

VOUCHERS 1-1 IN THE COURTS AS SCHOOL YEAR BEGINS

The battle for school vouchers got off to a hot start this school year with contrasting responses from the courts in Wisconsin and Ohio. A Circuit Court judge from Wisconsin rejected the state's request to lift a court order barring tuition vouchers for use in private schools. However, the Ohio Court of Common Pleas found vouchers constitutional.

Wisconsin Judge Paul Higginbotham ruled that the state's constitution forbids the use of state money for religious instruction even if the money is given to the schools by way of the parents. But Judge Lisa Sadler of Ohio's Franklin County ruled that the Cleveland school voucher plan, which covers religious schools, violated neither the Ohio State nor the United States Constitution. Judge Sadler's decision paved the way for nearly 2,000 students to use public funds to defray the cost of attending the private or religious school of their choice.

Since 1990, students of education have focused their eyes on the experiment being carried out in Milwaukee. Though the Milwaukee school-voucher plan does not extend to parochial schools, its track record with minority students attending non-religious private schools is impressive. The Milwaukee program gives a small number of parents—chosen at random—taxpayer money to send their children to private schools. The results are startling.

In a major study, Paul Peterson and Jiangtao Du of Harvard University and Jay P. Greene of the University of Houston, compared students using vouchers in Milwaukee to students who applied to the program but were turned down for lack of space. What they found was that three years into the program, voucher students scored an average of 3 percentage point higher on

standardized reading tests and 5 points higher on math tests; those in the program for four years scored 5 percentage points higher in reading and 11 percentage points higher in math.

What makes these results so important is that 97 percent of the 1,356 students are black or Hispanic and all of them come from poor families. It is no wonder that Paul Peterson, a self-described Democrat who is critical of Republican social policy, said that "These differences are substantively significant. If similar success could be achieved for all minority students nationwide, it could close the gap separating white and minority test scores by somewhere between one-third and one-half."

Now that Catholic schools are part of the Cleveland experiment, it is expected that the results will be at least as good as found in Milwaukee. Unless, of course, anti-choice advocates like the ACLU stop the progress in the courts.