

NC Private Schools Receiving Vouchers: A Study of the Curriculum

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NC Private Schools Receiving Vouchers: A Study of the Curriculum

“The right to education provided in the state constitution is a right to a sound basic education. An education that does not serve the purpose of preparing students to participate and compete in the society in which they live and work is devoid of substance and is constitutionally inadequate.” *Leandro v. State*, 346 N.C. 336 (1997).

Overview

The NC “Opportunity Scholarship Program” was established in 2013 to provide government-funded vouchers for students to attend private schools. The League of Women Voters of the Lower Cape Fear (LWV-LCF) began a study of this program in January 2017. However, the Children’s Law Clinic at the Duke School of Law released a comprehensive report on vouchers in North Carolina in March 2017², so we changed our focus to curriculum, which was not addressed in the Duke study. However, the Duke study did state: “In fact, there is no requirement that the participating private schools meet any threshold of academic quality. Thus, to the extent that the program was established to provide options for better academic outcomes for children, nothing in the program’s design assures or even promotes that outcome.”³ A summary of the Duke study is in Addendum A.

The Funding

Automatic increases have been built into voucher funding. If there are no other additions to the funding, the amount spent for the school years 2014-15 through 2028-29 will be \$1.1 B. The voucher funding for the first year was \$10.44 M. The funding for the 15th year will be \$143.34 M. When the cost of administering the program is included, the total cost for the program by the end of the 15th year will be \$1.3 B. See Addendum B.

Our Finding

We found that 76.7% of voucher funding is going to schools with a literal biblical worldview that affects all areas of the curriculum. This amounts to an estimated

² https://law.duke.edu/childedlaw/docs/School_Vouchers_NC.pdf

³ *ibid.* pp. 15-16.

\$997.1 M⁴ over 15 years. Expert educators have concluded that this biblical worldview curriculum does not prepare these students for 21st century colleges or careers. The University of California, for example, does not accept these schools' curriculum in Science, History, Government or Literature as fulfilling the requirements for entrance to that University.

The largest accrediting agency for Christian Schools is the Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI), which accredits many of the schools we reviewed. ACSI sued the University of California for not accepting their courses and the University won that case. From the Order granting defendants' motion for summary judgment, we discovered that UC rejected 175 courses, including Abeka and Bob Jones U. curriculum textbooks, proposed by ACSI schools during the relevant time period cited in the court case.

In addition to critical reviews of the Abeka and Bob Jones U. textbooks by professors in the University of California court case and their finding that students from schools using this curriculum were not eligible to be admitted to this major University, Dr. William Snider, Founding Director of the UNC Neuroscience Center and Dr. Lawrence Kessler, former Chair of Asian Studies at UNC-Chapel Hill, reviewed the Biology and World History textbooks, respectively. They, too, found those textbooks did not have the academic rigor required for college level course work. Our LWV-LCF Education Action Team also reviewed Abeka textbooks to analyze these concerns and wrote reports on the Abeka textbooks, which were considered in making an assessment of academic rigor and our recommendations.⁵

In conclusion, based on these critical reviews of the curriculum, we found that taxpayer money is being used to support schools that do not provide the fundamental purpose of our educational system which is to prepare students for 21st century colleges and careers.

Our Recommendation

We urge the Governor or the University of North Carolina, which administers the Opportunity Scholarship Program, to appoint a commission to review the curriculum used in these literal biblical worldview schools and determine if this curriculum satisfies academic rigor requirements by North Carolina colleges and universities, as well as other major universities outside North Carolina. This commission should also consider if there are clear goals and expectations for what students are learning and should learn in order to prepare for careers in the 21st century. Finally, the commission should make recommendations for curriculum requirements for schools receiving tax-payer funding through Opportunity Scholarships. Schools receiving public monies should use a curriculum approved by the state, such as the NCCOS.

⁴ Since total appropriations includes administrative costs, this total includes a percentage of those costs as well.

⁵ Purchase of textbooks was funded by the LWV-NC Citizen Education Foundation.

Study of the Curriculum

Process and Statistics

We reviewed the data for school years 2014-15 through 2017-18. See Addendum B. We reviewed the websites of 75% of the schools receiving the most vouchers for those years in order to determine the curriculum. (See table below.) Schools using a biblical world view curriculum stated that in their mission statement or philosophy of education. When these schools named the specific curriculum, it was usually A Beka (or Abeka) or a combination of Abeka and Bob Jones University. A few use Alpha-Omega, Seven Star, Adventist Education or Ignitia, which are also biblical world view curricula.

