

EDUCATION DAILY

The education community's independent daily news service

SCHOOL CHOICE

D.C. voucher program has mixed impact, ED study says

By Frank Wolfe

The D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program — a test case for voucher efforts nationally — has had a mixed impact on education in D.C. Public Schools, according to a final report by the Education Department's National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance.

While OSP significantly improved student graduation rates, according to parent reports, the program did not result in a significant elevation in student test scores, according to *Evaluation of the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program: Final Report*.

"Overall reading and math test scores were not significantly affected by the program, based on our main analysis approach," the report said. "On average, over the 40-plus months of potential participation, the treatment group scored 3.90 points higher in reading and .70 points higher in math than the control group, but these differences were not statistically significant."

The final report also found no conclusive evidence that OSP improved the performance of the high-priority group of students who applied from "schools in need of improvement." Parents reported higher satisfaction with OSP's private schools and rated them safer than their children's previous public schools, but students reported similar levels of satisfaction and safety regardless of whether they were offered or used a scholarship, according to the report.

OSP revealed positive effects on graduation rates, however, as 82 percent of students offered scholarships received a high school diploma, according to parent reports, compared with 70 percent of students who applied but were not offered scholarships. In addition, the graduation rate improvement was sustained for the high-priority group of students who came from "schools in need of improvement," according to the study.

Stoking the debate

The new report is sure to stoke the debate over whether Congress should continue the

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TEACHER QUALITY

Calif. program trains laid-off teachers for special ed jobs

By Wangui Njuguna

When California announced last March that it might lay off more than 26,000 teachers, Manteca (Calif.) Unified School District was among those to reach out to the California Teacher Corps — which works with more than 70 alternative certification programs — to help train teachers the district considered well-suited for available special education jobs.

Manteca had 15 special education vacancies during SY 2009-10. Fourteen of those positions were filled by laid-off general educators who received training as interns in the corps program.

Kallie Johnson told *Education Daily*® she heard about CTC from a letter the district provided teachers, along with the pink-slip notice. She formerly taught sixth grade and "didn't want to give up on the profession," she said, adding that switching to special education was an opportunity to keep teaching while learning something new.

"We believe that teachers who have been district-trained in curriculum and assessments are viable candidates for special education positions in our district," said Don Halseth, Manteca assistant superintendent for personnel services. "Intern candidates, including those

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Study: Home Internet access could limit student achievement

By Emily Ann Brown

While policymakers are trying to narrow the gulf between those who have access to computers and the Internet and those who do not, a new study suggests that technological resources at home could actually limit students' ability to perform well on standardized tests.

In *Scaling the Digital Divide: Home Computer Technology and Student Achievement*, professors of Duke University's Sanford School of Public Policy found that students in North Carolina with greater exposure to Internet access at home between 2000 and 2005, posted lower math and reading test scores over time as Web-surfing crowded out productive study.

The experts associated broadband access with "modest, but statistically significant and persistent negative impacts" on students' education. Among children, computers are more often used for recreation rather than learning, especially in the home, researchers said.

The findings are based on the Tarheel state's end-of-grade survey — which looks at how frequently students use computers to complete homework, watch television, and read for leisure — during the years of tremendous expansion of high-speed Internet access across the state.

The findings could prove beneficial as the nation examines what impact handheld devices and laptops have on teaching and learning in the coming years.

"We cut off the study in 2005, so we weren't getting into the Facebook and Twitter generation," said Jacob Vigdor, study coauthor and a professor of public policy and economics. "The technology was much more primitive than that. IM software was popular then, and it's been one thing after the other since then. Adults may think of computer technology as a productivity tool first and foremost, but the average kid doesn't share that perception."

Education technology advocates tout broadband infrastructure as critical to a student's academic progress, but that argument is largely unfounded as there is currently little research to support the benefits of high-speed Internet access among K-12 students, researchers noted.

This report raises doubts that popular initiatives aimed at furnishing students with a personal computer for classroom or at-home use is a wise use of public funds, they added.

The study focuses on students in grades 5-8, a population targeted by many existing one-to-one laptop initiatives.

