☞ **07hr_JC-Au_Misc_pt70**

☞ Details: Correspondence relating to School Choice Demonstration Project

(FORM UPDATED: 08/11/2010)

WISCONSIN STATE LEGISLATURE ...
PUBLIC HEARING - COMMITTEE RECORDS

2007-08
(session year)

Joint
(Assembly, Senate or Joint)

Committee on Audit...

COMMITTEE NOTICES ...

- Committee Reports ... **CR**
- Executive Sessions ... **ES**
- Public Hearings ... **PH**

INFORMATION COLLECTED BY COMMITTEE FOR AND AGAINST PROPOSAL

- Appointments ... **Appt** (w/Record of Comm. Proceedings)
- Clearinghouse Rules ... **CRule** (w/Record of Comm. Proceedings)
- Hearing Records ... bills and resolutions (w/Record of Comm. Proceedings)
  (**ab** = Assembly Bill) (**ar** = Assembly Resolution) (**ajr** = Assembly Joint Resolution)
  (**sb** = Senate Bill) (**sr** = Senate Resolution) (**sjr** = Senate Joint Resolution)
- Miscellaneous ... **Misc**

* Contents organized for archiving by: Stefanie Rose (LRB) (October 2012)

STATE OF WISCONSIN
Legislative Audit Bureau

22 E. Mifflin St., Ste. 500
Madison, Wisconsin 53703
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Fax (608) 267-0410
Leg.Audit.Info@legis.state.wi.us

Janice Mueller
State Auditor

February 22, 2006

Representative Peggy Krusick
128 North, State Capitol
Madison, Wisconsin 53702

Dear Representative Krusick:

At your request, we have reviewed statutory language contained in a bill draft related to the Milwaukee School Choice program (LRB 0547/3). The bill draft includes a section that requires involvement by the Legislative Audit Bureau in evaluating student performance in this program.

I have several observations related to SECTION 8 of the bill draft. First, the draft calls for annual standardized tests in three grades—fourth, eighth, and tenth—but it does not appear to specify that the students will be given the same test. According to established research practices, it is more difficult to draw firm conclusions about student achievement if different tests are used to measure student performance. There are methods that can be used to standardize scores from different tests but these methods have limitations, especially if the number of students taking a particular test is small.

Under s. 118.30, Wis. Stats., the State Superintendent of Public Instruction determines the academic testing system used for Wisconsin's public schools. Except for charter schools, which may use different tests if their use is approved by their respective school boards, *Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examination – Criterion-Referenced Tests* are to be given to all public school students in the grades being tested. Beginning in the 2005-06 school year, students in grades 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 10 are tested. Annually, the Department of Public Instruction publishes Wisconsin's Information Network for Successful Schools, a school report card that allows for comparison of student academic achievement among school districts and between schools within a district.

Second, the draft bill language states that test score data will be collected by researchers of a private school choice demonstration project. The language in SECTION 8 of the bill draft presupposes that we will have access to the raw data collected by the private researchers in order to conduct our own analyses. However, because the Wisconsin Legislature does not have the authority to compel this group to submit its data, it is not clear if the independent researchers would be willing to share these data with our office, whether they would charge for it, and if it would be provided in a timely manner upon completion of their analysis. These questions would need to be answered before we could proceed with our own analysis.

Finally, SECTION 8 of the bill draft states that the Legislative Audit Bureau "shall review and analyze the standardized test score data." However, it is not clear whether the legislative intent is that we simply review and comment on the private research group's findings and methodology, that we attempt to replicate the group's own procedures and results, or that we use available data to perform our own independent analysis. The type of approach we were directed to take would significantly affect the overall time and cost of our review.

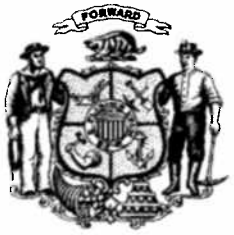
I hope you find this information helpful. Please contact me if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Janice Mueller
State Auditor

JM/bm


WISCONSIN STATE LEGISLATURE


FORWARD

Russ Decker

State Senator

August 28, 2007

Jan Mueller, Director
Legislative Audit Bureau
22 East Mifflin, Suite 500
Madison, WI 53703

Dear Ms. Mueller,

I am writing to request the standardized scores that are to be collected by the School Choice Demonstration Project pursuant to 2005 Act 125. I would like a list of all Milwaukee voucher schools that complied with the testing and reporting requirement and a breakdown by school of aggregate test scores.

Under the provisions of Act 125, Milwaukee voucher schools are required to annually administer the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examinations in the 4th, 8th and 10th grades as well as the 3rd grade Wisconsin Reading Comprehension Test. As you know, enhanced accountability was a key component of the agreement to expand the cap on the Milwaukee voucher program. In addition, what steps has the Bureau taken to ensure the integrity of the testing process and timely compliance with the law requiring an annual report on test scores? I have requested the same information for Milwaukee Public School pupils from the Department of Public Instruction, and they are in the process of compiling that information.

Thank you for your attention to this request, and please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Russ Decker
State Senator

State Capitol, P.O. Box 7882, Madison, WI 53707-7882 • (608) 266-2502
Legislative Hotline (toll-free) • 1-800-362-WISC (9472)


FORWARD

School Choice
WISCONSIN 2025 North Summit Avenue, Suite 103, Milwaukee, WI 53202 • Phone 414 319-9160 • Fax 414 765-0220

DATE: September 27, 2007

TO: Wisconsin Legislators

FROM: Susan Mitchell, President

I write in response to a press release yesterday from Senator Russ Decker regarding the research evaluation of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP).

For years Senator Decker has publicly misrepresented the facts regarding the MPCP. His release should be viewed in the context of this longstanding pattern. A partial list of his previous false claims include:

1. Repeated assertions, contradicted by the Legislative Fiscal Bureau, that school districts outside Milwaukee lose state aid because of the MPCP.

2. Statements that schools use selective admission practices to admit MPCP students and discriminate against students with special needs. Neither of these claims are true; it is no surprise that Senator Decker has never offered any evidence to support these falsehoods.

Five years ago, Senator Decker led an effort in the Wisconsin Senate to block a research study of the MPCP that was to be directed by the Legislative Audit Bureau. Two years later he voted against a separate bill calling for an LAB study and urged Governor Doyle to veto that bill.

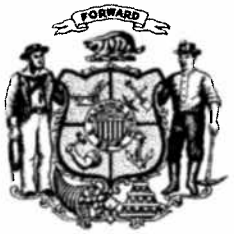
In his press release yesterday, Senator Decker misrepresents the status of a longitudinal evaluation of the MPCP that began a year ago. While he claims that the research team has not collected and reported test score data required by 2005 Wisconsin Act 125, the team in fact has collected the required data and will report it to the LAB later this year.*

Senator Decker wrongly asserts that the study team is "over a year late" in making this report to the LAB. As the first year's test score data cover the most recent 2006-07 school year, clearly the data are not "over a year late." Act 125 directs the LAB to report annually to the Legislature on the status of the research project. The act anticipated that the first such report would occur in 2007. It now is expected in 2008. Sen. Decker inflates this delay into the laughable claim of "yet another example of the voucher program's unwillingness to comply with minimal academic accountability requirements."

Given Sen. Decker's track record of misstatements, and his past efforts to block an independent evaluation of the MPCP, his misleading claims this week are unsurprising.

*It is my understanding that schools enrolling about 95 per cent of MPCP students administered tests required by Act 125. The Department of Public Instruction has indicated that it will hold accountable the small number of non-compliant schools. We support their actions to do so.


WISCONSIN STATE LEGISLATURE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Janice Mueller
State Auditor

September 11, 2007

Senator Russ Decker
122 South, State Capitol
Madison, Wisconsin 53702

Dear Senator Decker:

I am writing in response to your August 28th letter, which inquires about the status of the longitudinal evaluation of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program and the responsibilities of the Legislative Audit Bureau under s. 119.23(7)(e)2, Wis. Stats.

Statutes direct schools participating in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, beginning in 2006 and annually thereafter until 2011, to provide the scores of all standardized tests they administer to the School Choice Demonstration Project, a privately funded, multi-year research project. Statutes also direct the Legislative Audit Bureau to review and analyze the standardized test score data received from the School Choice Demonstration Project. Based on that review, we are required to report to the Legislature, in 2007 and annually thereafter until 2011, on the results of the standardized tests administered and on several other analyses of test scores, including comparisons with a group of pupils enrolled in Milwaukee Public Schools.

We have not yet received any test score data from the School Choice Demonstration Project. In November 2006, I contacted the project administrator and requested a status report. A copy of my letter is attached. In a subsequent telephone conversation, Dr. Patrick Wolf, the principal investigator on the project, informed me that he hoped baseline test score data would be provided to us late in spring 2007. On August 30, 2007, I met with Dr. John Witte of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, who is collaborating with Dr. Wolf on the academic research effort. Dr. Witte informed me that baseline data would now be provided to us later this year.

