

Florida kids can vouch for vouchers

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Students like Adrian Bushell have always posed an awkward political problem for opponents of school tuition vouchers.

Like most students receiving vouchers in Florida, he is black and lives in a poor neighborhood with bad public schools. How can you claim the moral high ground when you're denying him a chance to escape to a better private school?

The traditional answer has been that that his classmates would be left behind in a public school made worse by the loss of resources and students. But this argument is looking more dubious than ever, and you won't be hearing much of it when lawyers ask the Florida Supreme Court to end Florida's voucher program.

This case is high noon for both sides of the school-choice issue, because Florida is the only state that offers a voucher to any student in a failing school. It has given researchers a chance to study what happens to schools faced with the threat of vouchers, like Edison, the public high school that Adrian was supposed to attend in Miami.

Adrian lives with his grandmother Ramona Nickson, who wanted no part of Edison. She had been appalled at the high school when Adrian's father went there.

Because the school had been getting F's from the state, Adrian was entitled to transfer to another public school or get a \$4,400 voucher good at any private school willing to accept it as full tuition – which typically means a Catholic or other religious school. Adrian, an Episcopalian, used it at the Monsignor Edward Pace Catholic High School.

"It's a whole different environment from the public schools," Adrian said. "I was barely making a 2.0 in public school, but now it's 3.0. It's been great." His grandmother was just as pleased.

"There's been a complete turnaround in his grades, his focus, his discipline," she said. "This new school is the best thing that could have happened to him."

But has his success come at the expense of the public school he left behind? Well, the public system did lose \$4,400, but that's actually \$1,000 less than the cost of educating the average student.

As enrollment has dropped at Edison, the student-to-teacher ratio has improved to about 22 from about 30. In the past two years, a new principal has revamped the administration and replaced half the teachers.

Under the new leadership, the average test score last year rose sharply – one of the largest increases of any high school in Florida.

Test scores have gone up more rapidly at schools facing the threat of vouchers than at other schools. The latest study, by Martin West and Paul Peterson of Harvard, shows that Florida's program is much more effective than the federal No Child Left Behind program.

The federal program merely guarantees students at bad schools a chance to transfer to other public schools. That doesn't spur improvement in test scores, the study found, probably because it's not much of a threat. After all, students often can't find a good public school nearby, and even if they transfer, they still remain in the public system.

Vouchers threaten to shrink the system – and the membership rolls of teachers unions, which have been fighting the Florida program. They're arguing that the program violates the state's version of the Blaine amendment, a prohibition on aid to religious schools that was added to many state constitutions in the 19th century because of the "Catholic menace."

Florida adopted it at an 1885 constitutional convention that also banned interracial marriage and required segregated schools.

Whether its wording applies to the Florida voucher program is arguable. But when lawyers are using a law with this history to go after Adrian's voucher, they're nowhere near the high ground.

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