



Proving the Viability of a School Choice Voucher

by Scott Haller

A recent Pioneer Institute [report](#) written by Ken Ardon and Cara Stilling Candal, *Modeling Urban Scholarship Vouchers in Massachusetts*, explores the viability of a school choice voucher program in the Commonwealth. Nationally, school choice has been shown to improve parent satisfaction and student achievement, reduce racial segregation, and enhance the performance of public schools who are consequently faced with new competition.

For low-income families, school choice options are limited due to legal and regulatory restrictions; as a result they are oversubscribed or altogether unavailable in the Commonwealth. Charter Schools have a waitlist of 42,000 students, METCO (an inter-district student exchange program) has over 10,000 students on a waitlist, and thousands of others wait their turn for a chance at vocational-technical schools. It can take years for a spot in these programs to open up, leaving many families with no choice at all.

Most families do not have the luxury of moving to better performing districts or paying for private school on their own, so school choice options need to be enhanced in order to reach them. Ardon and Candal propose a program which would divert state public school funds into a voucher program that would allow 10,000 low-income Massachusetts students to attend private schools. Students in grade school or kindergarten would receive a \$6,000 voucher, while high school students would be eligible for \$8,000 in assistance.

The beauty of the voucher program is that the value of the grant is substantially less than the student's per pupil cost in public school, around \$12,000 on average; this means that the Commonwealth would reduce overall education spending if such a system were implemented while adding educational options. Additionally, per pupil expenditures of districts which lose students would increase, devoting more resources to those who choose to remain in public schools.

Scott Haller is a senior at Northeastern University in Boston where he is pursuing a degree in Political Science. He spent two years at the University of Connecticut before transferring and deciding on his major. Scott began working at Pioneer Institute through Northeastern's Co-op Program, and continues in a part-time role focusing on research and policy analysis. His last co-op position was at the Massachusetts Office of the Inspector General where he assisted the Bureau of Program Integrity with its review of the Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance. Scott is a member of the Northeastern Rock Climbing Team and is the founding president of the Northeastern University Cubing Association.

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Some critics of the voucher proposal argue that it would not, in reality, increase school choice as tuition at many of the private and parochial schools would still be out of reach. To prove the viability of such a voucher system, Pioneer has conducted a small scale, admittedly non-scientific survey of religious private school tuition in the state.

In conducting the survey, we sought schools that were geographically distributed, but we did not preselect the schools. We simply surveyed private schools with religious affiliations in proportion to the existing ratio in the state, i.e. Catholic schools make up about five-sevenths of religious private schools in the state, thus they make up the majority of schools we surveyed.

Nationally, voucher programs and school choice initiatives are on the rise. In 2015, ten states and Washington D.C. will oversee voucher programs for over 141,000 students, compared to the total of 30,000 students in all forms of private school choice in 2000. This burst in popularity is driven by the evidence. Nine out of ten studies of voucher programs in seven different cities all showed improved test scores for students, and none could point to any negative effects of the program.

Of the more than 900 private schools in the state, about 360 are parochial schools. According to data from [Private School Review](#), there are approximately 71,000 students currently enrolled in religiously affiliated private schools in the Commonwealth. Over 85 percent of these students attend either Christian or Roman Catholic schools, making them by far the most popular choices and important elements of this study.

Pioneer gathered tuition data from 107 institutions of various religious affiliations including Catholic, Christian, Jewish, Adventist, Baptist, Islamic, and Episcopal schools. Of the institutions surveyed, there were 74 kindergarten programs, 91 grade schools, and 47 high schools.

Before providing data on the tuitions at area independent schools, it is worth underscoring that many religious private schools already offer financial aid options, or intra-congregational discounts, which would help augment the effect of the vouchers and further expand options.

Many religious private schools already offer financial aid options that augment the effect of the vouchers.

Of the 74 kindergarten programs, 51 cost less than the proposed \$6,000 voucher. Eight other programs cost less than \$7,000, putting them within an affordable range for low-income families. This means that 80 percent of kindergarten programs surveyed would be made available to families who otherwise had few or no options.

Fifty-four of the 91 grade school programs were also within the \$6,000 threshold. An additional 7 others were within \$1,000 dollars, meaning that overall, two-thirds of surveyed primary schools would become choices. That opens up a wealth of opportunities across the state to low-income students at a critical educational period in their lives.

Of the 47 high schools, only 12 were under the \$8,000 voucher value; however ten more were below \$10,000. Between additional scholarships from the school and intra-congregational discounts these would become a viable choice for many prospective students. Even if the voucher program only applies to a quarter of private high schools, this is still a major improvement and gives families options which were previously unavailable.

TABLE 1. OVERALL SCHOOL ELIGIBILITY UNDER VOUCHER

	Eligible	Non-Eligible	Total
Kindergarten	51	23	74
Grade School	54	37	91
High School	12	35	47

Importantly, many of the schools which would become available under the voucher program are in, or around, major cities such as Boston, Springfield, Worcester and Lowell. This places them within reaching distance of the populations most likely to make use of such a voucher system.

There were telling trends among certain religious affiliations as well. Islamic and Baptist schools fared the best, with all surveyed schools charging less than \$6,500 in tuition. Additionally, every Seventh-day Adventist kindergarten and elementary program charges less than the value of the voucher, while the two high schools surveyed cost \$9,850 and \$10,173 respectively.

On the other hand, of the nine Jewish institutions surveyed, none were within the voucher’s value; the cheapest kindergarten and elementary program charges \$10,600 per year. Both Episcopal schools surveyed were also well beyond the voucher’s reach, however two other middle school programs offered free tuition to any student through a lottery system.

