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# How has the Louisiana Scholarship Program Affected students? A Comprehensive Summary of Effects After Three Years

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# HOW HAS THE LOUISIANA SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM AFFECTED STUDENTS?

A Comprehensive Summary of Effects after Three Years



By **Jonathan N. Mills and Patrick J. Wolf**, *University of Arkansas*

## Overview

School choice reforms comprise a broad category of policies aimed at improving public education through the introduction of market forces that expand customer choice and competition between schools. Here we summarize our research to date on the effects of a large statewide school voucher initiative, the Louisiana Scholarship Program (LSP), and draw the following conclusions:

- Overall, participating in the LSP had no statistically significant impact on student English Language Arts (ELA) or math scores after using an LSP scholarship for three years.
- The subgroup of students who were lower achieving before applying to the program did show significant gains in ELA after three years of scholarship usage. Students applying to lower grades demonstrated significant losses in math.
- Students without disabilities were less likely to be identified to receive special education services if they participated in the LSP than if they did not. Students with disabilities were more likely to be de-identified as requiring special education services if they participated in the private school choice program.
- The private schools that chose to participate in the LSP were disproportionately Catholic, had low tuitions, had low enrollments, and served a high percentage of minority students.

We discuss these findings in the remainder of this brief and in greater detail in the three accompanying technical reports. Combined with prior evidence, these results are informative about the specific design of voucher and other choice policies and about how the effects of choice evolve over time as programs mature.

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## INTRODUCTION

School choice has long been a subject of robust debate, with private school vouchers—programs providing public funds for students to attend K-12 private schools—the most contentious form of school choice. Over the past two years, our research team has released a series of reports through the Education Research Alliance for New Orleans examining how the LSP has affected key student and community conditions. In this brief, we summarize results from our technical reports on the following questions:

1. How did the LSP scholarship affect student achievement after three years?
2. How did the LSP scholarship affect identification of students to receive special education services?
3. What types of private schools are choosing to participate in voucher programs in Louisiana and elsewhere?

## THE LOUISIANA SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM

Student performance on standardized tests in Louisiana has trailed national averages for decades. In an effort to turn things around, the state began offering students publicly financed scholarships to attend private schools in New Orleans in 2008. This pilot version of the LSP was expanded statewide in 2012. A total of 9,736 students applied to the program that year, with 5,296 receiving scholarships. The program awarded 7,110 scholarships in 2015-16.

The LSP is a statewide private school voucher program available for moderate- to low-income students in low-performing public schools. To qualify, children must have family incomes below 250% of the federal poverty line and either be entering kindergarten or attending a public school that was graded C, D, or F for the prior school year. The majority of the program's first-year applicants applied from outside of New Orleans. This 2012-13 LSP applicant cohort is the subject of our evaluation.

The voucher size is 90% of the amount the state and local government provides in student funding to the local school system or the tuition charged by the student's chosen private school, whichever is less. Average tuition at participating private schools ranges from \$2,966 to \$8,999, with a median of \$4,925, compared to average per pupil spending of \$8,500 in Louisiana's public schools.

To participate in the program, private schools must meet certain criteria related to enrollment; financial practices; student mobility; and the health, safety and welfare of students. Participating schools are prohibited from being selective in their enrollment of voucher students and must administer the state's accountability tests annually to voucher students in grades 3-8 and one grade in high school.

“ *To participate in the program, private schools must meet certain criteria related to enrollment; financial practices; student mobility; and the health, safety, and welfare of students.* ”

Nearly 60% of eligible applicants received scholarships for the 2012-13 school year. Of these recipients, 86% used their voucher to enroll in a private school in the first quarter of 2012-13.

Roughly 87% of the applicants are African American, with 8% white and 3% Hispanic. Prior to applying to the LSP, students performed below the state average in ELA, math, science, and social studies by around 20 percentile points on the state accountability test. Applicants to the program in 2012-13 were concentrated in the earlier grades, with one-third entering Kindergarten through third grade.