Catholic, Islamic, a few Christian schools, and the non-religious schools use the NC Course of Study (NCCOS) also used by public schools, although a few use other curricula such as Core Knowledge, Thales, or Emerson Waldorf.

Breakdown by type of curriculum used in the schools we reviewed (see Addendum C for more data, by year):

| Curriculum Description | 2014-15 # vouchers | 2015-16 # vouchers | 2016-17 # vouchers | 2017-18 # vouchers | 4-yr. Total | % of study total |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-------------|------------------------|
| Christian literal biblical worldview | 657 | 2,144 | 3,267 | 3,884 | 9,952 | 76.9% |
| Christian, curriculum unknown | 6 | 12 | 41 | 62 | 121 | 0.9% |
| Other Religions (NCCOS or Other) | 179 | 510 | 776 | 978 | 2,443 | 18.7% |
| Non-religious (NCCOS) | 23 | 33 | 79 | 136 | 271 | 2.0% |
| Non-religious, curriculum unknown | 22 | 30 | 51 | 77 | 180 | 1.3% |
| Total in Study | 887 | 2,729 | 4,214 | 5,137 | 12,967 | 100.0% |
| Total vouchers for the school year | 1,216 | 3,682 | 5,624 | 6,775 | 17,297 | |

Focus of our Study

Since most of the voucher funding is going to Christian schools using a biblical world view curriculum distinct from the NC Course of Study (NCCOS), we focused our attention on the Abeka curriculum, which is used by most of these schools. Some of these schools use a combination of Abeka and Bob Jones University publications. We purchased the Abeka

textbooks, in order to review them, with a grant from the Citizen Education Foundation of the League of Women Voters of North Carolina.

North Carolina Course of Study and Textbooks

Before reporting on the Abeka textbooks, it is important to take a look at the NC Course of Study, which is used in all public schools, and in some schools receiving vouchers, in order to provide a basis for comparison with schools using the Abeka curriculum.

STANDARDS AND OBJECTIVES

“In each area, the NC Standard Course of Study must consist of up-to-date, relevant standards and objectives, by grade level and course. These standards and objectives must be developed in consultation with teachers, administrators, parents, students, institutions of higher education, and business/industry. **The standards must incorporate knowledge and skills necessary to enter the workforce and to continue post-secondary education** (our emphasis). At least once every five years, each curriculum area in the Division of Curriculum and Instruction shall convene a review committee to determine if revisions are needed in a Standard Course of Study area. By using data, research, and surveys, the committee recommends whether revision should take place.”⁶

There are four major sections for each grade level:

Common Core: Adopted in 2010, these are K-12 standards for Mathematics, English Language Arts, Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical subjects. These standards were developed by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers.

Essential Standards by Grade level: Written by teams of North Carolina Educators. To view an example of these standards for a high school course, this is the link for the [Social Studies - World History Course](#).⁷ For an example of Social Studies essential standards for elementary school, to go the link for [grades 3-5](#).⁸

Essential Standards by Proficiency Level & Course: English Language development, guidance, and World languages are organized by proficiency. Career and Technical Education for 6th through 8th grades is organized by course.

Extended Content Standards: Alternative achievement standards for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. These standards were developed for English Language Arts, Mathematics, Science and Social Studies.

ACADEMIC RIGOR

⁶ NC State Board of Education Website: [Standard Course of Study Curriculum Development Process](#)

⁷ <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/curriculum/socialstudies/scos/world.pdf>

⁸ <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/curriculum/socialstudies/scos/3-5.pdf>

Each discipline has its own webpage and describes its standards design and the College and Career Ready Anchor Standards. For example, the Social Studies webpage described “Building Rigor in K-12 Social Studies” and states “All students will graduate from a rigorous, relevant academic program that equips them with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to succeed in both post-secondary education and 21st Century careers and to be participating, engaging citizens. Academic rigor is based on expectations established for students and staff that ensure that students demonstrate a thorough, in-depth mastery of challenging and complex curricular concepts. In every subject, at every grade level, instruction and learning must include commitment to a knowledge core and the application of that knowledge core to solve complex real-world problems.” The website provides many links to resources for both teachers and parents.

An example of academic rigor expectations for all academic materials can be found in the skills taught at the 9th grade level in public schools. These skills are a guide to evaluating information in textbooks, newspapers, or any publication or lecture. These skills can be used to evaluate both the textbooks used in public schools as well as the Abeka Curriculum. These include: Identifying the Main Idea, Determining Cause and Effect, Making Generalizations, Distinguishing Fact from Opinion, Formulating Questions, Analyzing Information, Making Inferences, Detecting Bias, Synthesizing Information, Drawing Conclusions, Predicting, Problems and Solutions, Reading a Map, Interpreting Graphs, Sequencing Events, and Analyzing Primary Sources.

