

## School choice is not always the best choice

*Evidence suggests pupils subject to the voucher scheme will do worse*  
*The Economist, Apr 6th 2025*

Governor Greg Abbott was playing retribution politics before it was cool. Two years ago, the governor of Texas named his top policy priority: a sprawling school-voucher bill that would give parents \$10,000 each year if they sent their children to private schools, opting out of the public system. He wants choice “not just for millionaires” but for the state’s nearly 6m schoolchildren, one of every nine in America. But after failing to get his bill passed he went on the attack and backed primary challenges to Republicans who had voted against it, knocking most of them out of the legislature. Now Austin’s politicians are betting vouchers will pass. On April 3rd the bill made it out of committee. Mr Abbott is planning a “Texas-sized party” to celebrate its becoming law.

The governor’s push reflects how the Republican Party has become fixated on school vouchers despite no good evidence that they improve student performance. Vouchers’ proponents—a mix of politicians, disciples of Milton Friedman and religious activists—want parents to be freed to yank their children out of “woke” classrooms that Mr Abbott says are teaching youngsters to cuss and question their gender. In theory vouchers turn education into a marketplace, rewarding good schools and punishing bad ones. In practice it hasn’t worked like that in America so far. Research shows that such reforms lead to bleak academic outcomes. Fifteen states have passed universal voucher programmes, in which students from both rich and poor families are eligible. Early studies of single cities looked promising. But over time statewide analyses came to conclude that on average pupils do worse under voucher systems.

In Louisiana, where a lottery system made the impact of school choice easy to study, voucher-carrying students saw their maths test scores fall dramatically within a year and were 50% more likely to fail than those who stayed in public schools. The evidence on whether public schools improved is mixed; in some places, like Indiana, students who stayed in them also slumped. The rare study that shows vouchers to be a boon tends to have been questionably designed: higher college enrolment among early adopters of Florida’s scheme can probably be attributed to the participation of better students.

Private schools can choose whether to take vouchers. It tends to be the shoddier ones in lower demand that do. An analysis by *HuffPost* found that 75% of America’s voucher-taking schools are religious; facing waning enrolment at parochial schools, the Catholic church has championed the Texas bill. States cannot force elite schools to participate. In theory, students in exceptionally bad public schools could still benefit from switching to mediocre private

ones. But evidence from other states shows that the primary users of vouchers are children who already go to private schools. “That can’t possibly be a good use of public funds from a cost-benefit perspective,” says Sarah Cohodes of the University of Michigan.

Yet four states besides Texas are pushing for voucher programmes this year and measures have already passed in three. The policy’s contagiousness shows how fed up Republicans are with government-run schools, a sentiment turbocharged by teaching unions’ support for closing schools when covid-19 was spreading—a policy which has set American education back by 20 years. In an early executive order Donald Trump commanded his education secretary, who presides over a department the president plans to shut, to help states gain access to federal funds for more “education freedom” programmes.

What works better than vouchers? Charter schools once obsessed choice-hungry Republicans. Charters sit in the twilight zone between public and private: government funded, but run by non-profits. Several academic studies have found that charters perform decently relative to public schools overall. In urban areas they can do wonders, especially for poor children or those from minorities. New Orleans revamped its education system after Hurricane Katrina by firing all its teachers, allowing union contracts to expire and replacing every public school with a charter. Douglas Harris, an economist at Tulane University, found that after the switch students’ test scores soared, as did rates of high-school graduation, college entry and college graduation. The results have persisted for a decade and a half. Mr Harris attributes the success to a ruthlessly competitive process: non-profits that failed had their contracts revoked, leaving only the best in business. It was the combination of strict government oversight—something Mr Abbott rails against in Texas—and market forces that made this possible. The city’s story offers an alternative. Yet just when the evidence that charter schools worked started to coalesce—around the time Mr Trump was first elected—the party abandoned them. Betsy DeVos, the president’s first secretary of education, was a vouchers crusader. Simultaneously, polarising politics and powerful teachers’ unions made Democrats, especially black lawmakers from cities who had once fought for charter schools, back away from them. The American Legislative Exchange Council, a conservative group that writes model legislation, still officially supports charter schools. But the premier bill it is promoting creates a universal voucher system like the one planned in Texas. If Mr Abbott has his way the state will use a state surplus to pay for vouchers—money that could instead support underfunded public and charter schools.

A small bipartisan cadre of lawmakers is quietly considering conditioning their support for vouchers on a plan to put the issue to voters in a referendum in November. Mr Abbott has proven that his wrath can control lawmakers, but voters may think for themselves. In 2024 voters in three states, including deep-red Kentucky, rejected school choice on the ballot. But Texan law requires a two-thirds vote in the legislature to send a bill to the people. James Talarico, a Democrat on the state’s House education committee, says some Republican co-

authors of the bill have told him privately that they know vouchers are a bad idea. They simply cannot risk crossing the governor. ■