Louisiana offers three private school choice programs in addition to the LSP. First, the state offers taxpayers a tax deduction of up to \$5,000 per child for education expenses, including private school tuition. Over 100,000 Louisianans received the deduction in 2012. Second, 53 Louisiana students received a scholarship from a privately-funded School Tuition Organization to attend private school through the state's Tuition Donation Rebate Program in 2014-15. Finally, the state offers a separate voucher program for students with disabilities, the School Choice Program for Certain Students with Exceptionalities (SCPCSE). Launched in 2011,

the SCPCSE is intended to expand the educational options for students with unique educational needs. SCPCSE vouchers are restricted to the lesser of the private school's tuition or 50 percent of the state funds that would have been spent on the student, which means the vouchers can be worth less than an LSP voucher depending on the severity of a student's disability. In 2015-16, the average SCPCSE voucher was worth \$2,264. Eligibility is limited to parishes (a.k.a. counties) with at least 190,000 residents. The program only enrolled 342 students in 22 schools in the 2015-16 school year.

Because student achievement data are not collected for participants in these other three private school choice programs and two of them are small, we are not able to evaluate their effects on student achievement. Our evaluation is limited to the LSP and does not capture the effects of the state's subsidized private school choice in general.

## PRIOR FINDINGS

One of the themes of this brief is that the voucher landscape and research are quickly evolving. In a series of reports we released last year, we focused on earlier test scores impacts, as well as results for non-academic outcomes, competitive pressures across schools, and racial integration. From that work, we drew the following conclusions:

- LSP scholarship users performed significantly worse than their counterparts on Louisiana's ELA and math assessments. The effects were particularly negative after the first year and were slightly less negative after two years.
- We found no evidence that the LSP impacted students' non-academic skills, such as conscientiousness and grit, due in part to unreliable measures of these traits.
- Achievement of students in Louisiana public schools facing increased competitive pressures from the LSP was either unaffected or modestly improved as a result of the program's statewide expansion in 2012-13.
- The majority of LSP transfers improved integration in students' former public schools; however, LSP transfers slightly worsened integration in new private schools. The net effect of the program was positive, as more transfers helped than harmed

integration, especially in districts subject to court orders for prior racial segregation.

Vouchers and other forms of school choice raise many questions and require comprehensive program evaluations. The research that follows builds on these earlier studies, providing one of the most comprehensive evaluations of any voucher program in the country.

These prior LSP reports and our latest set of studies all can be found at the [Education Research Alliance for New Orleans' website](#).

## HOW DID THE LSP SCHOLARSHIP AFFECT STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT AFTER THREE YEARS?

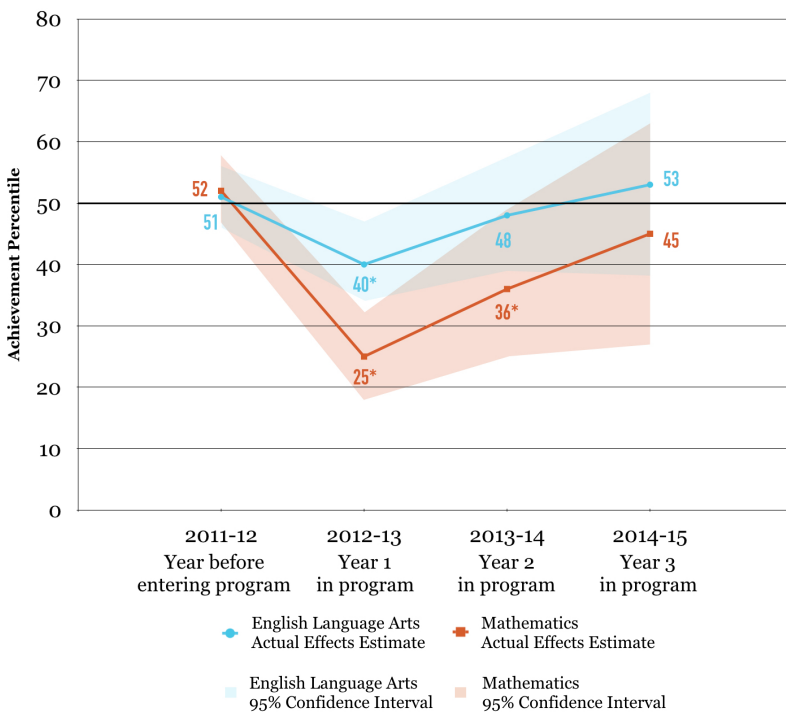
The first report in this series, by Jonathan Mills and Patrick Wolf, examines how LSP scholarship use affects student achievement. Academic achievement is a predictor of long-run outcomes including high school graduation, post-secondary degree attainment, and lifetime earnings. Achievement plays an important role in how the Louisiana Department of Education monitors the LSP's success, as private schools receive sanctions for continually low performance. Thus, we follow in a long tradition of evaluating the effect of school voucher programs in part by analyzing student test scores.

