

Milwaukee's school experiment shows promise

A researcher finds mixed but encouraging results

By Patrick Wolf

On a rainy May morning in 2008, my research team assembled at the Italian Community Center in downtown Milwaukee for focus-group sessions with the parents of students enrolled in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program.

After a long morning of listening to parents vent about the aspects of their children's schools that disappointed them, the tone of the meeting suddenly changed when we concluded with an "open mike" session.

"We may complain a lot about our children's schools," one of the parents told us, "but please, please, please don't take our school choice away."

Parents like this concerned mother have played a starring role in the long-running policy debate over the school-choice program, which enables parents to select a school for their child other than the assigned neighborhood public school. Charter schools, for example, offer choices within the public school system. School-choice programs like Milwaukee's notably include private schools and are often called voucher programs.

Begun in 1991, the Milwaukee program was the first — and is now by far the largest — urban voucher program in the country. In the 2008-09 school year, vouchers put 19,803 students in 127 private schools. A total of 59 public charter schools also operate within the city, enrolling 17,158 students last year. In addition, MPS students have the choice of magnet, community, open-enrollment, and inter-district school-choice options.

Indeed, when one thinks of school choice, Milwaukee has become the paradigm for the nation.

This poses a fiercely argued question for scholars, advocates and policymakers: Has school choice been a godsend or a scourge for the city's children? Put another way, was that mother justified in pleading for Milwaukee's voucher program to continue?

Fortunately, my research team launched a comprehensive evaluation of the voucher program three years ago. In partnership with two other veteran school-choice researchers, John Witte of UW-Madison and Jay Greene of the University of Arkansas (and assisted by a bevy of bright young scholars), we have left no stone unturned to determine the effects of the school-choice program on students and on the public school system as a whole.

To date, our evidence indicates that these students are demonstrating rates of growth in achievement comparable to similar MPS students. At the same time, we have determined that competition from the voucher program is pressuring public schools to improve and that school choice saves Wisconsin taxpayers tens of millions of dollars per year.

However, we suspect that the most important findings lie just ahead, in the fourth and fifth years of the project, which is a longitudinal study of a representative sample of 2,727 voucher students carefully matched to a similar group of MPS students. The two groups began the study similar to each other regarding important characteristics such as test scores, grade, race, and neighborhood.

Two years later, most of our statistical models showed the reading and math achievement gains of the voucher students to be similar to those of the MPS comparison group. We plan to track the achievement of both groups for at least two more years, so either the voucher or MPS students could demonstrate superior gains once we get deeper into our study.

Compared to low-income urban students across the country, however, the performance of the voucher students is somewhat more impressive. The fourth-grade voucher students who took standardized tests scored substantially higher than the national average for low-income urban students in reading and science.

Eighth-graders, meanwhile, scored better than their low-income urban peers nationally in all categories – reading, math, and science.

This poses a question: Why might Milwaukee voucher students, who perform similarly to other MPS students, still achieve at rates higher than national norms for urban students?

In a report last year, we concluded that pressure from the school-choice program since 1991 has caused the entire school system in Milwaukee to improve, leading to benefits for all students. The estimated size of the effect is modest, representing about 40% of the magnitude of the notorious black-white test-score gap.

Our research suggests that the Milwaukee voucher program has produced a rising tide that is lifting all boats, but that tide has hardly been a tsunami.

A second system-wide effect of the school-choice program is that it saves money for Wisconsin taxpayers. The value of the Milwaukee voucher is capped at less than \$6,500. Significantly larger amounts of public money are spent on each MPS student. As a result, every student who uses a voucher to attend a Milwaukee private school saves the state money.

We estimate that the taxpayer savings was about \$32 million in fiscal year 2008 and about \$37 million in fiscal year 2009. Due to anomalies in the funding system, the fiscal benefits of the choice program are realized exclusively by state taxpayers and property taxpayers outside of Milwaukee. Property taxpayers within Milwaukee actually pay more in taxes than they would if the choice program did not exist.

So, should we believe the voucher parents who say that school choice should be preserved, even though the program isn't perfect?

Midway through our longitudinal study there is reason for disappointment but also reason for assurance. We haven't uncovered clear evidence that choice students are learning at higher rates than other MPS students. We do know, however, that all Milwaukee students are benefiting academically from the competitive pressures of the voucher program.

Next year, we will add another year of data to our study of test score gains and also launch our most important analysis – a study of

the effect of the choice program on high school graduation rates.

Many scholars argue that educational attainments, measured through critical events such as high school graduation, are more important in the long run than educational achievement.

That is, long-term earnings and personal health are more closely related to whether you have a high school diploma or college degree than what your grade-point average was. In other words, how far you go is more important than how much you know.

Earlier studies based on limited data have suggested that Milwaukee choice students graduate from high school at higher rates than do other MPS students. Our study, with a more rigorous research design and stronger data, may or may not confirm those earlier findings. Please stay tuned.