Given the delays in receiving the test score data, we will not be able to issue our first report in 2007, as contemplated in the statutes. In addition, because we have not yet received the test score data, I cannot at this time fulfill your specific requests for a list of all schools that have complied with the project's testing and reporting requirements and a breakdown, by school, of aggregate test scores.

After we receive the data, we will begin our review and provide the Legislature with an estimated date for our report's completion. At this time, we anticipate an independent analysis of the data we receive for students tested by the School Choice Demonstration Project.

Please contact me with any further questions.

Sincerely,

Janice Mueller
State Auditor

JM/bm

Enclosure

cc: Senator Jim Sullivan, Co-chair
Joint Legislative Audit Committee

Representative Suzanne Jeskewitz, Co-chair
Joint Legislative Audit Committee

Senator Julie Lassa
Senator Alan Lasee
Senator Robert Cowles

Representative Samantha Kerkman
Representative Kitty Rhoades
Representative David Cullen
Representative Joe Parisi

Dr. Patrick Wolf
University of Arkansas

Dr. John Witte
University of Wisconsin-Madison

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Janice Mueller
State Auditor

November 27, 2006

Mr. Stephen Cornman, Administrator
School Choice Demonstration Project
Georgetown University
Box 571444
3300 Whitehaven Street NW, Suite 5000
Washington, D.C. 20057-1485

Dear Mr. Cornman:

Section 119.23(7)(e)2, Wis. Stats., requires the Legislative Audit Bureau to "review and analyze the standardized test score data received from the School Choice Demonstration Project" and report annually to the Wisconsin Legislature on the results of our analysis beginning in 2007. Therefore, I am writing to inquire about the status of your work.

At last report, the School Choice Demonstration Project had not been implemented and was seeking funding. If adequate funding has been obtained and the project is underway, I would appreciate information about both its funding source or sources and when we can expect to begin receiving standardized test score data for analysis. If you have any questions, please contact me at (608) 266-2818.

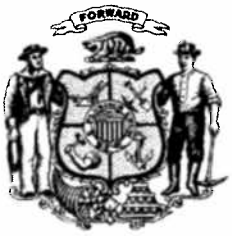
I look forward to your reply, which will assist me in planning the Bureau's work in 2007.

Sincerely,

Janice Mueller
State Auditor

JM/PS/bm

WISCONSIN STATE LEGISLATURE



WISCONSIN STATE LEGISLATURE

Joint Legislative Audit Committee

Committee Co-Chairs:
State Senator Jim Sullivan
State Representative Suzanne Jeskewitz

December 5, 2007

Dr. Patrick Wolf
201 Graduate Education Building
Department of Education Reform
College of Education and Health Professions
University of Arkansas
Fayetteville, Arkansas 72701

Dr. John Witte
217 North Hall
1050 Bascom Mall
Department of Political Science
University of Wisconsin-Madison
Madison, Wisconsin 53706

Dear Dr. Wolf and Dr. Witte:

As you are aware, the Legislative Audit Bureau was statutorily directed to review and analyze the standardized test score data received from the School Choice Demonstration Project. Based on that review, the Bureau is required to report to the Legislature, in 2007 and annually thereafter until 2011, on the results of the standardized tests administered and on several other analyses of test scores.

State Auditor Janice Mueller has indicated that the Bureau will not issue its first report to the Legislature until 2008 because it has taken longer than expected for the Project to obtain the baseline test score data. However, she has relayed your commitment to provide the data before the end of the year. We write to convey our expectation that the Bureau will receive this data this month.

The Wisconsin Legislature is interested in your information, your research, and the Bureau's analysis of it. Your efforts to provide the Bureau with baseline data in December 2007 will help to ensure that they are able to fulfill their independent role in this important longitudinal study of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program.

Thank you, in advance, for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

Senator Jim Sullivan, Co-chair
Joint Legislative Audit Committee

Representative Suzanne Jeskewitz, Co-chair
Joint Legislative Audit Committee

cc: Senator Julie Lassa
Senator Mark Miller
Senator Alan Lasee
Senator Robert Cowles

Janice Mueller
State Auditor

Representative Samantha Kerkman
Representative Kitty Rhoades
Representative David Cullen
Representative Joe Parisi

SENATOR SULLIVAN
P.O. Box 7882 • Madison, WI 53707-7882
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REPRESENTATIVE JESKEWITZ
P.O. Box 8952 • Madison, WI 53708-8952
(608) 266-3796 • Fax (608) 282-3624


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1995 (by statute
2000

Audit Request

— Let's Wait & see

Jan
— standardized test
—
Larry
— shall receive info
— info not defined

Jan met w/John Witte in Dec
— want test scores by school

→ gave us info on 12/28th
— not sure
— no personal identifiers
— not by school

UNIVERSITY of ARKANSAS

College of Education and Health Professions
Department of Education Reform
School Choice Demonstration Project

201 Graduate Education Building
Fayetteville, Arkansas 72701
(479) 575-6345
(479) 575-3196 (FAX)

December 20, 2007

Honorable Jim Sullivan, Co-chair
Joint Legislative Audit Committee
P.O. Box 7882
Madison, WI 53707-7882

Honorable Suzanne Jeskewitz, Co-chair
Joint Legislative Audit Committee
P.O. Box 8952
Madison, WI 53708-8952

Dear Senator Sullivan and Representative Jeskewitz:

I am writing in response to the letter from you dated December 5, 2007.

The School Choice Demonstration Project will deliver all test scores of MPCP students collected over the 2006-07 academic year to the Legislative Audit Bureau (LAB) this month. The data will be shorn of all personal signifiers, as required by the University of Arkansas Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Human Subjects Research and consistent with standard practices regarding independent scholarly research involving students.

If you have any additional questions regarding this matter, I can be reached at 479-575-2084 or pwolf@uark.edu.

Sincerely,

Patrick J. Wolf, Ph.D.
Principal Investigator
School Choice Demonstration Project

Cc: Janice Mueller, State Auditor
Dr. John Witte, Co-Principal Investigator, University of Wisconsin-Madison

Draft
January 2, 2008

Janice Mueller, State Auditor
Legislative Audit Bureau
22 East Mifflin Street, Suite 500
Madison, WI 53703

Dear Janice:

We respectfully request that the Legislative Audit Bureau conduct a comprehensive audit of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program to analyze the scores of all standardized tests administered to all pupils enrolled in every school that has participated in the program since 2002-03. We ask that these scores be reported by school, grade and subject.

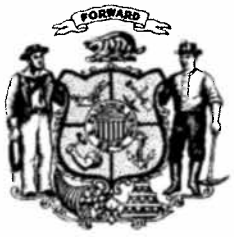
It is our understanding that, contrary to its request, the Legislative Audit Bureau last week only received limited test score data from the School Choice Demonstration Project. In fact, the data the bureau received will not enable its auditors to identify schools, grades or the subjects tested. In light of this troubling development and the inherent ambiguity of test score reporting requirements of the school choice expansion legislation (2005 Act 125), we believe a comprehensive independent audit of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program is warranted.

By the end of the current school year, Wisconsin taxpayers will have spent an estimated $750 million on the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program since its inception in 1990-91, according to the Legislative Fiscal Bureau. The 2007-09 state budget alone provides $242.6 million in taxpayer funding to choice schools without requiring them to report test scores by subject and grade. Wisconsin taxpayers, families and the public have a fundamental right to this information in order to help assess the academic achievement of these state-funded private schools.

Thanks for your consideration of our request.

Sincerely,


WISCONSIN STATE LEGISLATURE


FORWARD

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Janice Mueller
State Auditor

January 22, 2008

Senator Jim Sullivan and
Representative Suzanne Jeskewitz, Co-chairpersons
Joint Legislative Audit Committee
State Capitol
Madison, Wisconsin 53702

Dear Senator Sullivan and Representative Jeskewitz:

I write in response to questions raised by several legislators concerning the content and timing of our statutorily required analysis of the standardized test score data received from the School Choice Demonstration Project. Section 119.23 (7)(e) 2, Wis. Stats., requires the Bureau to report to the Legislature, in 2007 and annually thereafter until 2011, on the results of the standardized tests administered to pupils participating in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program and those who attend Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS). As you are aware, our first report to the Legislature will be delayed because we did not receive the baseline test score data from the Project until December 28, 2007.

We have completed a preliminary examination of the baseline test score data, which contain the results of the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examination tests that were administered during the 2006-07 school year to a sample of 2,727 pupils who attended schools participating in the Choice program, a sample of 2,727 MPS pupils who were selected based on their similarity to the sample of Choice pupils, and a random sample of 2,727 MPS pupils. Demographic and other information was also provided for these pupils.

With the data given to us, we anticipate that we can provide the Legislature with a report that analyzes the average baseline test score data, for reading and mathematics at each grade level, for each of the three groups of pupils and determine whether any differences in average test scores are statistically significant. We also anticipate providing summary demographic information for the three groups. However, because the test score data do not identify individual pupils or the schools where they were enrolled, we will be unable to report on the average test scores of pupils at individual Choice schools or determine whether pupils at some Choice schools scored significantly differently than those at other schools.