We determine the impact of LSP scholarship use on student achievement by comparing students who received and did not receive scholarships through random lotteries. The LSP was oversubscribed in the first year of the program and used a matching algorithm to allocate open seats in private schools to students. When LSP applicants exceeded the number of seats available in a given school, the program awarded scholarship placements to that specific school by lottery. Our analysis focuses on this subset of eligible applicants whose scholarship receipt was determined randomly so that any differences in outcomes between LSP awardees and non-awardees can be attributed to the program.

The sample for our primary experimental analysis is the subset of eligible LSP applicants who took the state test in grades 3 through 5 in the 2011-12 school year just prior to applying to the program (i.e. at "baseline"). By focusing on the 1,200 students with baseline achievement, we were able to verify that LSP scholarship recipients and control group members—i.e., students not receiving a scholarship to their first choice school—had very similar characteristics prior to the expansion of the program, as we would expect from lotteries.

Figure 1 presents the average effects of LSP scholarship use on student achievement over three years of program participation. Results are presented for a consistent sample of students with outcome data in 2014-15. The solid lines connect the actual effects, determined by regression analysis, while the shaded areas represent 95 percent confidence intervals. Effects are presented from the perspective of a student initially performing at the 50th percentile of the control group's test score distribution at baseline, and that 50th percentile is adjusted each year to reflect the actual performance of the control group.

**Figure 1. Estimated Effects of LSP Scholarship Use on Student Achievement after Three Years in the Program**



Note: \* indicates estimate is statistically significant at the 95% confidence level.

The program had large negative effects on student outcomes in both ELA and math after one year that appear to improve over time. The achievement of LSP students, which was equal to the control group at baseline, was 11 percentile points lower in ELA and 27 percentile points lower in math after one year of participation in the program. After two years, LSP students remained 17 percentile points behind their control group peers in math but the difference in ELA was no longer statistically significant.

By the third year, the performance of LSP scholarship users was statistically similar to their counterparts in both ELA and math. Surprisingly, the gains for initial LSP participants from year 1 to year 3 were similar for voucher students who stayed in their private schools and for voucher students who switched back to the public system after year 1 or year 2, a topic explored more thoroughly in our technical report on the year 3 results. Both subgroups of LSP recipients recovered substantially from the first year achievement losses.

“ *By the third year, the performance of LSP scholarship users was statistically similar to their counterparts in both ELA and math.* ”

We further examined the extent to which LSP achievement effects differed by gender or ethnicity and found no evidence of differences. We did, however, find that students initially performing in the bottom third in ELA at baseline experienced statistically significant positive effects of scholarship use on achievement in ELA after three years.

We also found that students entering earlier grades experienced more negative effects of LSP scholarship use on achievement than students entering later grades. When we expanded our sample to include students applying for grades 1, 2, or 3, who all lacked baseline test scores, the effects of the LSP on that larger sample of students in math was negative and statistically significant after three years. We treat the smaller sample of randomized students as our primary sample for analysis, however, because we can confirm that the test scores of the LSP and control group students were equal at baseline and because our previous analyses have consistently relied upon that smaller sample.

The LSP private schools compare more favorably with public schools on ELA than math outcomes. The same pattern has been observed in recent evaluations of private school choice programs in D.C., Florida, Milwaukee, and Ohio, all of which report better voucher effects on ELA than math. Why is that? We can only speculate at this point. Private schools might spend more instructional time than public schools on reading but less time on math. Student math achievement might be more disrupted by school switches than

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their ELA achievement, since math learning depends more heavily on content sequencing than ELA. There may be a finite number of effective math teachers who disproportionately gravitate towards public schools, where average teacher pay is higher. More research on the topic is needed to understand these differences by subject, grade, and initial achievement.

