



PlatteChat

AN ONGOING CONVERSATION ABOUT HOW TO BEST PRESERVE FREE ENTERPRISE,
PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY AND LIMITED GOVERNMENT IN NEBRASKA.

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Indiana Leading the Way on Vouchers

In 1875, the Speaker of the House of Representatives James G. Blaine introduced an amendment to the Constitution that would prohibit the use of state funds at private religious schools. While the amendment failed on the national level, 37 states-including Nebraska-adopted these amendments for their state constitutions.^[1] While these amendments have long been an impediment to those who support school vouchers-state-sponsored certificates of specified dollar amounts that parents can use for private school tuition^[2]-a recent ruling on Indiana's expansive voucher program indicates that vouchers may not fall under Blaine amendment constraints, which would open the door to vouchers in Nebraska.

The Indiana Supreme Court case examined whether Indiana's voucher program, which is available to low and middle-income families, was constitutional. The court held that it was, as the state funds "do not directly benefit religious schools but rather directly benefit lower-income families with school children."^[3] Such a precedent could make it possible for other states with Blaine amendments to introduce voucher programs without violating state constitutions, giving parents more choice and control in how their child is educated.

Twelve states currently have voucher programs, but Indiana's is the most expansive. It is a statewide program with a maximum voucher amount of \$4,500 for students in grades 1-8.^[4] A family of four earning less than \$42,000 annually can receive up to 90 percent of the maximum state voucher; families making up to \$62,000 annually receive 50 percent.^[5] Since its establishment in 2012, participation in the program has grown 140 percent, jumping from 3,919 students to 9,424. In the Indianapolis area in particular, the number of students receiving vouchers increased 94 percent, from 644 to 1,262.^[6] Such results demonstrate a critical need for more educational options for students and parents, and Indiana's response is one to be emulated.

Voucher programs introduce choice and competition into education. With vouchers, private schools are no longer open only to those who can afford it, and the playing field is leveled so parents with limited means that want to send their children to private school have opportunities to do so. In addition, a marketplace of educational choice compels both public and private schools to focus on advancing student achievement and meeting parent expectations.^[7] Research also suggests that public schools improved when subject to the competition introduced by vouchers. A study of public schools in Florida found "that public schools subject to more competitive pressure from private schools

raised their test scores the most following the introduction of Florida's voucher program." [8] Therefore, the positive benefits of vouchers extend even to those who choose to remain in the public school system in some cases.

Voucher programs have shown success in raising student outcomes in their own right. Students in Washington DC's Opportunity Scholarship Program-which provides vouchers to low-income students through a lottery-had a graduation rate of 91 percent, 21 percent higher than those without vouchers. DC voucher students also had higher student achievement and parental satisfaction, even while spending only \$7,500 per pupil, while DC public schools spent \$29,409 per pupil in 2010. [9] More than 20,000 students in Milwaukee's voucher program also saw positive results, achieving a graduation rate 18 percent higher than their public school counterparts between 2003-2009. [10]

The Indiana court ruling provides Nebraska a unique constitutional opportunity to implement vouchers and give Nebraska parents more opportunities for their children. Every child deserves to have a choice in where they go to school, and it is time to give all of Nebraska's children that choice.

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[2] Jordan Cash, "Vouchers and Tax Credits," Platte Institute for Economic Research, August 28, 2012. Accessed June 13, 2013, http://www.platteinstitute.org/docLib/20120823_Vouchers_and_Tax_Credits.pdf.

[3] Indiana Supreme Court Chief Justice Brent Dickson qtd. in Mark Guarino, "Indiana's

expansive school voucher program upheld: A model for others?" *Christian Science Monitor*, March 26, 2013. Accessed June 13, 2013, <http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Education/2013/0326/Indiana-s-expansive-school-voucher-program-upheld-A-model-for-others>.

[4] National Conference of State Legislatures, "School Voucher Laws: State-by-State Comparison." Accessed June 13, 2013, <http://www.ncsl.org/issues-research/educ/voucher-law-comparison.aspx>

[5] Indiana Supreme Court Chief Justice Brent Dickson qtd. in Mark Guarino, "Indiana's expansive school voucher program upheld: A model for others?" *Christian Science Monitor*, March 26, 2013. Accessed June 13, 2013, <http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Education/2013/0326/Indiana-s-expansive-school-voucher-program-upheld-A-model-for-others>.

[6] Indiana Supreme Court Chief Justice Brent Dickson qtd. in Mark Guarino, "Indiana's expansive school voucher program upheld: A model for others?" *Christian Science Monitor*, March 26, 2013. Accessed June 13, 2013, <http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Education/2013/0326/Indiana-s-expansive-school-voucher-program-upheld-A-model-for-others>.

[7] David N. Figlio and Cassandra M.D. Hart, "Competitive Effects of Means-Tested School Vouchers," National Bureau of Economic Research, Working Paper No. 16056, June 2010. Accessed June 13, 2013, <http://www.nber.org/papers/w16056.pdf>.

[8] David N. Figlio and Cassandra M.D. Hart, "Competitive Effects of Means-Tested School Vouchers," National Bureau of Economic Research, Working Paper No. 16056, June 2010. Accessed June 13, 2013, <http://www.nber.org/papers/w16056.pdf>.

[9] Jason Richwine, "D.C. Voucher Students: Higher Graduation Rates and Other Positive Outcomes," Heritage Foundation, July 28, 2010. Accessed June 13, 2013,

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[10] John Robert Warrem, "Graduation Rates for Choice and Public School Students in Milwaukee, 2003-2009," University of Minnesota, School Choice Wisconsin, January 2011. Accessed June 13, 2013,

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