

Governor Jindal's School Voucher Plan Gets an 'F' for Accountability

By Tim Mathis

Gov. Bobby Jindal's plan to dramatically increase the number of students who can attend private schools at public expense is missing a key safeguard: strong oversight and accountability to ensure kids are learning and that taxpayer money is being well-spent. Unfortunately, the governor has rejected all suggestions that private schools be held accountable for their performance in the same way as public schools. Instead, his plans would hand over public resources to private schools with no strings attached.

Setting aside the volatile question of whether public dollars should be used to support private, religious education, there is one area where people on any side of the voucher issue should be able to agree: Any recipient of state dollars should be held accountable for how that money is spent.

Private schools that accept vouchers should be subject to the same testing requirements – and graded on the same A-F scale - as public schools. Schools that fail to make the grade should be dropped from the program, or barred from accepting new voucher students.

Simply put, Louisiana taxpayers have a right to know what results they're getting for their money. And on this critical count, the governor's plan falls short.

A Major Expansion

Since 2008, the state's Student Scholarships for Educational Excellence Program has provided vouchers for qualifying students entering kindergarten for the first time or K-6 students from "academically unacceptable" schools in Orleans Parish, allowing them to attend a private school with available classroom space. The program is currently limited to students from families earning up to \$57,625 a year for a family of four. The average voucher is about \$4,865, substantially less than the \$8,463 per-pupil state funding level for New Orleans public schools.

Today, the \$9 million voucher program serves approximately 1,850 children in New Orleans, who are spread among 38 private schools. As part of his plan to overhaul Louisiana's education system, Jindal wants to make 380,000 students statewide – about 54 percent of the public school population – eligible for vouchers. The governor's plan would allow state-funded vouchers for any low-income student at public schools that receive a C, D or F under the state's new letter-grade system for school performance.

But the voucher program is voluntary, and it's likely that the actual number of students enrolling in private schools would be far below the number eligible. There are 122,495 private-school students in Louisiana, and it's hard to imagine their schools would have the capacity to absorb four times that many students.

Academic Accountability for Vouchers Lags Already

Louisiana has taken admirable steps to improve standards, assessments and accountability in its public schools, and has been cited as a national leader in those areas. Education Week, a newspaper that focuses on public primary schools,

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recently gave Louisiana an “A” for those efforts in its annual “Quality Counts” survey, even as the state was one of four (along with the District of Columbia, Mississippi and West Virginia) to receive an “F” for K-12 performance.

Since 1998, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education has required public schools and districts to continually improve student achievement, attendance and dropout rates. Student performance is largely judged by the results of annual standardized tests. Schools and districts get a letter grade, ranging from A to F, based on the results.

Schools that grow academically are rewarded with state recognition; those that fall short get assistance such as after-school tutoring and extended learning programs. Schools that consistently fail are subject to state takeover through the Recovery School District and are either closed, operated by the RSD or turned over to an independent operator to become a charter school.

Unlike voucher schools, charters are held to strict accountability requirements. They are required to enroll a percentage of at-risk students similar to that of the local public school district, and submit annual reports detailing their students’ academic progress. To have their charters renewed, schools must show they have met their goals within three years. Schools that fail to meet growth targets or adhere to financial requirements can have their charters revoked by BESE.

But Louisiana requires almost no accountability from voucher schools. To qualify for state dollars, private schools must submit documents showing that their curriculum is similar to public schools, their personnel are certified, and school health and safety conditions are adequate. They also must advertise their racial non-discrimination policy in their community for prospective parents and students. Unlike public schools, they are not required to provide special education and can set their own policies on student retention.

While voucher students are required to take the same assessment tests as public school students, there are no penalties for private schools if they fail to measure up to their public counterparts. In fact, Gov. Jindal vetoed language in a 2011 appropriations bill that would have removed participating schools if their students’ scores lagged those in the lowest performing schools in the Recovery School District, which incorporates most New Orleans public schools.

Voucher students actually performed worse overall on standardized tests than students in RSD schools, according to a recent analysis by New Orleans nonprofit *Educate Now!* The organization found that 38 percent of voucher students performed on their grade level in state math and reading tests, compared to 49 percent of all RSD students.¹ The governor’s veto protected four private schools that continue to fail the hundreds of students whose parents thought they chose a better learning environment.

Policymakers can look to Indiana’s voucher program as a model for implementing better academic accountability. Like Louisiana, Indiana uses a system that ranks public schools based on student performance and improvement data from standardized tests. However, Indiana includes private schools along with traditional public schools, allowing parents participating in the voucher program to make an informed choice for their children. Indiana private schools that accept voucher students must give state standardized tests to their entire student body. Louisiana needs to adopt a similar policy for its voucher program to empower parents and allow policymakers to fully evaluate its effectiveness.

Finally, there are serious concerns about whether the state Department of Education has enough resources to oversee a major expansion of the voucher program. Four years of budget cuts have resulted in more than 200 lost jobs and increased turnover, which means fewer people to provide oversight.

Conclusion and recommendations

A dramatic expansion of private school vouchers like what the governor is proposing demands an equally strong commitment to accountability and transparency. While a private education may be the best choice for some low-income parents whose children attend failing schools, a truly informed decision is only possible when all the facts are on the table. Private schools accepting public funds must face the same level of oversight and controls applied to public schools. Specifically:

- Parents need tools to evaluate private schools. Any school that accepts vouchers should be placed on the same A-F grading scale used for public schools, and schools that fail to make the grade should be dropped from the program.
- Louisiana should follow Indiana’s lead and require schools that accept vouchers to test all their students – not just the voucher kids.
- Children in the worst-performing public schools – those graded an “F” – should have first priority for vouchers. Only after those students have been served should vouchers be provided to children in schools graded “D” or “C.”
- The state Department of Education needs to have adequate staff to provide sufficient oversight of the voucher program.
- At a minimum, the state should consider a sliding scale of transparency and accountability; the more voucher students a school enrolls, the greater its obligations, an approach recommended by the Thomas Fordham Institute.²

About the Louisiana Budget Project

The Louisiana Budget Project (LBP) provides independent, nonpartisan research and analysis of Louisiana fiscal issues and their impact on Louisiana families and businesses. We seek to bring wider prosperity to Louisiana through a deeper understanding of the state budget, broadening fiscal policy debates, and increasing public participation in decision-making. As part of the State Fiscal Analysis Initiative’s 42 state budget projects that are coordinated by the national Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, we uphold a commitment to issuing work that is credible, timely, and accessible.

End Notes

¹ Jacobs, Leslie. “Voucher Program in Trouble.” *Educate Now!* July, 2011.
<http://educatenow.net/2011/07/06/voucher-program-in-trouble/?ref=titl>

² Finn, Chester E., Hentges, Christina, Petrilli, Michael J., and Winkler, Amber M. “When Private Schools Take Public Dollars: What’s the Place of Accountability in School Voucher Programs?” *Thomas B. Fordham Institute*. Mar., 2009.
http://www.edexcellencemedia.net/publications/2009/200904_whenprivateschoolstakepublicdollars/School%20Vouchers%20Report.pdf