## HOW DID THE LSP SCHOLARSHIP AFFECT IDENTIFICATION OF STUDENTS TO RECEIVE SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES?

The second report in this series, by Sivan Tuchman and Patrick Wolf, examines the experiences of students with disabilities in the LSP. A primary concern surrounding school choice is that disadvantaged students will not receive necessary services in participating private schools. This concern is particularly relevant for students with disabilities, as private schools often are not equipped to provide the same set of supports for students with disabilities offered in public school systems.

Students with disabilities are protected under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Initially passed in 1997, IDEA guarantees students with disabilities access to a “free and appropriate education” in public schools, with the scope of services detailed in their Individual Education Plan (IEP). While IDEA covers students with disabilities in public school settings, such legal rights do not apply when parents place their child in a private school. Parents always retain the right to return their children with disabilities to public schools where IDEA requirements remain in force.

Students with disabilities are eligible to participate in the LSP. They receive preference if they face a lottery for a scholarship award. Their scholarship, however, is worth the same amount as the scholarships of participating students without disabilities. The parents of students with disabilities who apply to the LSP must sign a waiver acknowledging they are only guaranteed to receive private school services made available to all students unless the private school has a history of providing special education services, which is true of 37% of private schools in the LSP.

As described earlier in this brief, Louisiana has a separate private school choice program for students with disabilities. Despite having no family income or academic proficiency requirements, the program is relatively undersubscribed.

## *LSP Effects on Special Education Identification*

Tuchman and Wolf examine how using an LSP scholarship to attend a private school affects the identification status of students. “Identification” refers to a student being classified as having a disability. Existing research indicates that the disability enrollment gap between private and public schools is not simply due to private schools enrolling lower rates of students with disabilities. Differences in identification rates once students are enrolled also contribute to the disability enrollment gap.

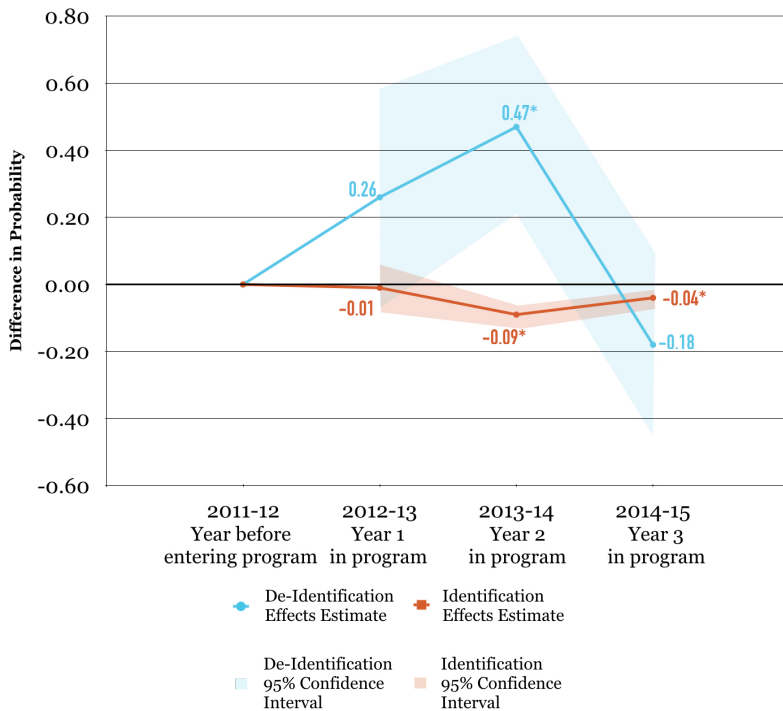
Students with disabilities made up 13% of eligible LSP applicants for the 2012-13 cohort (1,275 students). This proportion, as well as the distribution of specific disabilities among eligible LSP applicants, is similar to Louisiana’s population of students with disabilities. These results are surprising, given the LSP scholarship amount is less than the resources offered by public schools.