TEXTBOOK AUTHORS AND CONTRIBUTORS

Our team reviewed the public school textbooks for World History, US History, English, and U.S. Government Courses. Dr. William Snider reviewed the Biology textbook used in public schools. The textbooks all had the following:

- Author or authors with Ph.D credentials from major universities. Vitae or other academic descriptions are available that describe their academic publications, awards and other pertinent information.
- A large list of Academic Consultants with Ph.D. credentials from major universities and with experience in the disciplines contained in the textbook. These professors also have vitae or other academic descriptions available that describe their publications and other credentials.
- A large list of teacher reviewers from multiple states who had input from the classroom educator perspective.
- The NC Advisory Board including department chairs and teachers, curriculum facilitators and coaches, and principals.

The Abeka Curriculum

PUBLISHER, ACCREDITING and TEACHER CERTIFICATION AGENCY

Pensacola Christian College (PCC) is the publisher for the Abeka textbooks. PCC also has an accrediting and teacher certification agency for Christian biblical worldview schools. In order for a school to be accredited by this agency, the Association of Christian Schools, the school must pledge to abide by the Education Philosophy of PCC. Likewise, in order for a teacher to receive certification, they must also show evidence of their biblical knowledge and prepare two lesson plans demonstrating that knowledge. Many of the authors of the textbooks are current and former faculty at PCC. Many PCC graduates are now teaching at these North Carolina Schools using the Abeka Curriculum.

PCC ARTICLES OF FAITH⁹ (excerpts)

(Note: These articles of faith are also stated on the websites of the schools that are the primary focus of our study)

- We believe that the Bible is the verbally inspired and infallible, authoritative Word of God and that God gave the words of Scripture by inspiration without error in the original autographs.
- We believe that God created the heavens and the earth in six literal days, and that God created all life. We reject the man-made theory of evolution occurring over millions of years and believe that the earth is approximately 6,000 years old.
- We believe that God created man and woman in His image and instituted marriage between one biological man and one biological woman...and that the Scripture forbids any form of sexual immorality, including adultery, fornication, homosexuality...
- We believe...eternal hell was created for Satan, his demons, and people who do not believe in the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation.

STANDARDS AND OBJECTIVES

We could not find a listing of any standards or objectives at the Abeka Publishing website or in the textbooks and teacher guides or on the school websites. We did find an explanation of “Subject Distinctives” on the Abeka website.

History. “A realistic view of time, government, geography, and economics based on eternal truths.” “Ever since H. G. Wells published his *Outline of History* in 1920, the theme of world history texts has been man’s supposed progress from savagery toward socialism, from tribal religions toward one-world government. American history is usually presented as a series of conflicts—rich vs. poor, black vs. white, North vs. South, labor vs. management,

⁹<http://www.pcci.edu/spirituallife/articlesoffaith.aspx>

male vs. female, etc. Abeka history texts reject the Marxist/Hegelian conflict theory of history in favor of a truthful portrayal of peoples, lands, religions, ideals, heroes, triumphs, and setbacks. The result is positive, uplifting history texts that give students a historical perspective and instill within them an intelligent pride for their own country and a desire to help it back to its traditional values. “

Government. “We present government as ordained by God for the maintenance of law and order, not as a cure-all for humanity’s problems.”

Economics. “We present free-enterprise economics without apology and point out the dangers of Communism, socialism, and liberalism to the well-being of people across the globe.”

Science/Health. “The investigation of variety, order and reasonableness revealed in creation. While secular science textbooks present modern science as the opposite of faith, the Abeka science texts teach that modern science is the product of Western man’s return to the Scriptures after the Protestant Reformation, leading to his desire to understand and subdue the earth, which he saw as the orderly, law-abiding creation of the God of the Bible.”

“The Abeka science and health program presents the universe as the direct creation of God and refutes the man-made idea of evolution. Further, the books present God as the Great Designer and Lawgiver, without Whom the evident design and laws of nature would be inexplicable. They give a solid foundation in all areas of science—a foundation firmly anchored to Scriptural truth.”