Researchers compared the same reading and math scores of more than 150,000 students before and after they acquired a home computer. They also compared the scores among peers who acquired a home computer by the fifth grade and those who never owned one.

What they discovered runs counter to the Federal Communications Commission's National Broadband Plan, which particularly aims to broaden high-speed Internet access so that students and teachers can extend instruction "beyond the confines of the physical classroom and traditional school day."

The paper says evidence suggests that providing universal access to home computers and broadband would broaden, rather than narrow, math and reading achievement gaps, at least in certain grades.

Kids in the middle grades are more likely to use computers to socialize and play games rather than complete classwork, said Vigdor.

In a caution to school administrators interested in maximizing achievement test scores, or reducing racial and socioeconomic disparities in test scores, researchers said "all evidence suggests that a program of broadening home computer access would be counterproductive."

However, students whose parents limit their computer access to educational activities are more likely to post academic gains, they added.

Correction

The June 23 *Education Daily*® page 4 brief, "Weingarten, senators urge Republicans to extend FMAP," should have said H.R. 4213 would amend the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act to extend from Dec. 31 to June 30, 2011, the increase in the Medicaid federal medical assistance percentage.



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SCHOOL SAFETY

Chicago to spend \$25 million to reduce school violence

By Karen Bagwell

Chicago Public Schools will spend nearly \$25 million in federal economic stimulus funds in a collaborative effort with city leaders to reduce school violence, Mayor Richard M. Daley's office announced Tuesday in a statement.

CPS' plans to use the funding to organize new after-school and community, school and sports programs to provide more safe havens for children at critical hours, such as the time immediately following the end of the school day.

Officials identified school dismissal time as a dangerous point in the day for city youth, because many urban students go unsupervised until working parents arrive home. Officials want to expand afterschool planning throughout the new school year, the statement said.

Officials plan to boost anti-gang initiatives, violence prevention and efforts to maintain campus security. According to the statement, CPS plans to accomplish this by divvying up federal stimulus funding among three key priorities:

1. Mentoring at-risk students. Officials will spend \$10 million to mentor 1,500 students at 13 high schools across the city identified as most at-risk for violence. Mentors will help stu-

dents deal with gang activity, substance abuse and economic hardships.

2. Improving school social climate. Officials will spend \$10 million to improve the social climate at 38 high-risk high schools. Students at those schools will be instructed in behavior management, leadership training and conflict resolution.

3. Establishing a community watch program. Officials will spend \$4.7 million to establish a school and community watch program in 13 high schools where the Chicago Police Department identified high crime and active gang conflicts. Most of the watch program money will pay 390 community members hired through 14 local organizations to watch out for students in neighborhoods before and after school. About 20 to 30 patrol members per neighborhood will be assigned to monitor student safety as youth travel along designated safety routes during school arrival and dismissal times.

In addition to reducing violence, the programs are expected to boost student attendance, reduce misconduct and disruptive behavior in schools, and improve students' overall academic performance, the statement said.

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program. ED zeroed new scholarship funding for OSP — the first federally funded voucher effort — in its FY 2011 budget request, and Education Secretary Arne Duncan told the House Budget Committee in February that ED wanted to focus its efforts on improving outcomes for a wide swath of public school students, rather than “saving a few.” GOP legislators have joined D.C. Mayor Adrian Fenty, D.C. Schools Chancellor Michelle Rhee and a vocal group of D.C. parents in making a pitch to Congress to save the program.

“It is important to note that the program is making such a positive, demonstrable impact on the education of students despite any increase in the scholarship cap since the program's inception six years ago,” said Virginia Walden Ford, executive director of D.C. Parents for School Choice. “Given the amount that is spent, per child, by D.C. Public Schools, the scholarship program is clearly an education reform program that works.” DCPS reported spending \$17,542 per student last year, considerably more than the OSP cap of \$7,500, she said.

Backers of OSP also downplayed the negative findings in the final report by saying that ED's Institute of Education Sciences frequently fails to find statistically significant data for any federal

education programs. The proponents also noted that the new report indicates that graduation rate improvements were highest for students from chronically underperforming schools and that the federally-funded OSP has served more than 3,300 students from households with an average income of a little more than \$24,000.