“ *Students with disabilities made up 13% of eligible LSP applicants for the 2012-13 cohort. This proportion... is similar to Louisiana’s population of students with disabilities.* ”

The report tracks two groups of students who faced a lottery for admission to their first-choice LSP schools. For the students not identified as having a disability when they applied to the program, we compared the rates at which they were newly identified as having a disability, depending on whether they won or lost the LSP lottery. For the students who were identified as having a disability when they applied to the program, we compared the rates at which students in that group were de-identified as no longer having a disability, again, depending on whether they won or lost the LSP lottery. Any student receiving a new disability identification in a given year moves from the “not identified” to the “identified” group the next year.

Figure 2 describes how rates of special education identification and de-identification changed over time in response to LSP scholarship use. The vertical axis represents the change in probability of being either identified as a student with a disability (blue line) or de-identified (orange line). These analyses are based on the same methods employed in the earlier test score analysis, which compares students receiving scholarships via lottery to their first choice school to students who did not receive a scholarship from the same lottery. Although data were not available regarding student identification status during the baseline year (2011-12), due to random assignment it can be assumed that there was no (i.e. 0) difference between the probability of students from either group being identified or de-identified as receiving special education services at the start of our study. This is represented in Figure 2 with the difference in probability starting at zero in the year prior to this study.

**Figure 2. Trends in Identification and De-Identification for Students with Disabilities in the LSP**



Notes: \* indicates estimate is statistically significant at the 95% confidence level. The 0 line represents no difference in status between LSP scholarship users and their control group counterparts.

Initially, LSP scholarship users were statistically similar to their control group counterparts in their likelihood to be newly identified as a student with disabilities or to lose their disability identification. In the second year, LSP scholarship users were nearly 50 percent more

likely than control group students to lose their disability identification while their chances of being newly identified were slightly lower than the control group rate. By the third year, LSP scholarship users were less likely to lose their special education status and again less likely to be newly identified as a student with a disability. The former finding is probably because a large portion of students with disabilities in the LSP were de-identified in the second year.

*“ In the second year, LSP scholarship users were nearly 50 percent more likely than control group students to lose their disability identification while their chances of being newly identified were slightly lower than the control group rate. ”*

Tuchman and Wolf’s findings contribute to a growing research literature indicating that schools of choice are less likely to newly identify and more likely to de-identify students as having a disability. What is unclear, however, is the extent to which lower rates of identification and higher rates of de-identification in schools of choice harm or help students. If students are losing access to necessary resources because they no longer bear the disability label, these results are troubling. If, instead, public schools are over-identifying students as needing additional services when they actually do not, avoiding or removing the label of a student with a disability may be helpful and even an attraction of private schooling to parents.

### WHAT TYPES OF PRIVATE SCHOOLS ARE CHOOSING TO PARTICIPATE IN VOUCHER PROGRAMS IN LOUISIANA AND ELSEWHERE?

School choice can benefit students in either of two ways. Choice can enable more students to attend objectively “better” schools. In that case, school choice will be more successful when high quality private schools are the primary participants in voucher programs. Choice can also enable parents to better match their child’s school to the student’s educational needs. In this case, the goal is to create a diverse set of distinctive schools for families to choose from.

What types of private schools are opting into the program? To date, the research on that crucial topic is limited. Yujie Sude, Corey DeAngelis, and Patrick Wolf examine this question by analyzing the types of private schools participating in three voucher programs: the LSP, the Opportunity Scholarship Program in Washington, D.C., and the Indiana Choice Scholarship Program.

The decision by private school leaders to participate in a voucher program involves weighing the benefits of participation against the costs. Broadly speaking, private schools gain resources and the opportunity to serve more disadvantaged students by participating in a school choice program. Private schools with open seats have an incentive to participate because they can increase their resources often without adding staff or any other significant costs. Economists call this achieving economy of scale.

Private schools also may enjoy non-financial benefits from participating in a choice program due to their organizational mission. Religious private schools, such as Catholic schools, often have a direct mission to serve low-income and otherwise disadvantaged students. This commitment, in itself, may be sufficient motivation for some private schools to participate in a voucher program.