ACADEMIC RIGOR

ACADEMIC REVIEW: ABEKA BIOLOGY TEXTBOOK

Dr. William D. Snider, MD¹⁰ reviewed the Abeka Biology Textbook and noted that Judge Robert Hobgood, on the constitutionality of state funded private school vouchers, stated “it is unconstitutional to use state funds to support schools in which the curricula are not subject to any requirements or standards.”¹¹ Dr. Snider noted that “future training and jobs in biological sciences and health professions will require the latest knowledge about cell biology and DNA.” “Recent advances in sequencing of the human genome, regulation of gene expression, and RNA interference are carefully presented in the Miller and Levine book (used by NCCOS), but not even mentioned in the A Beka book. The situation is similar for the workhorse modern techniques of biology like fluorescence microscopy, DNA sequencing, and bioinformatics, none of which are covered in the A Beka text.” Dr. Snider goes on to say that “probably the biggest problem with the A Beka book is that religious teachings are

¹⁰ Dr. Snider is a Professor in the Department of Neurology at UNC School of Medicine and Founding Director of the UNC Neuroscience Center. He served as Director from 1999-2016.

¹¹ “Will Voucher students learn biology?”, www.ncpolicywatch.com, 9/17/2014.

interspersed in the text throughout...virtually all scientists and professional educators would agree that religious teachings do not have a place in science textbooks.”

Dr. Snider addresses the treatment of evolution. “The A Beka chapter on evolution, rather than explaining evolution, is an attack on the theory as a ‘retreat from science.’” There are five problems that Dr. Snider points out. “The first problem is not clearly stating the theory of evolution, thus setting up a ‘straw man’”.

“A second problem is mixing in religious commentary that has no place in a biology text. Statements that ‘many varieties of canines have developed from a single pair of canines that left the ark’, ‘All the diversity we see in the human race today comes from an original couple’, and that ‘Man is created in the image of God’ are not arguments that can be used against evolutionary theory, nor do they teach students biology.”

“A third problem is misinformation on multiple points.” “Stating the earth is ‘relatively young’ when scientists approximate the age of the earth as 4.5 billion years is misinformation that is harmful to students. The statement that radiometric dating is an unreliable method is simply incorrect.”

“A fourth problem is misrepresentation of the fossil record. Although a complicated issue, virtually all biologists and paleontologists agree that there is a progression from simple to complex organisms through the various eras of the earth’s history.”

“A final issue is not pointing out the ways that evolutionary theory is central to modern biology.” “Students using the A Beka book are deprived of the opportunity to learn what biology students (and potential competitors for future jobs) all over the world are learning and thus placed at a major disadvantage.”

Dr. Snider concludes: “In sum the A Beka text as a central component of a high school biology curriculum would be suspect if it were evaluated by a state board of education. It would fail because of confusing science and religion, for misstating the theory of evolution, and because it compares unfavorably with other texts in not fully presenting modern advances in cell biology and genetics. It is difficult to envision the justification for using state funds to support curricula that do not prepare students for the modern workplace.”

ACADEMIC REVIEW: ASIA UNIT, ABEKA WORLD HISTORY TEXTBOOK

At the request of the LWV-LCF Education Action Team, Dr. Lawrence Kessler, former chair of the Department of Asian Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, reviewed the unit on Asia.¹² Dr. Kessler listed factual errors on every page of that unit. Some examples of errors, omissions, and ideology and opinion given as fact include:

- “China was not populated as a result of the ‘Tower of Babel dispersion’;

¹² Dr. Kessler is Professor Emeritus in the History Department at UNC-CH, teaching courses on modern China, author of numerous books and articles on China, Director of NC China Council, President of Southern Conference of Asian Studies, Editor of the Southeastern Review of Asian Studies, and Chair of Council on International programs for UNC system. Full disclosure: husband of author of this report.

- Creation of Chinese characters had nothing to do with ‘Christian beliefs’;
- Chinese intellectual traditions of Confucianism and Taoism are philosophies, not ‘false religions’;
- The Tang dynasty of the 7th to 10th centuries, which was the greatest empire on earth at the time, is barely mentioned;
- The Boxers were not a ‘terrorist group’ but a reaction to Western imperialism and China’s inability to prevent it;
- Does not describe the moderation of Chinese social and economic policies since 1989, and per capita income is not ‘fixed’, but is growing;
- Amount of content devoted to Christianity in Japan overshadows more important developments in 19th c. Japan, such as modernization;
- The ‘pressing need of Japan is evangelization’ is pure nonsense;
- By calling the Geneva Accords ‘so-called’ denies their legitimacy;
- South Vietnam under Diem, whom the U. S. supported, was not ‘democratic’;
- Blames US defeat in Vietnam on ‘poor leadership, partisan media, and lack of patriotism’ rather than Vietnamese nationalism, corruption of the Diem regime, and superior Vietcong military strategy;
- The Summary section is a mix of narrow religious views, ideology and opinion, rather than the results of evidence-based scholarly research and expertise.”

