

RESEARCH BRIEFS

May 2011

Research on Milwaukee School Choice

Choice as a concept

The early proponents of school choice maintained that greater competition between public and choice schools would result in increased quality of both institutions, as measured by student achievement data. That competition would be fostered by providing parents with a tax-supported voucher to send their children to private schools.

History of the program

Enrollment in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program [MPCP] has increased since its inception in 1990, due in part to major changes in the law that allowed religious schools to participate; allowed students already attending private schools to receive vouchers; and loosened income requirements, expanding the pool of eligible families. Today, after \$1 billion in funding and increased support from Milwaukee property taxpayers, the voucher program stands as the second largest system in the state serving almost 20,000 students.

Voucher schools do not have to meet the same standards as public schools. Teachers do not have to be licensed and, until recent changes in the law, did not have to be college graduates. The schools do not have to meet federal or state accountability standards, such as those in No Child Left Behind, and experience no consequences for low performance. Until last year, choice schools did not have to participate in statewide testing.

For various reasons, students with disabilities tend not to choose voucher schools. As a result, 20 percent of students in Milwaukee Public Schools [MPS] today have some form of disability, compared to less than one percent of students in voucher schools.

The vast majority of choice schools rely heavily on public funds to operate. On average, 83 percent of students in participating schools receive vouchers. In one-half of the schools, more than 94 percent of students receive vouchers. Such high levels of tax support caused the State Superintendent to ask whether or not these schools are more public than private.¹

RESEARCH BRIEFS

The evidence: test scores

There have been numerous studies over the past two decades that compared students in MPS with students who participated in the MPCP. John Witte of UW-Madison completed five of these studies in the early to mid-nineties and reported slight, but insignificant differences in student performance.²

Since then, there have been four studies by the School Choice Demonstration Project at the University of Arkansas. The University of Arkansas reported results similar to those of Witte two decades earlier: that is, the differences in test scores did not consistently favor voucher or MPS students.³

In 2009-10, a new law required all students in the choice program to take the same Wisconsin Knowledge & Concepts Examinations as those in public schools. Overall, MPS students outperformed students in the MPCP in both reading and math. The State Superintendent said that “While both systems have some good schools, our statewide assessment data show, with very few exceptions, that the choice program provides similar or worse academic results than MPS.”⁴

Wisconsin Achievement Scores—2010-11 (Percent proficient or advanced)

| Subject | State | MPS | MPCP |
|-------------|-------|------|------|
| Mathematics | 77.2 | 47.8 | 34.4 |
| Reading | 83 | 59 | 55.2 |

Source: Department of Public Instruction, WKCE tests.

Academic achievement is redefined from test scores to graduation

After insisting for twenty years that market dynamics would improve academic achievement, school choice proponents recently redefined academic success to be based not on test scores but on high school graduation rates. High school graduation is very important, but that this should now become the primary measure of academic “attainment” is a classic “bait and switch” from earlier claims that choice would improve achievement in reading and math.

RESEARCH BRIEFS

MPS and other public schools, moreover, are judged by standardized test scores. Thus, school choice advocates maintain a double standard: that standardized test results are a valid measure for public schools, the results of which can be used for high-stakes decisions, but that standardized tests should not be used to judge voucher schools, because graduation rates are a more important measure there.

What is the graduation rate for choice schools?

Two studies about graduation rates frequently are cited by Wisconsin school choice advocates. The first is by Robert Warren, University Minnesota, and the second is by the School Choice Demonstration Project, University of Arkansas. In both cases, school choice advocates cherry pick statements and results to cast voucher schools in a favorable light.

Warren research

Warren found that in the 2007-08 school year, choice schools graduated 77 percent of their students while MPS graduated 65 percent—a difference of 12 percent.⁵

- School choice advocates consistently report that voucher schools have a graduation rate that is 18 percent higher than MPS. This 18 percent figure is obtained by taking the difference between 65 and 77—which is 12—and dividing that by 65 to generate the larger 18 percent difference. Generally speaking, the difference between 65 percent and 77 percent would simply be reported as 12 percent.⁶
- Warren himself, moreover, reports that his results do not show that choice schools cause higher graduation rates. Higher graduation rates could be due to factors outside the schools.

School Choice Demonstration Project research

The second study, by the School Choice Demonstration Project, reported different graduation rates based on different sets of available data. One analysis found the gap between MPS and MPCP students to be just six percent percent—one-half the difference found in the Warren study.⁷

A second different analysis by the School Choice Demonstration Project, based on just 318 of 801 students in the original sample, found that 300 of 318 students (94 %) graduated

RESEARCH BRIEFS

from the MPCP. This figure is misleading because we do not know what happened to the 483 students for which they have no data.

Assessing their overall findings, the authors state in the Executive Summary:

- “Ninth grade students who were in the MPCP in 2006-07 were more likely to graduate high school in 2009-10 than similar 9th grade students who were in MPS in 2006-07. These differences persisted after accounting for race, gender, and prior achievement, **but the effects were not statistically significant.**” In other words, the researchers could find no real difference in graduation rates between the two programs.⁸
- The strongest finding made by the team was that children who stayed in MPS for all four years, or children that stayed in the MPCP all four years, had the greatest likelihood of graduating and enrolling in college. This suggests that efforts to move children from one system to the other might actually decrease participation in higher education.⁹

Conclusion

As you read about these two studies, realize there are a host of factors that can affect graduation rates. These include:

- **Parental effects:** choice school parents might be more involved in their children’s education, affecting graduation more than anything done by the schools.
- **Admissions bias:** Only a few high schools participate in the choice program. A number of these private schools have admission criteria. Unlike public schools which must be open to all students, private schools can be more selective, which may affect graduation rates.
- **Potential differences in graduation requirements:** The extent to which the graduation requirements in MPS and voucher schools are alike or different is unknown. Do all voucher schools have the same graduation requirements? Do they all meet statewide graduation requirements for course work in English, reading, math and science?

RESEARCH BRIEFS

- **Differences in student population:** About 20 percent of students served by MPS have special needs, compared to less than one percent of children in the MPCP. Special needs may delay or prevent graduation for some students.¹⁰

For years, choice proponents maintained that student achievement would improve through competition if parents could send their children to private schools at taxpayer expense. Such claims have not been supported by the evidence. Today, voucher school proponents suggest that graduation rates are a more important measure of school success than test scores. Here too, however, the research fails to show that choice alone explains higher rates of student graduation.

Written by: Russ Allen Ph.D., and Jeffrey Leverich Ph.D.

Endnotes

¹ Department of Public Instruction, "Memo to Joint Finance," May 11, 2011.

² John Witte, <http://www.disc.wisc.edu/choice/aea97.html#ABSTRACT>.

³ School Choice Demonstration Project, http://www.uaedreform.org/SCDP/Milwaukee_Research.html.

⁴ Department of Public Instruction, <http://dpi.wi.gov/oea/pdf/MPCP-school-results-fall-2010.pdf>.

⁵ Robert Warren, http://www.schoolchoicewi.org/data/currdev_links/gradrates-8.5x11-FINAL.pdf.

⁶ School Choice Wisconsin, <http://www.schoolchoicewi.org/currdev/detail.cfm?id=322>.

⁷ School Choice Demonstration Project, "Student Attainment and the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program," p. 7, March 2011.

⁸ School Choice Demonstration Project, "Student Attainment and the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program," p. i, March 2011.

⁹ School Choice Demonstration Project, "Student Attainment and the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program," p. i, March 2011.

¹⁰ Milwaukee Public Schools, "Superintendent's Highlights," 2008-09 Report Card, 2009.