We will begin analyzing the test score data in earnest in the weeks ahead and anticipate releasing our first report to the Legislature later in 2008.

We appreciate the cooperation of the School Choice Demonstration Project in providing us with the baseline test score data and explaining its research methodology. Please contact me if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Janice Mueller
State Auditor

JM/bm

cc: Senator Julie Lassa
Senator Mark Miller
Senator Alan Lasee
Senator Robert Cowles

Representative Samantha Kerkman
Representative Kitty Rhoades
Representative David Cullen
Representative Joe Parisi

Dr. Patrick Wolf
School Choice Demonstration Project

Dr. John Witte
School Choice Demonstration Project


FORWARD

JANUARY 2008

"The high school diploma is the bare minimum credential necessary to have a fighting chance at successful participation in the workforce or civil society."

"Graduation Matters: Improving Accountability for High School Graduation"
The Education Sector, July 2007

Graduation Rates for Choice and Public School Students in Milwaukee

John Robert Warren, Ph.D.
University of Minnesota

School Choice WISCONSIN

Over four years, graduation rates for school choice students are (with only one exception) higher than those in MPS schools, generally by about 10 percentage points.

INTRODUCTION

Independent researchers have focused considerable attention in recent years on high school graduation rates.

Their research has called attention to unacceptably low graduation rates in America, and particularly in urban areas. Their work also highlights serious shortcomings in the way graduation data are reported. In the words of the respected Education Sector, the graduation problem has been "hidden from public view" by government reporting systems that "dramatically [undercount] dropouts."

Milwaukee, unique among American cities, provides an important laboratory for examining this issue. About one in four K-12 Milwaukee students use public programs to attend schools apart from the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS). The largest such program, enrolling 18,550 students in 2007-08, is the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP). It lets parents enroll their children in one of 122 participating private schools.

In a report issued four years ago, Jay Greene, Ph.D., estimated graduation rates for students in the MPCP and in MPS. Greene, a recognized national expert in the field, found that students in the MPCP graduated at a significantly higher rate than those in MPS. He cautioned that his finding applied to a single graduating class (the class of 2003).

In this report, another highly regarded scholar reviews Greene's estimate and looks at three additional years of data (the classes of 2004, 2005, and 2006). John Robert Warren, Ph.D., a recognized expert in the field, estimates a higher graduation rate for MPCP students in three of the four years. **The number of MPS graduates would have been 14 per cent higher if the graduation rate in MPS high schools equaled the MPCP graduation rate.**

These notable results are consistent with the claim that participation in the MPCP increases a student's chance of receiving a high school diploma. Whether participation in the MPCP causes that is being examined in ongoing independent research by the School Choice Demonstration Project.

Given the scope of the urban graduation crisis, the implications of Warren's findings extend well beyond Milwaukee.

Susan Mitchell
President, School Choice Wisconsin

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

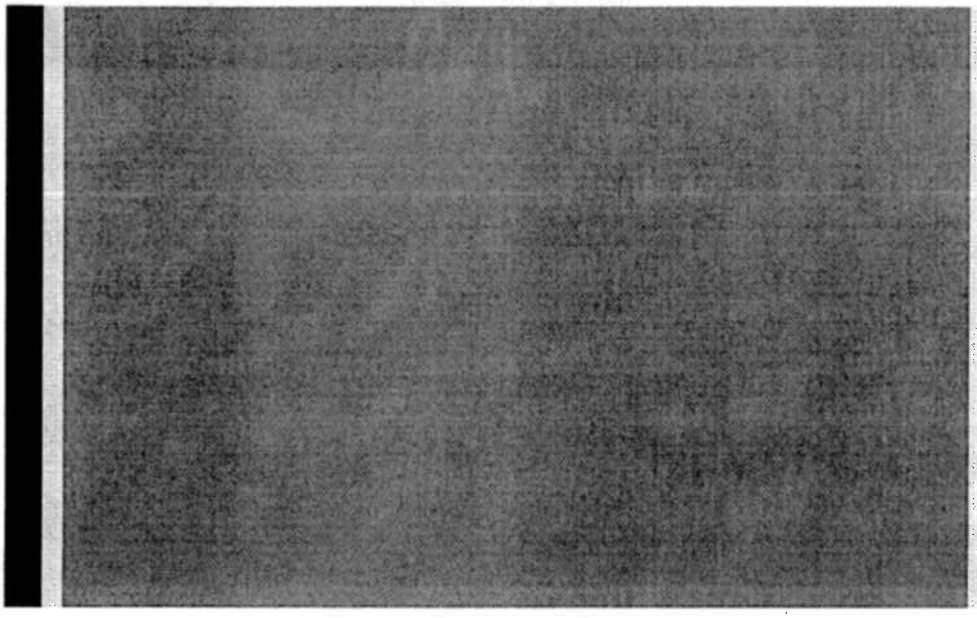
This study compares graduation rates of students in Milwaukee who use a voucher to attend a private high school with students who attend a public high school.

Four years ago Jay Greene reported graduation rates for a single year — 2002-03 — for students in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP) and students in the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS). This study provides updated evidence by presenting graduation rates for 2003-04, 2004-05, and 2005-06. In addition, it incorporates reasonable assumptions about the direction and magnitude of biases inherent in the type of graduation rate measure that Greene and this study use.

Based on the methods and assumptions described in this study, I conclude that students in MPCP schools are more likely to graduate from high school than students in MPS schools. In three of four years where sufficient data are available graduation rates for MPCP students are about ten percentage points higher than in MPS schools. In the fourth year the MPS graduation rate appears to be anomalously higher. Overall, had MPS graduation rates equaled those for MPCP students, the number of MPS graduates would have been 14 per cent higher in these four years.

Valuable additional research on this topic is ongoing as part of a longitudinal study directed by the School Choice Demonstration Project at the University of Arkansas.

Had MPS graduation rates equaled those for MPCP students, the number of MPS graduates would have been 14 per cent higher in these four years.



PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Do Milwaukee students benefit by using the MPCP to attend a private school instead of an MPS school?

Most prior evaluations have focused on whether students in the MPCP score better on tests of academic achievement than students in MPS schools. In two cases, researchers were able to compare students who were *randomly assigned* to MPCP schools to statistically equivalent students who were *randomly assigned* to attend MPS schools. This random assignment came about as a result of the way in which the MPCP program was designed and implemented. By law, when MPCP schools receive more applicants for admission than they can accommodate, they are required to hold a lottery. The result is that those students who are admitted do not differ in any systematic way from those who are not admitted and who thus attend MPS schools. Such randomized trials are the "gold standard" for researchers seeking to make valid claims about whether a particular treatment — in this case, attending MPCP schools — causes change in some outcome. The studies — published by Jay Greene and colleagues[1] in 1999 and Cecilia Rouse[2] in 1998—each demonstrated significantly higher mathematics test scores for MPCP students as compared to MPS students four years after enrolling in the program; the study by Jay Greene and colleagues also showed significantly higher reading test scores.

[1] Jay P. Greene, Paul E. Peterson, and Jiangtao Du. 1999. "Effectiveness of School Choice: The Milwaukee Experiment." *Education and Urban Society* 31: 190-213.

[2] Cecilia Elena Rouse. 1998. "Private School Vouchers and Student Achievement." *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 113: 553-602.

As Greene explained in his report[3] on 2002-03 graduation rates, these studies of test scores are limited in a number of respects, not the least of which is that they pertained to the program in its early years. Still, based on more recent evidence from randomized trials conducted in a number of other cities — including Charlotte, N.C., the District of Columbia, Dayton, O.H., and New York City — it does appear that programs like the MPCP have the effect of improving academic achievement, at least for some (generally disadvantaged) subgroups of students.[4]

Beyond all of this research on whether participating in a program like the MPCP matters for academic achievement, it is also important to ask whether participating in such a program matters for students' chances of completing high school. Decades of evidence from scholarship in sociology, economics, education, public health, political science and other disciplines makes plain that completing high school is a prerequisite for success in modern America. For example, individuals who do not complete high school enjoy fewer social and economic rewards later in life, they experience poorer health outcomes, they are less involved in the political process, and they are more likely to engage in criminal behavior.

If we accept the evidence that participating in programs like the MPCP improves academic achievement, we might rightly ask whether there are tradeoffs for rates of high school completion. After all, if participating in programs like the MPCP improves students' test scores but hurts their chances of graduating, then this may not be a tradeoff we are willing to accept. In 2004 Greene showed that graduation rates in 2002-03 were substantially higher for students in MPCP schools as compared to students in MPS schools. The present report updates that finding for three subsequent graduating classes and, more importantly, tests the methodological assumptions that underlie the analyses and central conclusions.

Evidence from "gold standard" research in other cities — Charlotte, N.C., the District of Columbia, Dayton, Ohio, and New York City — suggests that programs like the MPCP improve academic achievement for some groups of students.