Private schools also face financial and non-financial costs to participate in a school choice program. Voucher amounts fail to cover the average cost of education at most private schools. Some voucher programs allow private schools to make up the difference by charging additional fees above the amount of the voucher, a practice known as “top up.” Private schools in voucher programs that do not allow top-up fees must instead take the voucher amount as full payment for educating the child, even if the actual cost of doing so is higher. Private schools that lack the resources to subsidize the enrollment of voucher students will be hard-pressed to participate.

Private schools that participate in school choice programs face other costs that are not reflected in dollars. Participation comes with additional regulations. While some regulations are not particularly burdensome, such as complying with health and safety codes, regulations can have hidden costs. For example, some voucher programs, such as the LSP, require schools to demonstrate success via state accountability tests. Schools may feel pressured to change their curricular offerings in an attempt to align what is being taught in their school with the state’s standards.

Presumably, participating schools have determined that the benefits of participation outweigh the costs, while non-participating schools have reached the opposite conclusion.

Sude, DeAngelis, and Wolf analyze the school choice participation decisions of private schools in Louisiana, the District of Columbia, and Indiana. While all three programs have eligibility requirements linked to family income and public school quality, the programs vary by age, size, voucher amount, and regulatory burden as described in Figure 3.

**Figure 3. Characteristics of the Louisiana, D.C., and Indiana Voucher Programs**

	Louisiana Scholarship Program	D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program	Indiana Choice Scholarship Program
<b>Date Enacted</b>	2012	2004	2011
<b>Scope</b>	Statewide	D.C. Metro	Statewide
<b>Average Funding Relative to Public School</b>	54%	47%	42%
<b>Eligible Students Relative to State Population</b>	20%	35%	54%
<b>Test-Based Accountability Requirement</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Open-Admissions Process</b>	Yes	No	No
<b>Financial Reporting</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Parental Copy Prohibited</b>	Yes	No	No
<b>Teacher Certification Requirements</b>	No	Yes	No
<b>CER Policy Design Score (2014)</b>	C	B	A
<b>Participating Students (2014-15)</b>	7,362	1,520	29,148
<b>Participating Schools (2014-15)</b>	131	47	314
<b>Percentage of Private Schools Participating in Program (2014-15)</b>	33%	78%	70%

Note: CER Policy Design Score taken from the [Center for Education Reform](#).



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Private schools in Washington, D.C. participate in school choice at the highest rate of 78%. Indiana private schools are not far behind with a participation rate of 70%. Louisiana is the laggard, with only 33% of its private schools participating in the LSP. The Louisiana tuition tax deduction program is a potential factor in the low LSP private school participation rate because private schools benefit from state subsidies to their enrolled students without having to formally participate in any voucher program. Concerns about future LSP regulations potentially also played a role in Louisiana schools' low participation rate.

Sude, DeAngelis, and Wolf use regression analysis to test how each of the factors in Figure 3 influence the likelihood of school participation. That analysis indicates that private schools that are Catholic, have lower tuition, and serve a higher percentage of minority students are more likely to participate in school choice programs than private schools that lack those characteristics. The pattern holds across all three locations; however, in Louisiana, private schools with lower enrollments were also more likely to participate.

“ *... private schools that are Catholic, have tuitions that are closer to the voucher amount, and serve a higher percentage of minority students are more likely to participate in school choice programs than private schools that lack those characteristics.* ”

These results are not surprising. Private schools that are not required to provide a large resource subsidy to voucher students, that already have a history of serving minority students, and that follow in the Catholic tradition of educating disadvantaged students are more likely to see the benefits of participation in school choice exceed the costs. They are the types of private schools that supply choice.

## WHAT DO THESE RESULTS MEAN FOR PRIVATE SCHOOL CHOICE?

Our new reports on the LSP speak to several important concerns about school choice initiatives. First, different school choice programs attract different numbers and types of participating private schools. If policymakers want to attract a larger and more diverse population of private schools to supply choice to families, they could consider policy changes that increase the benefits of LSP participation—such as increasing voucher amounts or reducing regulatory burden—for private schools. Nevertheless, such incentives come with their own set of costs. Reduced regulation, for example, could make it harder for policymakers to ensure students are learning basic academic skills. Policymakers will have to thoroughly weigh the benefits of increased school participation relative to these costs when considering such policy changes.

