

Evaluation of the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Grant Program 1996-1999

Executive Summary

Submitted by:

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The pilot Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program was established in June 1995 to provide families within the boundaries of the Cleveland Municipal School District the opportunity to apply for either: (1) a tutoring grant to be used to obtain additional academic assistance for their child who continued to attend Cleveland public schools; or, (2) a scholarship (i.e., tuition voucher) that could be used to defray the cost of private school enrollment for their child. As part of the pilot, the legislation also required the Ohio Department of Education to contract with an independent research entity to conduct an evaluation of the Cleveland program, with a report due the legislature in September, 1999. In March, 1997, the Indiana Center for Evaluation was selected through a competitive bidding process to conduct a large portion of this evaluation, examining both the implementation of the program and its impact including:

- Student academic achievement, attendance, conduct/behavior, and commitment to education
- Parent involvement in child's education, satisfaction with schools, and educational choices
- Student and family characteristics
- Classroom and school characteristics
- Basic functioning of the program

What is known:

- (1) ***The scholarship program effectively serves the population of families and children for which it was intended and developed.*** The program was designed to serve low-income students while maintaining the racial composition of the Cleveland public schools. Participation data support the fulfillment of these dual objectives.
- (2) ***The majority of children who participate in the program are unlikely to have enrolled in a private school without a scholarship.*** Seventy-five percent of those applicants who did not receive a scholarship remained in public school. Those students who attended private school without the scholarship were from higher income families (the majority had incomes above \$30,000) than those students who remained in public schools.

- (3) ***Parents who apply for the scholarship program are likely to be better educated, and more interested, motivated, and involved than parents who do not apply.*** Even in the lowest income levels, parents who pursue a scholarship for their children are more likely to have completed a college degree and to engage in a greater number of school-related activities (e.g., parent-teacher conferences, interacting with the teacher, etc.). Further, there is some evidence to suggest that obtaining a scholarship may affect parent involvement. Parents who applied for a scholarship but did not receive one more closely resemble other public school parents than scholarship parents in the number and types of school activities in which they participate.
- (4) ***There are substantial differences between public and private schools and classrooms.*** Public schools tend to be larger in terms of student enrollment and number of full time teachers, but tend to include a smaller number of grades than private schools. Public school teachers are also likely to possess considerably more teaching experience than their colleagues in private school and more likely to have completed coursework beyond their undergraduate degree. On the other hand, private school classrooms serving scholarship students tend to be smaller than comparable public school classrooms.
- (5) ***Public school teachers are generally not knowledgeable about the scholarship program or its operation.*** In spite of wide publicity surrounding the program, a large number of public school teachers reported being unaware of or having little understanding of it.
- (6) ***Participation in the scholarship program appears to substantially improve parents' perceptions of, and satisfaction with, their children's schools.*** Reasons given by parents for applying to the scholarship program indicate that the two most important factors in their decision to pursue a scholarship were improving the quality of their children's education and enhancing the safety of their children while at school. When asked about their satisfaction with academics and social activities, and discipline in the school their children attend, scholarship recipients were much more satisfied than either applicant/non-recipient parents or public school parents who did not apply for a scholarship. Satisfaction of applicant/non-recipients was more comparable to other public school parents than to scholarship parents.

What remains to be learned:

- (1) ***It is not clear what impact the scholarship program will have on either the public or private schools.*** Both public and private school representatives are largely neutral or undecided about whether the scholarship program has affected them positively or negatively. For most public schools, this may be due to the comparatively small number of students who use a scholarship to attend a private school. This may also explain why many public school teachers had little knowledge of the program. While public school administrators expressed concern over the potentially negative effects of the program in reduced resources and diminished public support, they seldom reported experiencing them.
- (2) ***The effect of participation in the scholarship program on students' academic achievement is not yet clear.*** Available data indicate small but statistically significant effects on students' achievement in two of five cognitive domains (language and science) after two years in the program. What remains to be determined is whether the gap diminishes, remains, or widens with time.

- (3) ***The effect of participation in the scholarship program on students' attendance, conduct, and commitment remain uncertain.*** A critical problem in objectively examining these elements of the program is a lack of reliable and equivalent measures across the range of public and private schools. The evaluation to date has relied on ratings and reports by teachers and principals to attempt to examine this issue, and the findings are largely inconclusive. However, further collection of data on these factors for students who continue to attend their public or private schools should provide the basis for conclusions.
- (4) ***While there are substantial differences in some factors associated with the classrooms in which scholarship and public school students learn, little is known about the types of instructional interactions that occur in these classrooms.*** Public school teachers are more experienced and have somewhat more education than the private school teachers in the study, whereas private school classes are slightly smaller. While these factors may be associated with greater or lesser degrees of student learning, they do so only indirectly by influencing how teachers engage and interact with students during instruction. Many scholarship parents feel that the smaller class sizes provided by private schools improve the attention their child receives, and many public school advocates believe that greater teacher experience and education enable a teacher to be more confident and competent. However, research on the relation between these factors and student learning is not yet conclusive. To the extent that school choice is intended to enable parents to be effective consumers of education, it is important that we understand much more about how the public and private school classrooms work.
- (5) ***An important issue for examination is the impact of the ongoing court battles over the constitutionality of the scholarship program on the schools, teachers, families, and students.*** Many scholarship students' parents have expressed fear that they might be forced to move their children out of the private school to which they had only recently become adapted. It is unclear how the uncertainty of the program may effect parent satisfaction with the program and their continued participation. It is reasonable that this instability is conveyed to students in ways that impact their satisfaction, commitment, or achievement. In addition, the uncertainty of the program has made private schools reluctant to add new classes or hire new teachers to meet the increased demand created by scholarship students. As a result, families who have received scholarships have often been unable to find private school placements, especially at their school of choice, for the student. What remains to be learned is whether resolution of the constitutionality issue will enhance the stability and capacity of the scholarship program through increased private school enrollment of scholarship students.

In all, the Cleveland Scholarship program is an ambitious experiment that is providing otherwise unavailable information on educational options. Ohio has assumed a role as a national leader not only in developing an innovative educational program, but also in supporting rigorous and objective evaluation. To this end, the Ohio Department of Education has committed to a continuation of the evaluation through the 2000-2001 and 2001-2002 school years. The Indiana Center for Evaluation looks forward to providing further updates for stakeholders in this important program.