[3] Jay P. Greene, 2004. "Graduation Rates for Choice and Public School Students in Milwaukee," Manhattan Institute for Policy Research and School Choice Wisconsin.

[4] See, for example: John Barnard, Constantine Frangakis, Jennifer Hill, and Donald Rubin. 2003. "Principal Stratification Approach to Broken Randomized Experiments: A Case Study of School Choice Vouchers in New York City." Journal of the American Statistical Association 98: 299-323; Joshua Cohen. Forthcoming. "School Choice as a Latent Variable: Estimating the 'Complier Average Causal Effect' of Vouchers in Charlotte." Policy Studies Journal; Jay Greene. 2001. "Vouchers in Charlotte." Education Matters 1: 55-60; Alan Krueger and Pei Zhu. 2004. "Another Look at the New York City School Voucher Experiment." The American Behavioral Scientist 47: 658-698; and Patrick Wolf, Babette Gutmann, Michael Puma, Lou Rizzo, Nada Eissa, and Marsha Silverberg. 2007. Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Impacts After One Year. US Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office.

A longitudinal study, now being conducted by the School Choice Demonstration Project, is the best way to measure graduation rates.

ESTIMATING MILWAUKEE'S GRADUATION RATE

The best way to measure graduation rates involves longitudinal tracking systems. Such systems closely monitor the school enrollment, school completion, and geographic location of every incoming high school student from the day they first enter high school until the time they permanently leave the secondary schooling system (regardless of how, when, or where they do so). Although such systems provide precise information about the share of incoming high school students who go on to graduate, in practice they are difficult and expensive to implement. School districts rarely have all of the financial or personnel resources that they need for such efforts, and even when they do they have a very difficult time monitoring the activities of students who leave their jurisdictions or who repeatedly leave and re-enter.[5]

[5] A five-year longitudinal study of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP) is currently being conducted. It is directed by the School Choice Demonstration Project at the University of Arkansas. One component of the study will track 2006-07 ninth graders in MPCP, matched to similar students in the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS). The study will follow both groups over several years to generate comparative rates of high school graduation. As this study is only in its second year, those results are unavailable.

An alternative technique for measuring Milwaukee's graduation rate involves comparing the number of graduates from Milwaukee high schools in the spring of calendar year X to the number of students who entered those schools for the first time as ninth graders in the fall of calendar year X-4. If none of those ninth graders die, if none are made to repeat any high school grades, and if the number of students who leave Milwaukee is exactly equal to the number of new students who move into Milwaukee, then this simple technique yields precisely accurate information about Milwaukee's high school graduation rate.

Of course, some ninth graders do die, some are made to repeat grades, and net migration rates are not exactly equal to zero. Thus, a simple comparison of the number of Milwaukee high school graduates in the spring of calendar year X to the number of enrolled ninth graders in the fall of calendar year X-4 is potentially biased by (1) mortality; (2) grade retention; and (3) net migration. A number of researchers have developed techniques for statistically adjusting for these sources of bias[6] in such measures, with varying degrees of success. As demonstrated elsewhere, the most accurate and empirically valid of these adjustment techniques is Warren's "Estimated Completion Rate" (ECR).[7] Unfortunately, computing the ECR for the Milwaukee schools is not technically possible—for one thing, it requires precise information about mortality rates and net migration rates among school-aged individuals, separately for those attending MPCP and MPS schools. It also requires information about the number of first time ninth graders (as opposed to the total number of ninth graders) in the fall of calendar year X-4. This information is not readily or completely available for the Milwaukee schools.

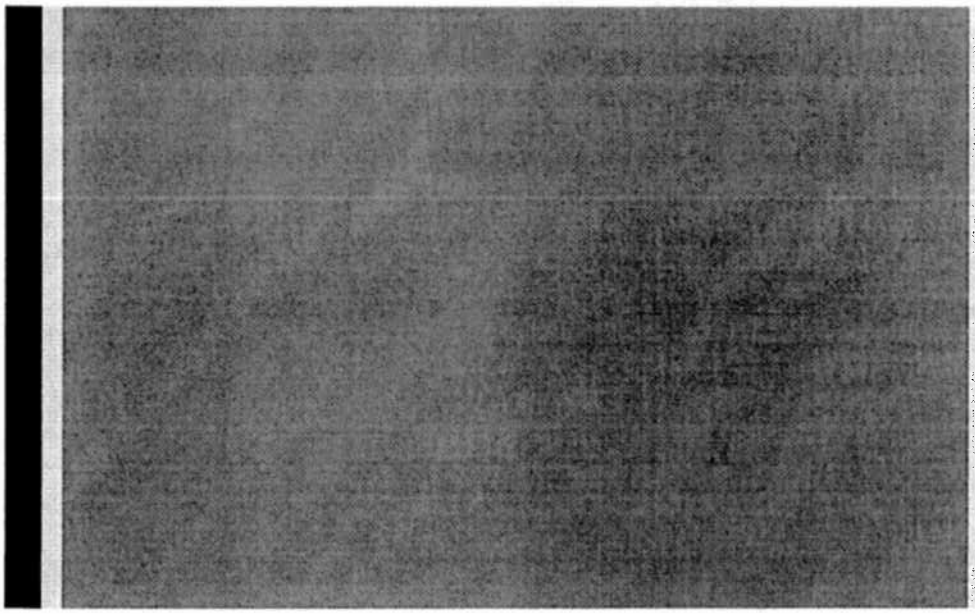
As Greene did in 2004, this study begins by producing graduate rate estimates for students in MPS and those participating in the MPCP by using the simple comparison of the number of high school graduates in the spring of calendar year X to the number of enrolled ninth graders in the fall of calendar year X-4. Cognizant of the potential biases inherent in these measures, however, this study then proceeds to provide detailed evidence about the likely direction and magnitude of the grade retention and net migration biases for our major findings.[8] As shown below, the basic initial findings hold even under reasonable assumptions about grade retention and net migration.

After accounting for possible bias in our method, the basic finding of higher school choice graduation rates still holds.

6 See Jay P. Greene, and Marcus A. Winters. 2005. *Public High School Graduation and College-Readiness Rates: 1991-2002.* New York: Center for Civic Innovation, Manhattan Institute. Walt Haney, George Madaus, Lisa Abrams, Anne Wheelock, Jing Miao, and Ileana Gruia. 2004. *The Education Pipeline in the United States, 1970–2000.* Chestnut Hill, MA: National Board on Educational Testing and Public Policy, Boston College. Marilyn Seastrom, Lee Hoffman, Chris Chapman, and Robert Stillwell. 2005. *The Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate for Public High Schools From the Common Core of Data: School Years 2001-02 and 2002-03.* NCES 2006-601. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Christopher Swanson and Duncan Chaplin. 2003. *Counting High School Graduates When Graduates Count.* Washington, D.C.: Education Policy Center, Urban Institute.

7 See John Robert Warren. 2005. "State-Level High School Completion Rates: Concepts, Measures, and Trends." *Education Policy Analysis Archives* (Retrieved March 13, 2006 from http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v13n51/).

8 Mortality rates are (fortunately) generally very low among high school aged people, and are also unlikely to differ much between students attending MPS and MPCP schools. Thus, we do not discuss the role of mortality in biasing our results.



RESULTS

Information on MPS enrollment counts and numbers of graduates comes from the MPS "Official State Aids (School Enrollment) Report" and the "Wisconsin School Performance Report."[9] Similar information was obtained for private schools participating in the MPCP program from surveys of those schools.[10] Based on the resulting data, for each of four consecutive academic years (2002-03 through 2005-06) this study estimates high school graduation rates by taking the sum of all graduates in each academic year and then dividing by the sum of all ninth grade enrollments three academic years earlier (in 1999-00 though 2002-03). The graduation rates for 2002-03 in Table 1 are equivalent to those that Greene reported in 2004; they are included here for sake of comparison.

A school was only included if both ninth grade enrollment and graduation data were available for that school. Across the four years data were available for between 33 and 38 public high schools, charter schools, and "partnership" schools in Milwaukee. The partnership schools are schools that operate under contract with the public school system and focus on at risk students. Including charter and partnership schools is essential because they are all part of the public-school system. Excluding them would artificially inflate the graduation rate by excluding schools that the public system creates or employs specifically to educate some of their students who are at greatest risk of failing to graduate. Data were also available for between 8 and 13 private schools in the MPCP program across the four years, including virtually all participating schools with a substantial number of high school students.

[9] The MPS Office of Student Services calculates the district's Official State Aids Report every year during the district's official third Friday in September enrollment count. Published by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction in May for the prior school year, the Wisconsin School Performance Report serves as the state's annual public school report card. See http://www2.dpi.state.wi.us/spr/.

[10] Abigail Schumwinger, a researcher at School Choice Wisconsin, conducted a survey under Greene's direction and review for his 2004 report. Researcher Michael Ford of School Choice Wisconsin conducted a similar survey under my direction and review for this report.