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA COURT CASE PROFESSIONAL REVIEWS

The order for Summary Judgment in the University of California case contains professional reviews of the textbooks (both Abeka and Bob Jones U.) used by Christian Biblical world-view schools, including those in North Carolina.¹³ Here are some excerpts:

Biology: Professor Sawrey, UC-Berkeley, reviewed the Abeka textbook *Biology: God’s Living Creation* and “found the text problematic because it characterized religious doctrine as scientific evidence, included scientific inaccuracies, failed to encourage critical thinking, and took an overall un-scientific approach to the subject matter.” Professor Sawrey stated “...judgment was based not on the fact that the textbooks contained religious references and viewpoints, but that the texts would not adequately teach students the scientific principles, methods and knowledge necessary for them to successfully study those subjects at the University of California.” Professor Ayala, UC-Irvine, and Professor Kennedy, Stanford U. and editor in chief of *Science* magazine, concluded that neither the Abeka nor the Bob Jones University Biology texts are appropriate for use as the principal text in a college preparatory biology course. Professor Kennedy determined “by teaching students to reject scientific evidence and methodology whenever they might be inconsistent with the Bible...both texts fail to encourage critical thinking and the skills required for careful scientific analysis.”

¹³ <https://web.archive.org/web/20080821201728/http://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/news/acsi-stearns/ruling0808.pdf>

Professor Ayala found that the texts “reject the methodology generally accepted in science, which relies on observation and experimentation and on the formulation of laws and theories that need to be tested rather than accepted on the basis of the Bible or any other authority.”

Government: Professor Petracca, Chair, Dept. of Political Science at UC-Irvine.

“...The content of the course outline is not consistent with the empirical historical knowledge generally accepted in the collegiate community.” “...many factual and empirical assertions that are not generally accepted among political scientists or historians and that are nevertheless not substantiated within the text by evidence.”

History: Professor James Givern, UC course reviewer, on Bob Jones U. *United States History for Christian Schools*: “...instructs that the Bible is the unerring source of analysis of historical events, attributes historical events to divine providence rather than analyzing human action, evaluates historical figures and their contributions based on their religious motivations or lack thereof and contains inadequate treatment of several major ethnic groups, women, and non-Christian religious groups.” Professor Gary Nash, UCLA, found the text failed to encourage “historical thinking skills and analytical thinking” and failed to cover “Major topics, themes, and components of United States History.” “From reading the reviewed text, students will have little opportunity to exercise independent judgment, to sharpen their critical thinking skills or to consider multiple perspectives of those who made our history.” These students “will have difficulty understanding history as a discipline as it has been practiced since Herodotus and Thucydides—a never-ending quest to reconstruct the past based on new evidence and informed by new questions posed about the functioning of past societies.”

Literature: Jeanne Hargrove, UC course reviewer, on Abeka textbook *Classics for Christians*: “selection of works and pedagogical apparatus were inconsistent with... expectations regarding critical thinking and broad exposure to writers’ key works.” Professor Samuel Otter (UC-Berkeley) found the text inadequate for a college-preparatory English class because it “fails to provide substantial readings and because it insists on specific interpretations.” “Such a combination contradicts the emphasis on analytical and critical thinking required.”

ABEKA TEXTBOOK AUTHORS AND CONTRIBUTORS

Like Dr. Snider, who reviewed the Abeka Biology textbook, we could not find information on many of these authors or contributors/consultants.¹⁴ Some of these authors, contributors and consultants are on the faculty of PCC, but we could not find academic vitae.

¹⁴ Researched the following Abeka textbooks authors and consultants: *Science of the Physical Creation*, *Science: Earth and Space*, *United States History in Christian Perspective*, *World History and Cultures in Christian Perspective*, *United States History in Christian Perspective*, *American Government in Christian Perspective*, *World Geography in Christian Perspective*, *Economics: Work and Prosperity in Christian Perspective*, *Health in Christian Perspective*, and *World Literature*.

We could not find evidence of reviews by teachers, principals or other professional educators, other than the critical reviews by the professors who commented in the University of California court case and by Dr. William Snider and Professor Lawrence Kessler.

Christian Schools with a Mixed Curriculum

We recognize that some schools may supplement their Biblical World View Curriculum with secular textbooks in order to give their students a wider exposure to other principles of education. Such schools may well provide a curriculum acceptable to major colleges and universities.

Our study simply tries to alert North Carolina educators and legislators to take a closer look at the curriculum in schools receiving vouchers, especially since a large percentage of these vouchers are going to schools whose curriculum may not be meeting educational standards and goals.