While only one-fifth of Christian elementary schools were eligible under the voucher, a third of Christian high schools and over 40 percent of kindergarten programs were within the limit. Catholic schools, making up over 80 percent of students enrolled in parochial schools, fared slightly better. Only five of 28 high schools surveyed were eligible, however two-thirds of the 57 elementary schools and over

80 percent of kindergarten programs would be accessible through a voucher.

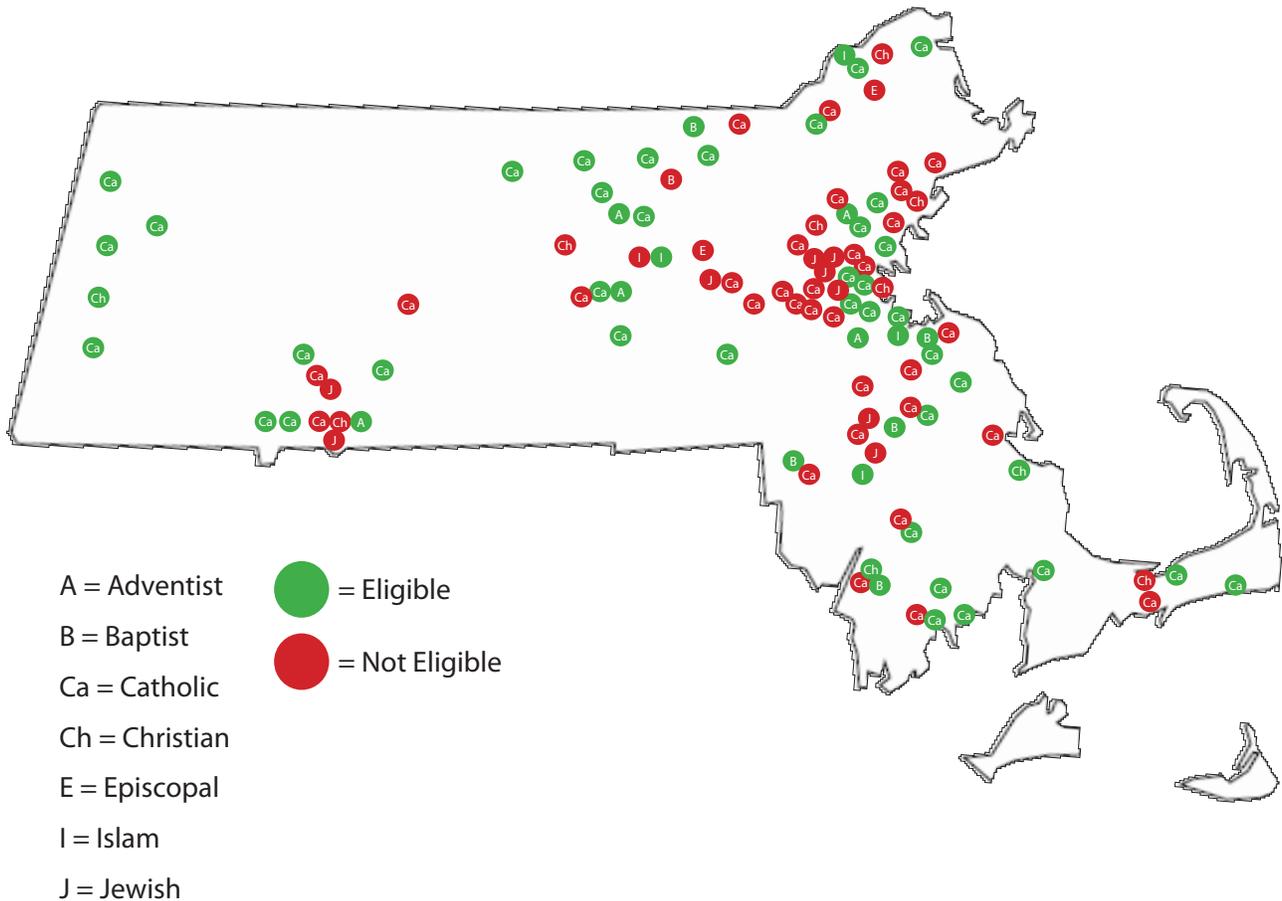
Unfortunately for the families which stand to benefit from such a program, an antiquated Massachusetts constitutional amendment, the Know Nothing Law, prevents state money from flowing to private or religious schools. This law has its roots in anti-Catholic bigotry and was enacted to prevent Catholic schooling from overtaking the dominant Protestant curricula. Until this amendment is repealed, a voucher program would be impossible, removing an important facet of school choice from the Commonwealth’s education system.

It’s time to move forward from anti-choice amendments and into a system which affords every parent their religious freedom and increased school choice. Evidence shows that this will, in turn, improve outcomes for students in both public and private school as competition is increased, improve parent satisfaction, and reduce overall spending on education.

TABLE 2. RELIGION-SPECIFIC ELIGIBILITY UNDER VOUCHER

	Kindergarten	Grade School	High School
Adventist	100%	100%	0%
Baptist	80%	83.3%	100%
Catholic	81.8%	66.7%	17.9%
Christian	42.9%	20%	33.3%
Episcopal	-	-	-
Islamic	60%	80%	100%
Jewish	0%	0%	0%

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About Pioneer

Pioneer Institute is an independent, non-partisan, privately funded research organization that seeks to improve the quality of life in Massachusetts through civic discourse and intellectually rigorous, data-driven public policy solutions based on free market principles, individual liberty and responsibility, and the ideal of effective, limited and accountable government.



PIONEER INSTITUTE
PUBLIC POLICY RESEARCH

185 Devonshire Street, Suite 1101, Boston, MA 02110
T: 617.723.2277 F: 617.723.1880
www.pioneerinstitute.org