Table 1 reports the number of ninth grade students in 1999-00 through 2002-03 and the number of high school graduates in 2002-03 through 2005-06, separately for MPCP and MPS schools. For 2005-06 (the most recent year for which complete data are available), the estimated graduation rate in MPS schools equals 3,749/8,831, or 43%. The estimated graduation rate for MPCP schools in that year equals 220/384, or 57%. Table 1 generally shows similar estimates for 2002-03 through 2004-05.

TABLE 1.

Graduation Rates (All schools with sufficient data)

	MPCP SCHOOLS				MILWAUKEE PUBLIC SCHOOLS			
	'02-'03	*'03-'04*	*'04-'05*	*'05-'06*	*'02-'03*	*'03-'04*	*'04-'05*	*'05-'06*
Graduation Rate	**64%**	**59%**	**58%**	**57%**	**36%**	**48%**	**40%**	**43%**
Ninth Graders	262	267	284	384	9,226	7,976	8,972	8,831
Graduates	167	157	164	220	3,329	3,795	3,585	3,749
Number of Schools	10	8	11	13	37	33	38	37

Because the numbers of schools in our estimates differ across academic years, it would not be technically appropriate to compare graduation rates in Table 1 across years (e.g., to compare the MPCP graduation rate in 2002-03 to the rate in 2005-06). To facilitate such a comparison, Table 2 restricts the schools in our analysis to those with complete information for all four academic years under consideration. This limits the scope to 30 MPS schools and 6 MPCP schools. Table 2 presents graduation rate estimates based on these subsets of schools.

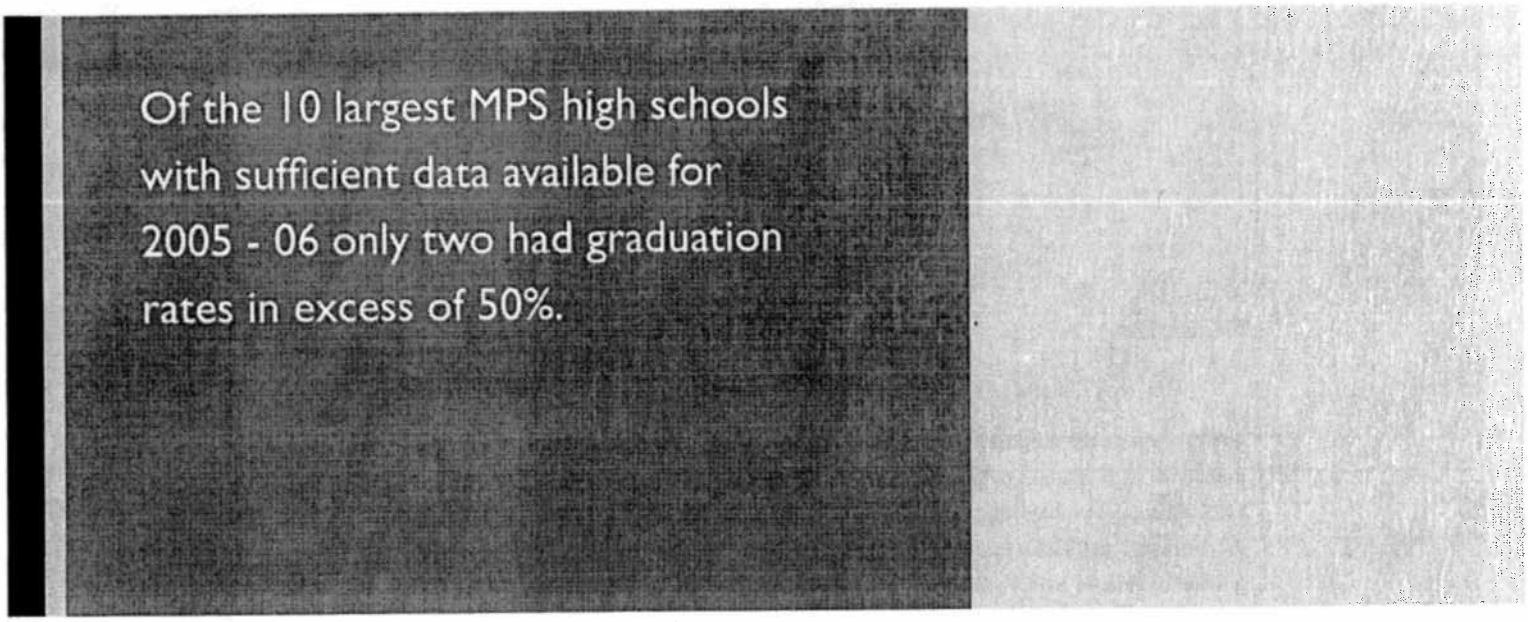


TABLE 2.

Graduation Rates (Schools with complete data for all years)

	MPCP SCHOOLS				MILWAUKEE PUBLIC SCHOOLS			
	'02-'03	*'03-'04*	*'04-'05*	*'05-'06*	*'02-'03*	*'03-'04*	*'04-'05*	*'05-'06*
Graduation Rate	**59%**	**57%**	**58%**	**61%**	**36%**	**49%**	**39%**	**40%**
Ninth Graders	179	247	256	251	8,344	7,296	7,968	8,517
Graduates	105	142	148	152	3,003	3,548	3,113	3,417
Number of Schools	6	6	6	6	30	30	30	30

The graduation rate for MPCP schools appears to have remained more or less unchanged over these four years. It might be tempting to conclude that the graduation rate in MPS schools declined substantially after 2003-04. However, given that the estimated graduation rate for the Milwaukee public schools in 2002-03 was 36% it seems more likely that 2003-04 was simply an anomalous year.

These broad patterns of difference between MPCP and MPS schools should not be taken to mean that all Milwaukee public high schools have low graduation rates or that all MPCP schools have high graduation rates. However, of the 10 largest MPS high schools with sufficient data for 2005-06,[11] only two had graduation rates in excess of 50%. Of the 3 largest MPCP schools with sufficient data for that year, none had graduation rates below 50%.[12] This study does not identify graduation rates for individual schools, reflecting its purpose — which is to compare overall graduation rates between MPS and MPCP schools — but also because of potentially serious biases in individual schools' graduation rates (which average out when school-level data are aggregated to the district level).

11 Size of school is based on the number of ninth graders in the fall of 2002. Of the 8,903 ninth graders in Milwaukee public schools in the fall of 2002, 6,250 — or 70% — attended these 10 schools.

12 Again, size of school is based on the number of ninth graders in the fall of 2002. Of the 417 ninth graders in MPCP schools in the fall of 2002, 234 — or 56% — attended these 3 schools.

CORRECTING FOR POTENTIAL BIAS

The graduation rate estimates in Tables 1 and 2 are potentially biased by (1) mortality; (2) grade retention; and (3) net migration. In this section we investigate the possible magnitude of grade retention and net migration biases and assess the extent to which they may affect our conclusion that graduation rates are higher in MPCP schools than in Milwaukee public schools.

GRADE RETENTION. Imagine that there are 100 ninth graders in a school in the fall of calendar year X-4 and that 90 students graduate from that school in the spring of calendar year X. We would conclude based on the methodology used above that the graduation rate for the school equals 90/100 or 90%. But what if 10 of the 100 ninth graders in the fall of calendar year X were repeating the ninth grade, such that only 90 of the 100 ninth graders were attending the ninth grade for the first time? These 10 repeat ninth graders would be counted in the denominator of our graduation rate calculation in two different years, but in the numerator a maximum of once. As a result, our estimated graduation rate — 90/100 = 90% — would be downwardly biased. In fact, the denominator should exclude the 10 students who are repeating the ninth grade, and the correct graduation rate is thus 90/90 = 100%.

NET MIGRATION. Imagine again that there are 100 ninth graders in a school in the fall of calendar year X-4 and that 90 students graduate from that school in the spring of calendar year X. As before, using our methodology we would conclude that the graduation rate equals 90/100 or 90%. But what if 50 more students moved into the school than left the school (through death or migration) between the ninth and 12th grades? In this case, there would be 150 — not 100 — prospective graduates and an unbiased graduation rate would equal 90/150, or 60%.

The lesson is that simple graduation rates like those in Tables 1 and 2 are downwardly biased by grade retention, upwardly biased by net in-migration, and downwardly biased by net out-migration. Given that Tables 1 and 2 do not account for grade retention or net migration, how likely is it that these biases seriously affect the major conclusions?

This report demonstrates that graduation rates are generally higher among school choice students than among students in MPS. Whether this is caused by school choice can only be addressed with a stronger research design.

[13] Here we can count death as a form of out-migration.

A total of nine different scenarios were examined to validate the main findings.

Table 3 illustrates, through nine scenarios, how graduation rates for MPCP and MPS schools for 2005-06 would change under a variety of assumptions about grade retention rates and net migration. Using the numbers of ninth graders and graduates reported in Table 2, Table 3 reports graduation rates when grade retention rates vary between 5% and 25% and total net migration rates vary between -10% and +10%. Table 3 accomplishes this by adjusting the number of 2002-03 ninth graders in our graduation rate calculations from Table 2 to reflect the number of individuals who would actually be candidates for graduating from high school under these nine scenarios.