Conclusion

Our review of the curriculum used by a significant percentage of schools receiving Opportunity Scholarship Grants leads us to concur with the assessment of the professional educators quoted in this study: that the Science, History, Government and Literature textbooks in the Abeka curriculum do not prepare our students for college level courses or for 21st century careers in many fields. To the extent that these schools depend on public monies for their funding, they are siphoning off greatly needed resources from our chronically underfunded public schools.

Let us be clear: we recognize that school choice is a valued component of our state education system, but we also insist that all schools (public and private) receiving public funds must meet objective and measurable educational standards. We must not limit our students' choices for higher education by not offering them a curriculum that is accepted at all colleges and universities in the United States or that does not prepare them for careers requiring knowledge of 21st century science and skills.

We conclude where we began: "An education...devoid of substance...is constitutionally inadequate." We owe it to our children, ourselves, and the future of our state to address this grave curriculum infirmity immediately, intelligently, compassionately and effectively. We call on our General Assembly to "guard and maintain", by whatever means necessary, the right of the people to "the privilege of education" that is enshrined in the North Carolina State Constitution. Clearly, the Opportunity Scholarship Grants program as it currently exists fails to do so.¹⁵

¹⁵ Quotes are from the NC State Constitution, Section 15.

ADDENDUM A: School Vouchers in NC

A Report by the Children’s Law Clinic, Duke School of Law (excerpts)

Executive Summary

- ❖ “Based on limited and early data, more than half the students using vouchers are performing below the 50th percentile on nationally-standardized reading, language, and math tests. In contrast, similar public school students in NC are scoring above the national average.”
- ❖ “Accountability measures for North Carolina private schools receiving vouchers are among the weakest in the country. The schools need not be accredited, adhere to state curricular or graduation standards, employ licensed teachers, or administer state End-of-Grade tests.”
- ❖ “Because private schools receiving vouchers are not required to administer the state tests nor to publish detailed achievement data, researchers will be unable to develop thorough and valid conclusions about the success of the program at improving educational outcomes for participating students.”
- ❖ “The North Carolina voucher program is well designed to promote parental choice, especially for parents who prefer religious education for their children. It is poorly designed, however, to promote better academic outcomes for children and is unlikely to do so.”

Academic Performance of Voucher Students

“The law requires all schools with students enrolled in the program to administer, at least once a year, a nationally-standardized test to voucher students in all grades, beginning with third grade... The test must measure achievement in English grammar, reading, spelling, and math. The law does not spell out how the data is to be provided, whether by individual scores or only as aggregate data. The SEAA¹⁶ does not collect demographic data on the test takers specifically, so it does not have the ability to see the test results by grade level, race, ethnicity, or sex.”

“The law states that most of the data is not a public record. However, a small subset of the data—the aggregate test performance of voucher students enrolled at schools where more than 25 students receive vouchers—is a public record.”

“For the 2015-16 school year, 34 schools reported aggregate data, reporting results for 805 test takers. This represents ten percent of the participating schools and 22% of the students with vouchers. Overall, in the aggregate, a majority scored below the 50th percentile on the tests.”

¹⁶ The State Education Assistance Authority, which is under the authority of General Administration of the University of North Carolina, administers the Opportunity Scholarship Program.

“Because the law allows the private schools to select their own tests, requires only a very small percentage of the test scores to be made public, and allows the public data to be reported only in aggregate form, no accurate comparisons can be made.” “Due to the nature of the data that will be produced by the private schools—which will never be comparable to public school data—it is unlikely that any truly valid comparison will be possible.”

Accountability

“In comparison to most other states, North Carolina’s general system of oversight of private schools is weak.” “Under North Carolina law, private schools are permitted to make their own decisions regarding curriculum, graduation requirements, teacher qualifications, number of hours/ days of operation, and for the most part, testing. No accreditation is required of private schools.”

“Most states require schools accepting vouchers to be accredited in some fashion, use the state-approved curriculum or an equivalent, employ only licensed or certified teachers, participate in the state testing program, and operate for as many hours and days of school as public schools are operated. Most other jurisdictions also require that the schools accepting vouchers make their testing data public, and several have a mechanism that denies future vouchers for schools that cannot demonstrate acceptable educational results over a period of time.”

Analysis

Is the program serving its purposes?

“The law creating the Opportunity Scholarship Grant Program does not set out its purpose. Generally, however, voucher supporters identify ‘parental choice’ as one of the most significant values in support of voucher programs.”

