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**OPINION**

# Could More School Vouchers Counter NAEP Slump? 3 Reasons Why Not

Barone: Tutoring, personalized instruction, extra learning time, data & better leadership could help — if public schools provided them



U.S. President Donald Trump holds up an executive order after signing it during an indoor inauguration parade on Jan. 20. (Christopher Furlong/Getty Images)

**By Charles Barone**

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*The views expressed here are those of the author.*

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Two significant events occurred on the national education landscape last week: the highly anticipated and widely commented-upon release of 2024 results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and the issuance of executive orders on school choice by President Donald Trump.

The NAEP results are about as bad as they were expected to be. Across the nation, on average, reading scores in fourth and eighth grade were down and math scores were stagnant. Students who were the furthest behind showed the sharpest declines relative to their higher-achieving peers, while their more advantaged peers showed slight upticks.

It's hard to say whether Trump's executive orders on school choice were timed to coincide with the NAEP release or if the White House has so many edicts they're trying to get out the door that it was a coincidence. Either way, at least one advocate is trying to use the NAEP scores as a rationale for expanded private school choice. Whether you're a voucher proponent or a skeptic, you have to admit there are some flaws in this logic. Here are three key ones:

**Private school choice won't improve state NAEP scores.** There are no state-level NAEP results for private schools. NAEP does assess private schools, but that data is available only on a nationwide level. One could argue that the competition exerted by private schools against public schools could improve outcomes in the latter, but the data at the very best are mixed. Big private school choice states like Arizona and Florida actually saw some of the most precipitous drops in NAEP fourth grade reading as compared with 2022, while states with newer choice programs such as Indiana and, in particular, Louisiana showed gains.

Both those states also, though, have embarked on other reform efforts with regard to public schools.

With the continued expansion of choice programs and states like Texas on the verge, maybe this is a good time for a discussion of whether NAEP should expand to include state-level private school results. You would think anyone using the NAEP results as a rationale for expanded private school choice would be on board with that. But I'm not so sure. Which brings me to point No. 2.

**School choice advocates are split on whether students attending publicly subsidized private schools should take any tests at all.** Some contend that choice is the ultimate type of accountability and that other forms, such as formal assessments, are unnecessary. One argument, for example, is that the public school system is a monopoly and thus needs to be regulated while, in contrast, open-market education systems are more dynamic and need a lighter touch.

Certainly test scores and other outcome data are not the only considerations parents could or should make in choosing a school for their child. But wouldn't it be helpful for families to have achievement data in making this decision? In a National Parents Union poll released in early January, 86% of parents supported requiring schools to provide data on student achievement, discipline and enrollment so families and policymakers can make informed decisions. Shouldn't voters and taxpayers also have some of this same information in determining the return on investment that taxpayers are getting from private school operators? Even red states like Indiana and Louisiana (both of which — coincidentally? — are among the few showing NAEP gains) have taken this approach, as has the solidly blue District of Columbia. Which brings us to point 3.

**If you're looking for test score gains, private school choice should probably not be at the top of your list of options.** The most rigorous recent research shows that, on standardized assessments, private school students, including those receiving vouchers, fare no better — and in some instances fare worse — than their peers in public schools. Some studies do show that expanded private school choice improves performance for public school students, presumably as a result of competition, but the effect is said to be very modest. Also, vouchers may increase the likelihood that students will enroll in and complete college.

But if it's test scores you're worried about, be it NAEP or state tests or school-chosen assessments, vouchers would not seem to be your best first choice for improvement. Fortunately, there is a wide body of evidence (check out, for example, the What Works Clearinghouse or the Evidence for ESSA project at Johns Hopkins) on what does work to improve student achievement, especially in the public schools where 90% of students continue to be enrolled. And many of those policies and practices — like high-impact tutoring, personalized instruction, expanded learning time, improved school leadership and data-driven decisionmaking — are exactly what parents are asking for and, candidly, still aren't getting in high enough doses from the public education system.

In the coming months, with any luck and a good deal of effort, the NAEP results will propel policymakers to dramatically change that state of affairs.

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