The study of special education in the LSP demonstrates that students with disabilities are participating in the program. Nearly 13% of LSP applicants in 2012 were identified as having a disability, a rate similar to that of all students in Louisiana. Private and public schools appear to approach student disability differently, with private schools slightly less likely to identify and much more likely to de-identify students as having disabilities. Those are organizational differences that both parents and policy makers need to understand when they consider how school choice programs operate for students with special educational needs.

Finally, our third year analysis indicates that the test score effects of the LSP follow a distinct pattern of large negative effects in year 1 that diminish somewhat starting in year 2 and are statistically insignificant by year 3. Although a declining sample size plays a role in the year 3 finding of statistical insignificance, our estimates of the LSP achievement effects over time certainly suggest that something changed after year 1 that allowed voucher students to reclaim much of the achievement ground that they had lost.

### *The Pattern of Drop and Recovery*

We only can speculate regarding the exact causes of the drop and partial recovery pattern of test score results. We can, however, rule out some factors as clearly explaining both the drop and the recovery because those conditions have been constant throughout our analysis. First, state sanctions on private schools whose voucher

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students demonstrated unsatisfactory test score levels and growth took effect in year 3 of our study. It is possible that the private schools ignored those sanctions in year 1 and started taking them seriously in years 2 and 3, leading to the pattern of effects we observe, but it seems unlikely that they would place themselves in such a disadvantaged position from the start. We just do not have the data necessary to fully test the extent to which the state's accountability sanctions contributed to the LSP student test score recovery after year 1, though we cannot rule these sanctions out completely as a contributing factor.

Increasing achievement in public schools could result in the observed negative effects of LSP scholarship usage. In a separate study, Anna Egalite determined that Louisiana public schools that faced the strongest competitive threat of losing students to the LSP produced higher test scores in year 1 of the program. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that this improvement contributed in a meaningful way to the observed negative effects, as the gains for public school students were small, especially compared to the large drop in LSP participants' test scores relative to the scores of students who did not receive vouchers to their first place choices that year, when the newness of the program suggests that any competitive effects should have been at their zenith. Any positive competitive effects of the LSP are insufficient to explain the program's achievement effects over time.

Similarly, most New Orleans students who lost a lottery for placement in their most-preferred LSP schools ended up in a public charter school instead, and [research by Douglas Harris and Matthew Larsen](#) has shown strong test score growth in New Orleans charters put in place post-Katrina. In the technical report, when we exclude New Orleans applicants from the analysis, the negative test score effects of the program in year 1 were smaller and the recovery in years 2 and 3 was more complete than in the full sample. Still, charter school students were part of the control group throughout all three years of the study, so while they could explain some of the initial drop, they do not explain the observed recovery.

### *More Likely Explanations*

Three factors were present for the year 1 drop in relative LSP student test scores but absent for the subsequent partial recovery. Some unknown combination of these conditions likely explains the test score effects of the LSP across the three years. The implementation

schedule for the LSP was faster than for any private school choice program we know of. The program's enabling statute, Act 2, was signed into law in early June and nearly 5,000 voucher students showed up at their new private schools less than ten weeks later. The rushed implementation of the program may have contributed to the severe drop in achievement due to a lack of capacity to manage the influx of large numbers of disadvantaged students. The study of the participating schools indicated that they tended to have small enrollments at the time of program launch. To add a lot of students, the private schools would either have had to hire new teachers late in the summer, when most experienced teachers had already secured jobs for the upcoming year, or allow their class sizes to balloon. Either approach to dealing with the enrollment surge could have contributed to the large drop in student achievement that first year. This likely played only a small role, however, in the negative results, as the median school added only 20 students, or 10% of their total enrollment, through the LSP in 2012-13. Nevertheless, adjustments made over time by LSP schools to the program and the new students the LSP brought to these schools may have contributed to the recovery of some of the lost ground regarding student achievement.