For both MPCP and MPS schools, the *highest* estimated graduation rates are observed if we assume net out-migration (-10%) and fairly high rates of ninth grade retention (25%). Conversely the *lowest* estimated graduation rates are observed if we assume net in-migration (+10%) and fairly low rates of ninth grade retention (5%).

TABLE 3.

Estimated Graduation Rates for 2005-06 under Different Assumptions About Grade Retention and Net Migration Rates

		MPCP SCHOOLS			MILWAUKEE PUBLIC SCHOOLS		
		Ninth Grade Retention Rate			*Ninth Grade Retention Rate*		
		5%	15%	25%	5%	15%	25%
NET MIGRATION RATE	-10%	71%	79%	90%	47%	52%	59%
	0%	64%	71%	81%	42%	47%	53%
	+10%	58%	65%	73%	38%	43%	49%

The most important point to be made about Table 3 concerns the range of possible graduation rates for MPCP and MPS schools. It is certainly true that measures like those presented in Tables 1 and 2 are subject to systematic bias due to their failure to account for grade retention, net migration, and mortality. But how large are those biases in this case? And how do they affect our comparison of MPCP and MPS school graduation rates? Table 3 helps answer those questions.

For MPCP schools, the unbiased graduation rate for 2005-06 almost certainly falls somewhere between 58% and 90% (assuming that grade retention rates are no higher than 25% and that net migration falls within the range of +/- 10%). Any estimate outside this range would have to assume even more extreme ninth grade retention and/or net migration rates than those included in Table 3. In contrast, for MPS schools the unbiased graduation rate for 2005-06 almost certainly falls somewhere between 38% and 59%. An important lesson from Table 3 is that the true difference in graduation rates between MPCP and Milwaukee public schools depends on their respective ninth grade retention and net migration rates. However, if we assume that the MPCP graduation rate is at the minimum of this range of rates — 58% — and the MPS graduation rate is at the maximum of this range of rates — 59% — the most extreme conclusion that we could come to is that graduation rates in MPCP and MPS schools are about the same. Such a conclusion of more-or-less equal graduation rates would have to be based on evidence that the simple MPS and MPCP graduation rates like those presented in Table 2 are both highly biased but in opposite directions.

Although there is little direct evidence on this point, there is some reason to suspect that MPCP schools have much lower grade retention rates than Milwaukee public schools. Whereas the MPS schools' official ninth grade retention rate has consistently been between about 20% and 25% in recent years, MPCP school administrators report that ninth grade retention is quite rare in their schools. The figures at our disposal are consistent with large differences between MPS and MPCP schools with respect to ninth grade retention rates. If we simply compute the ratio of the number of ninth graders in 2002 to the number of tenth graders in 2003 — a very crude technique for estimating the proportion of ninth graders in one year who go on to the tenth grade the following year—we observe ratios of 1.02 for MPCP schools and 1.53 for MPS schools. That is, in the MPCP schools included in our graduation rate calculation there were about 2% more ninth graders in 2002 than there were tenth graders in 2003. In contrast, in the MPS schools in

Some — but not all — of the difference in graduation rates is due to differences between MPCP and MPS schools in rates of 9th grade retention.

If the MPS graduation rate had been equal to the rate for school choice students a cumulative total of 1,870 additional MPS students would have graduated over the four years — a 14.3 per cent increase.

our graduation rate calculation there were about 53% more ninth graders in 2002 than there were 10th graders in 2003. Returning to Table 3, this means that the most accurate graduation rate estimates for 2005-06 for MPCP schools are probably those that assume a 5% grade retention rate. The most accurate graduation rate estimates for 2005-06 for the Milwaukee public schools are probably those that assume a 25% grade retention rate.

Even allowing for these large differences in ninth grade retention rates, we still observe that high school graduation rates in 2005-06 in MPCP schools are at least as high as those observed in MPS schools. In order to conclude that graduation rates are actually the *same or lower* in MPCP schools than in MPS schools we would have to assume that the two groups of schools experience very different rates of net migration. Specifically, we would have to assume that the graduation rate estimates for MPCP schools are *upwardly* biased by high net *in*-migration and/or that the graduation rate estimates for the Milwaukee public schools are *downwardly* biased by high net *out*-migration rates. While MPCP and Milwaukee public schools appear to experience very different ninth grade retention rates, we see no evidence that they experience markedly different net migration rates. In the end it seems that part — but clearly not all — of the differences between MPCP and MPS school graduation rates in Tables 1 and 2 can be accounted for by differences in ninth grade retention rates.

[14] These ratios — 1.02 for MPCP schools and 1.53 for Milwaukee public schools — should *not* be taken as good estimates of rates of ninth grade retention. For one thing, they conflate ninth grade retention and high school drop-out. We present them only to suggest that the data at our disposal are consistent with large disparities in ninth grade retention rates between MPCP schools and Milwaukee public schools.

Accordingly, Table 4 revises the estimates presented in Table 2 such that for each year it assumes: (1) a 25% ninth grade retention rate for MPS students; (2) a 5% ninth grade retention rate for MPCP students; and (3) no net migration among either MPS or MPCP students.

TABLE 4.

Graduation Rates after Adjusting for Ninth Grade Retention (Schools with complete data for all years)

	MPCP SCHOOLS *(Assuming 5% Ninth Grade Retention Rate)*				MILWAUKEE PUBLIC SCHOOLS *(Assuming 25% Ninth Grade Retention Rate)*			
	'02-'03	'03-'04	'04-'05	'05-'06	'02-'03	'03-'04	'04-'05	'05-'06
Graduation Rate	**62%**	**61%**	**61%**	**64%**	**48%**	**65%**	**52%**	**53%**
Adjusted Ninth Graders	170	235	243	238	6,258	5,472	5,976	6,388
Observed Ninth Graders	179	247	256	251	8,344	7,296	7,968	8,517
Graduates	105	142	148	152	3,003	3,548	3,113	3,417
Number of Schools	6	6	6	6	30	30	30	30

After making these assumptions, we see that graduation rates in MPCP schools are (with only one exception) higher than those in MPS schools in each year, generally by about 10 percentage points. The only year in which MPS graduation rates appear to be slightly higher than MPCP graduation rates is 2003-04; again, as noted above it appears that the MPS graduation rate is anomalously high in this year.

What if the MPS graduation rate in these four years had been equal to the rate for high school students in the MPCP? If, for example, the 6,388 potential ninth grade MPS graduates in 2006 had graduated at the MPCP rate of 64%, we would have observed 4,088 MPS graduates in that year-an increase of 671 over what we actually observed. Table 5 shows that a cumulative total of 1,870 additional MPS students would have graduated under that scenario over the four years, a 14.3 per cent increase.

TABLE 5.

Hypothetical Number of MPS Graduates Based on MPCP Graduation Rates

	'02-'03	*'03-'04*	*'04-'05*	*'05-'06*	*Total*	*% Chg.*
Actual MPS Graduates	3,003	3,548	3,113	3,417	13,081	n/a
MPS Graduates if at MPCP rate	3,880	3,338	3,645	4,088	14,951	n/a
Difference	+877	-210	+532	+671	+1,870	+14.3

Recent independent studies of high school graduation rates have generally produced lower graduation rate estimates than those issued by school districts and state education agencies.

OFFICIAL GRADUATION RATES

According to the MPS, "as of the 2005-2006 school year, the MPS graduation rate stands at 68%."[15] This is 15 percentage points higher than the MPS graduation rate shown for that year in Table 4. Separately, for 2004-05, the MPS reports a 65% graduation rate , whereas this study estimates the 2004-05 rate to be 52%.

Recent independent studies of high school graduation rates have generally produced lower graduation rate estimates than those issued by school districts and state education agencies.[16] A variety of factors help to explain these lower independent estimates; several of the most prominent are discussed below.

[15] MPS Office of Communications and Public Affairs, August 9, 2007. "Response to conference committee remarks on MPS graduation rates." http://mpsportal.milwaukee.k12.wi.us/portal/server.pt?in_hi_space=SearchResult&in_hi_control=bannerstart&in_hi_userid=2&in_tx_query=graduation+rates

[16] See, for example, Jay P. Greene. 2004. "Graduation Rates for Choice and Public School Students in Milwaukee." Manhattan Institute for Policy Research and School Choice Wisconsin; John Robert Warren. 2005. "State-Level High School Completion Rates: Concepts, Measures, and Trends." *Education Policy Analysis Archives* (Retrieved March 13, 2006 from http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v13n51/); Christopher B. Swanson and Carole Bausell. 2007. "Diplomas Count: Ready for What? Preparing Students for College, Careers, and Life after High School." Bethesda, MD: Editorial Projects in Education.

One A key factor involves the manner in which non-graduating students are classified in official graduation rate estimates.