“Because the size of the voucher is low compared to the tuition at many of the high-end college preparatory private schools, those schools are not typically accessible to low-income families even with voucher help. Religious schools and small schools tend to have lower tuitions that are more within reach of a family with a \$4,200 voucher.”

“The program in North Carolina is not limited to families whose children were or would be enrolled as low-performing public schools, nor does the program have any program features that channel students into schools with better academic outcomes than the public schools in which the students would otherwise be enrolled. In fact, there is no requirement that the participating private schools meet any threshold of academic quality. Thus, to the extent that the program was established to provide options for better outcomes for children, nothing in the program’s design assures or even promotes that outcome.”

Is there enough accountability to the public?

“Because voucher programs, like the one in North Carolina, are supported through tax revenues, the public has a stake in knowing whether the money spent represents a sound investment. In addition, because attendance at a private school meets the state’s compulsory education requirement, the state has a stake in being assured that the education offered meets basic standards.” “Overall, the program lacks the type of accountability that would allow the public to make an informed judgment about the investment being made. Following are the limitations of the few additional accountability measures built into the program:

- ❖ “Annual testing, rather than triennial testing.” “Only publicly-available test data is from schools that enroll more than 25 voucher students. For 2015-16, the data covered just 10% of the schools.” “There is no mechanism to withhold vouchers from schools that produce poor test results.”
- ❖ “Independent research. The law requires that by 2018, the SEAA must contract with an independent research organization to analyze the ‘learning gains or losses of students receiving scholarship grants...on a statewide basis and...compare, to the extent possible...to public school students with similar socioeconomic backgrounds...’ It must also analyze the competitive effect on the public schools.” “Despite this provision, it is unlikely that the research will provide any valid comparisons or truly informative results.”
- ❖ “Financial review. Financial reviews are required only for schools receiving more than \$300,000 in vouchers. In 2014-15, no school met that threshold; in 2015-16 and 2016-17 only three schools met the threshold...Neither the law nor the program rules make clear what findings would trigger a withholding of funds, nor what would resolve the findings... the law does nothing to protect students from the impact of a school’s financial mismanagement, nor does it protect the nearby public schools from the difficulties of having to immediately absorb those children.”
- ❖ “Criminal background checks. Private schools enrolling voucher students must submit a criminal background check of the head of the school...The law does not, however, give the SEAA the power to withhold voucher payments to a school that has a head-of-school with a criminal background.” “Virtually all school districts in North Carolina conduct criminal background checks on all employees prior to hiring, although the overall system for conducting criminal background checks was considered to be very poor according to one study.”
- ❖ “Discrimination. Schools accepting vouchers are forbidden from discriminating on the basis of race, color, or national origin. They may, however, discriminate on the basis of religion, disability, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, or any other characteristic.”

Conclusion

“The North Carolina program is not designed to accomplish one of the main goals that its proponents express: to provide an escape mechanism for students in failing public schools so they can thrive in a more successful educational environment. The North Carolina program allows for participation in the program by children who are not in failing schools and by private schools that *do not* offer a more academically promising education...Even if the state became aware of significant deficiencies in the participating schools, the law provides no mechanism for those schools to be denied continued receipt of voucher support.”

“The design of North Carolina’s program—as well as the way it has been used to date — is more suited to goals that do not relate to academic outcomes for children.” “The program has no checks to protect children from the choices of their parents, which could include the choice to send a child to a fringe school that does virtually nothing to prepare a child for active participation in our democratic society after graduation, or may even undermine such participation. While surely most parents will not choose such an outcome, that such an outcome is supported by taxpayer resources is profoundly problematic.”

“The research of programs in other states is now nearly unanimous in showing that students in voucher programs do not have better educational outcomes than children in public schools.”

“Nevertheless, should the state continue to offer school vouchers, it should seriously consider amendments to the program.” “The most important amendments include the following:

- Require all participating schools to offer a curriculum that is at least equivalent to the curriculum used in the North Carolina public schools, providing instruction in English language arts, mathematics, social studies, science, physical education, arts education, foreign languages, and technology skills; alternatively design an accreditation system that holds schools to strong academic standards.
- Require all participating schools to set reasonable qualifications for teachers.
- Require that students receiving vouchers participate in the state End-of-Grade testing program, and that the schools receiving voucher support publicly report data in the same manner as is required of public schools.
- Require all participating schools to offer at least the same number of hours and days of education as are offered by the public schools.
- Prohibit all forms of discrimination in schools accepting voucher support.
- Require limited financial reviews of all schools, with more extensive reviews for schools receiving more than \$50,000 in voucher support.
- Strengthen the oversight role of the SEAA and/or the Division of Non-Public Education such that schools that consistently fail to provide an adequate education are denied continued voucher payments.