“ *The rushed implementation of the program may have contributed to the severe drop in achievement due to a lack of capacity to manage the influx of large numbers of disadvantaged students.* ”

For all of the students in our study, participating in the LSP began with a school switch. We know that all school switches disrupt learning somewhat, as students need to adjust to both the academic and behavioral expectations of their new school. That adjustment process may have been especially difficult given the rushed implementation of the program, leading to the large drop in scores the first year. From the second year on, students participating in the LSP tended to gain in achievement somewhat faster than control group students, making up some (in the case of math) or all (in the case of ELA) of the ground they lost initially. The pattern is by

no means perfectly consistent—we still observe negative effects in math in year 3 for students applying to earlier grades—but the importance of student adjustment does suggest that school choice programs might need time to demonstrate their worth.

Finally, the program’s testing requirement may have played a role in the pattern of results. The LSP requires that voucher students take the state accountability test. In the first year of our study, the use of the state test may have benefited the control group students because it is closely aligned with the public school education standards and Louisiana public schools were used to preparing their students for its annual administration while the private schools were not. In the second year of our evaluation, the LSP schools had at least one year of experience using the state test for accountability purposes. In the third year of our study, when we found no significant differences in the test score outcomes of the voucher and control group students, the state adopted a new test. The newness of the state test for both private and public school students may have produced a more valid gauge of the impact of the LSP on student achievement in the third year.

Initial implementation problems, complicated by the need of students to adjust to their new schools, and the use of the state accountability test to compare student performance all likely contributed to the large drop in the achievement of LSP students relative to control group students in year 1 of our study. In years 2 and 3, when these conditions no longer held, the voucher students made up a good portion of the lost ground. We do not know where they will end up in year 4.

The three reports summarized in this brief are part of an on-going evaluation of the LSP. School choice interventions like the LSP can have a broad range of effects that often take time to develop. Comprehensive evaluation is, therefore, key to understanding the impacts of these interventions. Moving forward, we will continue to expand our evaluation with research examining how the LSP affects student academic experiences over time, family satisfaction, and longer-term outcomes like high school graduation and college enrollment.



## About the Authors

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Jonathan N. Mills is a Senior Research Associate in the Department of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas and a Non-Resident Research Fellow with the Education Research Alliance for New Orleans at Tulane University. His research focuses on the effects of school choice programs on student achievement and non-academic outcomes, as well as the benefits and unintended consequences of college financial aid programs. Mills received his Ph.D. in education policy from the University of Arkansas in 2015. He additionally holds a Bachelor of Science and a Master of Arts in economics from the University of Missouri.

### Patrick J. Wolf

Patrick J. Wolf is Distinguished Professor of Education Policy and 21st Century Endowed Chair in School Choice at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville. He has authored, co-authored, or co-edited four books and over 130 journal articles, book chapters, and policy reports on school choice, civic values, public management, special education, and campaign finance. He received his Ph.D. in Political Science from Harvard University in 1995.

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The mission of the Education Research Alliance for New Orleans (ERA-New Orleans) is to produce rigorous, objective, and useful research to support the long-term achievement of all students. Based at Tulane University, ERA-New Orleans is a partnership between university-based researchers and a broad spectrum of local education groups. Our Advisory Board includes (in alphabetical order): the Louisiana Association of Educators, the Louisiana Association of Public Charter Schools, the Louisiana Federation of Teachers, the Louisiana Recovery School District, New Orleans Parents' Guide, New Schools for New Orleans, the Orleans Parish School Board, the Orleans Public Education Network, and the Urban League of Greater New Orleans. For more information, please visit the organization's website:

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[EducationResearchAllianceNOLA.org](http://EducationResearchAllianceNOLA.org)

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*An Initiative of*



## About the School Choice Demonstration Project (SCDP)

Housed within the Department of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas, the School Choice Demonstration Project (SCDP) is an education research center dedicated to the non-partisan study of the effects of school choice policy. Led by Dr. Patrick J. Wolf, the SCDP's national team of researchers, institutional research partners and staff are devoted to the rigorous evaluation of school choice programs and other school improvement efforts across the country. The SCDP is committed to raising and advancing the public's understanding of the strengths and limitations of school choice policies and programs by conducting comprehensive research on what happens to students, families, schools and communities when more parents are allowed to choose their child's school. Reports from SCDP studies are available via their website:

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[UAedreform.org/school-choice-demonstration-project](http://UAedreform.org/school-choice-demonstration-project)

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