The official high school graduation rate in Milwaukee (as in all other Wisconsin public school districts) is defined for an academic year as the ratio of (1) the number of students who obtained regular high school diplomas in that year to (2) the total number of students expected to complete high school in MPS in that year. Those "expected to complete high school in MPS" include those who obtained regular diplomas, those who obtained alternate credentials (e.g., GEDs or certificates of completion), non-completers who reached the maximum age at which individuals are granted a free public education, and non-completers who dropped out of high school in the four preceding academic years. Only students who obtain regular high school diplomas are counted as graduates in the numerator of this formula.

Because students who move out of the district (or who die) are not expected to complete high school in MPS, they are not counted in the denominator of this ratio. However, students who drop out, who obtain alternate credentials, or who "age out" of the school system are counted in the denominator. The official method thus makes it crucial that students who leave the district are properly classified. More specifically, if a dropout is wrongly assumed to have moved to another district that student is not included in the denominator; the effect is to upwardly bias the graduation rate.

This official method is difficult to administer in urban areas with highly mobile populations and disproportionate numbers of students in low- and moderate-income families. The method requires school officials to keep track of and properly classify the residential and attendance status of tens of thousands of students. The potential for erroneous or inconsistent classification of students is high.

MPS rates are based on school officials' complicated classifications of students as out-migrants (who are not counted in the graduation rate), as dropouts (who are counted in the graduation rate), and so forth. When a student leaves school, administrators are required to assign one of several "exit codes" that classify that student as either having transferred, dropped out, or completed high school. Given the large numbers of students involved and the difficulties associated with determining with certainty what has happened to every student, it would be understandable if some students were misclassified. Unfortunately, the degree to which administrative misclassifications bias the MPS high school graduation rate is not clear.

Two This study's estimate for 2004-05 is based on the 30 schools for which we have complete information for 2002-03 through 2005-06; the MPS estimate is based on all students in the district in 2004-05. Thus it may be that our subset of schools graduates students at a lower rate than the rest of the district. This is unlikely, however, because the 30 schools that form the basis of our calculation enrolled 88% of all ninth graders in the district in fall of 2001 and issued 81% of all regular diplomas in spring of 2005.

Three This study assumes that net migration of MPS students to and from the district during the high school years equals zero. That is, it assumes that the number of students moving out of the district exactly equals the number of students moving in. If we begin with the figures in Table 4 that pertain to the MPS graduation rate in 2004-05 and instead assume a net out-migration rate of 15%, we arrive at a revised estimate of 3,113 / (5,976 x 0.85) = 61%. However, because we see no reason to believe that net migration rates differ substantially between students in MPCP and MPS schools, the basic findings presented in Table 4 still hold. Students in MPCP schools are (at least) as likely to graduate as those in MPS schools. In most years they are considerably more likely to do so.

CONCLUSION

This report and Greene's in 2004 describe an intuitively simple technique for calculating high school graduation rates that is based on a comparison of the number of regular diploma recipients in one year to the number of ninth graders three academic years earlier. As in 2004, this study uses this technique to compare graduation rates for students in MPCP and MPS schools. This study updates the comparisons in the 2004 report to include three additional years.

The 2004 report relied exclusively on simply comparing the number of graduates in one year to the number of ninth graders three academic years earlier. This study endeavors to deal with two potentially serious problems with such a measure. Specifically, such a measure is unbiased only when no students are made to repeat the ninth grade and when the net migration rate of students into and out of the district equals zero.[17]

After making reasonable assumptions about grade retention and net migration rates in MPCP and MPS schools, this study finds that graduation rates are about 10 percentage points higher in MPCP schools than in MPS schools for three of the four years we consider. In the fourth year, the MPS graduation rate appears to be anomalously high.

This report demonstrates that graduation rates are generally higher among students in MPCP schools than they are among students in MPS schools.

By law, students who participate in the MPCP are from lower-income families.[18] Students in MPS schools come from a much broader range of social and economic backgrounds. Given the well-documented relationship between socioeconomic background and high school completion rates, this fact suggests that we ought to observe lower high school completion rates among students in MPCP schools. On the other hand, families who are sufficiently motivated to make use of vouchers and to send their children to MPCP schools may be different from other families in such a way that would lead us to expect higher graduation rates among students in MPCP schools. This report demonstrates that graduation rates are generally higher among students in MPCP schools than they are among students in MPS schools. Whether this association is causal in nature — that is, whether these higher graduation rates are due to selection bias or to something real that is going on in MPCP schools — is a question that can only be addressed using a stronger research design. In this regard, we eagerly await the results of the longitudinal study being conducted as part of the School Choice Demonstration Project at the University of Arkansas. This project, which involves matched pairs of students in MPS and MPCP schools — will help address this question of causality.

17 The 2004 report described substantial differences (about 28 percentage points) in graduation rates between students who attend MPCP schools and those who attend MPS schools. The current report concludes that some — but not all — of those differences are due to differences between MPCP and MPS schools in ninth grade retention rates.

18 In 2007-2008, income eligibility to enter the MPCP is $35,843 for a family of four.

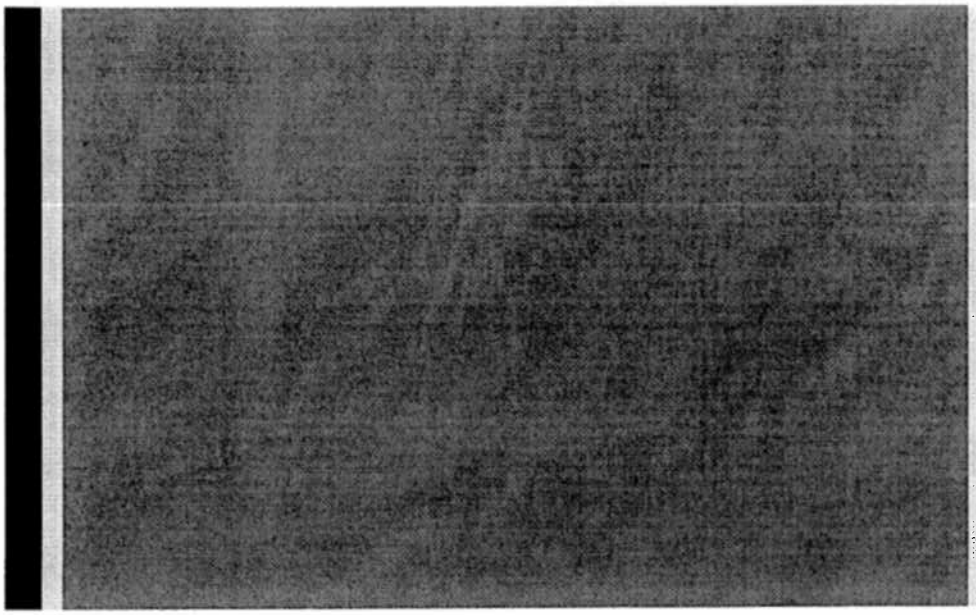
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Robert Warren is an Associate Professor and Director of Undergraduate Studies in the Department of Sociology at the University of Minnesota—Twin Cities. Dr. Warren received his doctorate in 1998 from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

His published scholarship reflects extensive examination of issues associated with the accurate measurement of high school graduation rates. In "State-Level High School Completion Rates: Concepts, Measures, and Trends," he provides a comprehensive review of those issues and validates a rigorous new method for accurately calculating graduation rates (see *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, Vol. 13, No. 51, December 23, 2005 — http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v13n51/).

Dr. Warren participates with scholars at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study (WLS), an extensive long-term research project involving graduates of Wisconsin high schools in 1957 (see http://www.wisls.org/about.htm).

He also is a recognized expert in the emerging issue of state high school exit examinations and their consequences.



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Both sides find fodder in study

Voucher supporters, opponents point to favorable results

By DANI McCLAIN
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Posted: Feb. 25, 2008

Early results from a planned five-year evaluation of Milwaukee's voucher program spurred a range of reaction Monday, with school choice supporters arguing that the data challenges myths about the program and opponents pointing to the nearly identical state test scores of MPS and voucher school students.

"After 13 years of research, there's still not one study that shows that the voucher schools do a better job of educating our income-challenged kids than MPS," said Guy Costello, vice president of the Wisconsin Education Association Council.

Costello's comments centered on a segment of the study that says that voucher school students in third through fifth grades are scoring slightly below their MPS counterparts in the math and reading sections of state standardized tests, with any real difference in scores disappearing by the middle school years.

But differences in test scores among voucher schools also deserve some attention, said Anneliese Dickman, a researcher with the nonpartisan think tank Public Policy Forum, who has studied the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program.

"People tend to paint the voucher program with a broad brush and classify all these schools as one," Dickman said. "It's really inappropriate to categorize them as one entity. They're not, and it shows in the scores."

Both Dickman and Mike Ford, a researcher with School Choice Wisconsin, said they were pleased by the report's findings that the parents of both MPS and voucher students are generally satisfied with their children's schools, with 87% of choice and 74.5% of MPS parents reporting that they would give their child's current school a grade of A or B, compared with 67% of parents nationwide expressing that level of satisfaction.