ADDENDUM B: Appropriations

- Data compiled by NC Tax Policy Center of the NC Justice Center from NC Certified Budgets at <https://www.osbm.nc.gov/library>, under General Administration line item 16015. Certified budget records are in our files.
- Appropriations includes NCSEAA (NC State Education Assistance Authority) administrative costs.
- 2014-15 & 2015-16 appropriations are for that school year.
- Beginning in 2016-17 appropriations are forward-funded. Therefore, 2016-17 includes appropriations for school years 2016-17 and 2017-18, since that is a transitional year. 2017-18 appropriations is funding for school year 2018-19, etc.
- Per G.S. 115C-562.8, Opportunity Scholarship appropriations will increase by \$10M per year until 2027-28, when total appropriations reach \$144.8 M.

| Fiscal Year | Appropriations |
|--------------|------------------------|
| 2014-15 | \$10,840,000 |
| 2015-16 | \$17,640,000 |
| 2016-17 | \$59,680,000 |
| 2017-18 | \$44,840,000 |
| 2018-19 | \$54,840,000 |
| 2019-20 | \$64,840,000 |
| 2020-21 | \$74,840,000 |
| 2021-22 | \$84,840,000 |
| 2022-23 | \$94,840,000 |
| 2023-24 | \$104,840,000 |
| 2024-25 | \$114,840,000 |
| 2025-26 | \$124,840,000 |
| 2026-27 | \$134,840,000 |
| 2027-28 | \$144,840,000 |
| 2028-29 | \$144,840,000 |
| TOTAL | \$1,276,240,000 |

ADDENDUM C: Voucher Data¹⁷

| 2017-18 | | | | |
|-----------|-------|------------|-------|--|
| # Schools | % | # Vouchers | % | School Description |
| 94 | 72.9% | 3884 | 75.6% | Christian literal biblical worldview |
| 2 | 1.5% | 62 | 1.2% | Christian, curriculum unknown |
| 25 | 19.4% | 978 | 19.0% | Christian & other religions (NCCOS or Other) |
| 5 | 3.9% | 136 | 2.6% | Non-religious (NCCOS or Other) |
| 3 | 2.3% | 77 | 1.5% | Non-religious Curriculum unknown |
| 129 | 100% | 5137 | 100% | TOTALS |

| 2016-17 | | | | |
|-----------|-------|------------|-------|--|
| # Schools | % | # Vouchers | % | School Description |
| 90 | 76.9% | 3267 | 77.5% | Christian literal biblical worldview |
| 2 | 1.7% | 41 | 1.0% | Christian, curriculum unknown |
| 19 | 16.2% | 776 | 18.4% | Christian & other religions (NCCOS or Other) |
| 3 | 2.6% | 79 | 1.9% | Non-religious (NCCOS or Other) |
| 3 | 2.6% | 51 | 1.2% | Non Religious Curriculum unknown |
| 117 | 100% | 4214 | 100% | TOTALS |

¹⁷Represents approximately 75% of the total vouchers awarded. Lists of schools receiving vouchers, by school year, are available at <http://www.ncseaa.edu/OSG.htm>

| 2015-16 | | | | |
|-----------|-------|------------|-------|--|
| # Schools | % | # Vouchers | % | School Description |
| 82 | 79.6% | 2144 | 78.6% | Christian literal biblical worldview |
| 1 | 1.0% | 12 | 0.4% | Christian, curriculum unknown |
| 16 | 15.5% | 510 | 18.7% | Christian & other religions (NCCOS or Other) |
| 2 | 1.9% | 33 | 1.1% | Non-religious (NCCOS or Other) |
| 2 | 1.9% | 30 | 1.1% | Non-religious Curriculum unknown |
| 103 | 100% | 2729 | 100% | TOTALS |

| 2014-15 | | | | |
|-----------|-------|------------|-------|--|
| # Schools | % | # Vouchers | % | School Description |
| 53 | 70.7% | 657 | 74.1% | Christian literal biblical worldview |
| 1 | 1.3% | 6 | 0.7% | Christian, curriculum unknown |
| 14 | 18.7% | 179 | 20.2% | Christian & other religions (NCCOS or Other) |
| 3 | 4.0% | 23 | 2.6% | Non-religious (NCCOS or Other) |
| 4 | 5.3% | 22 | 2.5% | Non-religious Curriculum unknown |
| 75 | 100% | 887 | 100% | TOTALS |