OSP launched after Congress passed the District of Columbia School Choice Incentive Act in January 2004. That legislation mandated a rigorous evaluation of the impacts of OSP.

“Because many students have graduated from the program and the sample size for the study has declined significantly, we didn't see more broad-based achievement gains in areas like math,” Kevin Chavous, a former D.C. Councilman and chairman of the Black Alliance for Educational Options, said of the new report.

“Nonetheless, the results of the study demonstrate what we've known for years: that the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program is making a difference for students who need our help the most, and it is helping lead a revitalization of D.C. schools. This program must continue, and we call on Congress to take immediate action to save the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program from extinction.”

The report is available at <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/20104018/pdf/20104018.pdf>.

General educators transition into special education

Not everyone can be a special educator, said California Teacher Corps President Catherine Kearney and special educator Kallie Johnson, a former general educator. Before filling special ed positions, 14 general educators who were to be laid off in Manteca (Calif.) Unified School District had to interview for the new jobs.

After 30 years in education, Johnson was already accustomed to working with students with disabilities in her general education classroom, she said, and it seemed like a natural fit.

The two-year training she is receiving as she teaches English to special education students in grades 9-12 includes coaching and mentoring provided by the school district and by CTC. Kearney said a veteran educator meets with the trainees for at least two hours per week to observe and offer feedback.

"I'm loving the new direction," Johnson said. "I love the students, the education and knowledge I am getting, and it's a great opportunity for me. The only challenge for general education teachers [enrolling in the program] is that they need to give up their nights. We have classes Monday and Wednesday from 4:30 to 7:30 all year for two years."

Program elements

To screen potential candidates, the program uses a selective process that may include classroom observations before enrolling for the training, Kearney said. The program also looks for teachers who:

- Have strong content knowledge.

- Have met HQT requirements in at least one core subject.
- Exhibit maturity and a desire to serve students with disabilities.
- Are capable of taking charge of a classroom immediately.

Now in the second year of the program, Johnson is making progress toward full state certification for special education. She has completed seminars on special education testing and how to read and write IEPs. She has also completed courses in math. She's taking social studies this summer and completing English content in the fall to meet highly qualified requirements in these core content areas, as required under NCLB.

Other program features include training on:

- IDEA laws and IEP implementation.
- Instructional strategies.
- Positive behavioral management.
- Collaborations with other special education specialists and general education teachers.

"While several of our laid-off teachers were willing to become special education interns, those that were selected demonstrated an interest in remaining in special education after completing this training," said Don Halseth, the district's assistant superintendent for personnel services. "This was very important for us in providing for long-term, quality special education teachers and making sure that candidates were committed to this program for the right reasons."

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from outside our district, have been hired to fill special education positions in the past because the pool of special education candidates has always presented a challenge for districts across the nation."

The training program "is a win-win-win for teachers, districts and for the kids," CTC President Catherine Kearney said. "The teachers get to stay employed, and the district and kids get a committed and caring teacher."

Program's scope

During SY 2009-10, 3,500 special education teachers received training from the CTC program. Of those, more than 1,500 were general education teachers moving to special education.

Roughly half of the special educators in California State University's San Bernardino alternative certification program were pink-slipped general education teachers, according to a press statement from CTC. The Teachers College of San Joaquin placed 31 former general educators

into special education positions in San Joaquin County, CTC said.

Kearney said it is hard to estimate how many districts will seek to fill such positions this fall. California's education budget for the upcoming school year is slated for \$1.5 billion in cuts, according to the California Teachers Association.

Several teachers enrolled in the program for the 2010-11 school year in anticipation of additional special education job openings, Halseth said.

"More than 26,000 teachers received pink slips earlier this year," Estelle Lemieux, CTA's legislative advocate, said in a statement June 3.

State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell last year issued a statement thanking the CTC program for helping the state "address California's special education teacher shortage [and for being] an important partner in our effort to improve student achievement for all students and close the achievement gap."

Learn more at www.cateachercorps.org.