"We're excited that choice parents are more satisfied," said Ford, whose group advocates on behalf of the voucher program. "Both MPS and choice parents have higher satisfaction than the national average. Parents are satisfied with the choices they're getting."

Ford said the study helps combat a number of myths he said are promulgated by opponents of school choice, namely that voucher schools don't attempt to meet the needs of special education students.

According to the report, around two-thirds of voucher programs offer services for students with learning problems.

Still, based on the parent survey portion of the report, around 18% of MPS parents report having a child with a learning disability. That's more than twice the number of voucher school parents reporting children with special needs.

Tim Sheehy, president of the Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce, said the early reports had little effect on his continued support for the voucher program.

"The cynic would say, 'Well, if they're not any better, at least they're doing it with less cost,' " Sheehy said, adding that he did not see this as a sound basis for an educational policy. "I think this is a good opportunity to provide information to a community that desperately needs to raise the education performance of its young people."

Both Milwaukee Public Schools and state Department of Public Instruction officials said they hadn't had enough time with the study to comment on its results.

Howard Fuller, director of the Institute for the Transformation of Learning, wrote in a statement that he welcomes the report and looks forward to the dozens that will follow as the study progresses.

"We should find a way to end the fight over how kids get to our various schools in this community and focus on what happens once they get there," Fuller wrote. "Our children deserve no less from us."

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Voucher study finds parity

Students achieve about as well as those at MPS

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The first full-force examination since 1995 of Milwaukee's groundbreaking school voucher program has found that students attending private schools through the program aren't doing much better or worse than students in Milwaukee Public Schools.

The study, released Monday in Madison, is the first from a five-year project aimed at providing a comprehensive evaluation of the voucher program, which this year is allowing more than 18,000 Milwaukee children from low-income families to attend private schools, 80% of them religious schools.

The authors caution repeatedly that stronger conclusions will come only when trends over several years can be examined, and not much should be read into this year's results.

But the early findings, based on examining standardized test results for voucher students and comparing them to those of a matched set of MPS students, are unlikely to be seen as good news by advocates of the program that was launched in 1990 with hopes of being a powerful step to increase educational success among the city's children.

The Milwaukee program is the largest, oldest and arguably most significant school voucher effort in the United States. As Patrick J. Wolf, the lead researcher in the project, wrote, "When one thinks of school choice, one thinks of Milwaukee."

"We have displayed a rough and limited snapshot of the average performance of Choice (Milwaukee Parental Choice Program) students in certain grades that suggests they tend to perform below national averages but at levels roughly comparable to similarly income-disadvantaged students in MPS," Wolf, a professor at the University of Arkansas, concluded.

At one point in the reports, researchers use the phrase "relative parity" in describing the small differences between the performance of MPS students and voucher students.

They say there is little evidence that voucher schools are "skimming the cream" by taking the best students from MPS, as some critics have claimed. What they conclude is that the performance of both MPS and voucher students is fairly typical for low-income students nationally, pointing at the broader American dilemma of how

to achieve widespread educational success among poor children, minority children and children from homes where there is little history of educational success.

Apples-to-apples effort

The researchers' conclusions are based on test results from the 2006-'07 school year, when they gave a sample of voucher students the same tests given to public school students in Wisconsin and compared the results to those of a scientifically matched group of MPS students.

• Overall, they found, fourth-grade voucher students scored "somewhat lower" than MPS students but eighth-grade voucher students scored "somewhat higher."

• At all grades, both MPS and voucher students had overall test scores well below the 50th percentile nationally, and generally around the 33rd percentile, meaning they were generally scoring lower than two-thirds of students.

Results for individual voucher schools were not released as part of the study, despite calls from several legislators and others to see the private school results.

The study was conducted by the School Choice Demonstration Project, part of the Department of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas. The main researchers included John Witte, a University of Wisconsin-Madison professor who conducted studies of the Milwaukee voucher program from 1990 to 1995, before the Legislature dropped the requirement for such studies.

Since Witte's last study, the program has grown enormously, but there has been a minimal amount of research on its effectiveness.

The program provides up to $6,501 per student to private schools in the city. State officials expect about $120 million in voucher payments to be made in this school year.

As part of a deal in 2006 between Democratic Gov. Jim Doyle and Republican legislative leaders, the voucher program was allowed to grow to as many as 22,500 students, but the private schools were required for the first time to administer nationally accepted standardized tests, and the School Choice Demonstration Project was authorized to launch its study.

In his summary, Wolf calls the research "the most comprehensive evaluation of a school choice program ever attempted."

Some surprises

Researchers released the first year's analysis in the form of four reports dealing with finances of the voucher program, characteristics of the schools involved, student performance, and parent and student opinion of both MPS and voucher schools.

Some of the findings confirm assumptions about the program - for example, that religion is a major reason why parents enroll children in private schools. Other findings are more surprising - for example, that MPS parents who were surveyed were more likely than voucher parents to help their children with homework, and that teachers in voucher schools had more experience on average than MPS teachers.

One trend the researchers found is that the variation in scores on tests among MPS schools tended to be much narrower than the variation among private schools. In other words, it could be that the range of quality among

voucher schools is much wider - from very weak to outstanding - while the range of schools in MPS tends to stick closer to the system averages. That would square with observations of classes in both MPS and the voucher schools made by education reporters for the Journal Sentinel, especially in a major reporting project on the voucher program in 2005.

The researchers emphasize that the results are a snapshot that does not address many possible factors behind the differences. "It would be a mistake for readers to draw conclusions about the effectiveness of the MPCP based on these simple annual descriptive statistics," the report says.

How families compare

Surveys of students and parents in MPS and the voucher schools found that voucher and MPS students are about equally likely to be living with both parents (38% and 36% respectively).

Voucher parents are notably more likely to be involved in activities at their children's schools, such as doing volunteer work or taking part in parent/teacher organizations, but MPS parents are more likely than voucher parents to help their children with homework or read books with them, the study found.

Both MPS and voucher parents express high levels of satisfaction with their children's schools, but voucher parents are much more likely to say they are "highly satisfied," while MPS parents are more likely to pick the "satisfied" response.

Witte, one of the most experienced school choice researchers in the U.S., said the high level of parental satisfaction with the voucher schools is an important aspect of answering the question of whether the program is successful.

The researchers found that voucher schools are, on average, much smaller than those in MPS overall and have smaller class sizes, a factor that clearly appealed to the parents who were surveyed.

Of 120 schools examined by the researchers, 95 identified themselves as religious and seven were classified as non-religious but operating within a religious tradition. Thirty-six of the schools were Catholic, 26 Lutheran and 22 were from other Christian denominations.

The reports say that 43% of MPS teachers have a master's degree or higher, compared with 29% in the voucher schools. But 66% of voucher school teachers have at least five years of experience, compared with 56% in MPS.

The reports do not include figures on what percentage of voucher school teachers have state certification or college degrees, both points of debate about the program. State law does not require private school teachers to meet those standards - it requires only that they have high school diplomas - but a relatively new requirement that the voucher schools become accredited by independent agencies is expected to result in the near-elimination of teachers without college degrees.

While cautioning that the figures are a bit uncertain, the researchers came up with student/teacher ratios of 13.6 to 1 for voucher schools and 16.6 to 1 for MPS.

While there is not much difference between MPS and voucher parents when it comes to the percentage who say their children have physical disabilities, there is a significant difference when it comes to other special education needs.

"The percentage of respondents who said that their child had a learning disability is twice as large in the MPS

sample (18.2%) than in the MPCP sample (8.7%)," the researchers wrote. They say some of the difference might be due to differences between the two streams of schools in labeling children with special needs.

MPS officials have said frequently in recent months that the public schools are shouldering a far larger portion of special education students than the private schools are, and that the trend is causing major stresses on MPS.

Fiscal impact

Among other findings, the researchers' report on finances concludes that the way the voucher program is funded puts a greater burden on Milwaukee property-tax payers, while actually providing financial help to property-tax payers in the rest of the state and some reduction in state income taxes.

In simplified form, the reasons are that voucher students receive less public money than MPS students, while the formula for how to come up with the public money puts a larger load on Milwaukee property taxes than MPS students put.

Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett and others have argued for fixing the "funding flaw" in the voucher program to help city taxpayers. Action by the Legislature last fall provided partial relief.

The research project is being paid for with private funds, primarily from major foundations, including at least three that are firmly identified with advocacy for school choice programs such as Milwaukee's. They are the Walton Foundation, funded by Wal-Mart heirs and based in Arkansas; the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, based in Milwaukee; and the Kern Family Foundation, a relative newcomer to the scene, based in Waukesha.

Plans call for reports in future years that will examine such questions as how much progress students in the voucher program are making from year to year, and how that compares with a comparable MPS group. Ninth-graders identified in the 2006-'07 school year will be followed to determine graduation rates and other outcomes several years from now.

"Stay tuned," Wolf said.

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