income families solutions to academic inequality, but what they deliver is often little more than religious indoctrination to go alongside academic outcomes that are worse than before.

This is a major rebuff to voucher advocates around the world and in Australia as Cowen is a highly influential academic. He has studied voucher programs in the US for almost twenty years and initially was optimistic about their success.

Voucher programs operate in many US states under which governments provide funding for students to attend a private school. Funding that would otherwise be used by a public school district is allocated to a participating family in the form of a voucher to pay partial or full tuition fees to attend a private school, including both religious and non-religious schools. The amount of funding is typically based on the state’s per-student funding for public schools. Many programs are directed at low income and Black families.

Cowen’s judgement is based on evaluation studies of major voucher programs in the US. He was lead author of an official evaluation of the [Milwaukee Parental Choice Program \(MPCP\)](#) in Wisconsin published in 2013. The evaluation tracked more than 2,500 voucher children alongside 2,500 carefully matched public school children. It concluded that “that students exposed to MPCP did no better on those exams than students in traditional public schools” [p. 164].

Several studies of the Louisiana voucher program found that students performed worse in private schools than in public schools. For example, a study published by the [US National Bureau of Economic Research](#) found that voucher students performed much worse in reading, maths, science and social studies than similar students who remained in public schools. These results were

replicated in other studies such as those published in the [Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis journal](#) and more recently in the [Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness](#).

A study of the impact of the [Indiana Choice Scholarship Program](#) on student achievement for low-income students who used a voucher to transfer from public to private schools found that they achieved less in maths regardless of the time spent in private school and there was no statistically meaningful effects in English/Arts. It concluded:

Although school vouchers aim to provide greater educational opportunities for students, the goal of improving the academic performance of low-income students who use a voucher to move to a private school has not yet been realized in Indiana. [p. 783]

Similar results were found by a study of [Ohio's EdChoice Scholarship Program](#). The students who used vouchers to attend private schools fared "considerably worse" on state exams compared to their closely matched peers remaining in public schools:

...our conclusion is that participation in the EdChoice program likely reduced students' reading and mathematics scores relative to what would have occurred in the public sector.... [p. 38]

In all these programs, students from low income families were fully funded by government to attend a private school of choice. The evidence that they failed to increase student achievement is compelling. As Cowen states"

The bottom line is that the research case for vouchers doesn't hold up to scrutiny, while the research case against them has been flashing warning lights for almost a decade.

Cowen's conclusion is supported by a recent literature review published in the [Journal of Economic Literature](#). It found that the evidence about small-scale programs in high income countries is not consistent or robust and "it is frequently the case that no significant impact is found [p. 485]. In the case of large-scale programs, it noted "some discouragingly large negative achievement effects" [p. 486]. Overall, it found that "the evidence does not make a case for wholesale adoption of vouchers" [p. 485].

Australia has a quasi-voucher system whereby private schools are partially funded by the Commonwealth Government according to a measure of the capacity of families to pay private school fees, and to a lesser extent by state and territory governments. In contrast to US voucher schemes, the money is provided directly to schools or systems rather than to families.

Quasi-vouchers have proved no more successful in raising student results in Australia than voucher programs in the US. Many studies have shown that private schools do not do any better than public schools after taking account of their different social composition despite their large resource advantage over public schools.

The report on Australia's results in [the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment \(PISA\) in 2018](#) found no difference in student results in reading and science between public, Catholic and Independent schools after taking account of differences in student and school socio-economic background. Public school students achieved higher results in mathematics than Catholic school students. [A review of nearly 30 academic studies](#) of public and private school outcomes in Australia shows that the vast weight of evidence is that public schools achieve similar outcomes to private schools.

Many have advocated US-style vouchers for Australia over the years, whether universally available or means-tested. They include Turnbull Government education minister, [Simon Birmingham](#), Liberal [Senator James Patterson](#), the [Centre for Independent Studies](#), the [Institute for Public Affairs](#) and Independent Schools Victoria (submissions to Gonski Review 2011). Others want to extend the quasi-voucher arrangements to [full funding of private schools](#) conditional on them not charging fees.

It is nonsensical to use vouchers or quasi-vouchers to entice low income and other disadvantaged student into private schools. At best, they will do no better than in a public school but are likely to do worse. Australia advocates of vouchers should have the intellectual courage to follow the example of Professor Cowen – recant and adopt his admonition: **Vouchers are dangerous for education**. In Australia, quasi-vouchers have diverted funding from where it is most needed.

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