



The Comprehensive Longitudinal Evaluation of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program: Summary of Second Year Reports

Patrick J. Wolf, Ph.D.

SCDP Milwaukee Evaluation

Report #6

March 2009



The University of Arkansas

was founded in 1871 as the flagship institution of higher education for the state of Arkansas.

Established as a land grant university, its mandate was threefold: to teach students, conduct research, and perform service and outreach.

The College of Education and Health Professions established the Department of Education Reform in 2005. The department's mission is to advance education and economic development by focusing on the improvement of academic achievement in elementary and secondary schools. It conducts research and demonstration projects in five primary areas of reform: teacher quality, leadership, policy, accountability, and school choice.

The School Choice Demonstration Project (SCDP), based within the Department of Education Reform, is an education research center devoted to the non-partisan study of the effects of school choice policy and is staffed by leading school choice researchers and scholars. Led by Dr. Patrick J. Wolf, Professor of Education Reform and Endowed 21st Century Chair in School Choice, SCDP's national team of researchers, institutional research partners and staff are devoted to the rigorous evaluation of school choice programs and other school improvement efforts across the country. The SCDP is committed to raising and advancing the public's understanding of the strengths and limitations of school choice policies and programs by conducting comprehensive research on what happens to students, families, schools and communities when more parents are allowed to choose their child's school.

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**SCHOOL CHOICE
DEMONSTRATION PROJECT**

School Choice Demonstration Project

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The Comprehensive Longitudinal Evaluation of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program: Summary of Second Year Reports

The city of Milwaukee is often called a laboratory for experimentation with parental school choice. Milwaukee is home to the first urban school voucher program, the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP), which has grown over the past 18 years to enroll 19,069 students in 124 different private schools 2007-08. A total of 58 public charter schools operate within the city's boundaries, enrolling 17,549 students last year. Even students in the Milwaukee Public School (MPS) system have a variety of magnet, community, open enrollment, and even inter-district school choice options available to them, so long as transportation funding holds out. When one thinks of school choice in America, one thinks of Milwaukee.

Milwaukee's extensive array of school choice programs make it a place of great interest to educational researchers. Are these programs working to improve educational outcomes for children? Is the competition that is induced by school choice generating improvements in the public schools? What is it like to experience school choice in Milwaukee? These are just some of the important questions that lure evaluators to the western shore of Lake Michigan.

John Witte of the University of Wisconsin was the first person to collect information about the MPCP.¹ His initial evaluations of that small, early version of the Choice program from 1990 to 1995 concluded that MPCP parents were highly satisfied with their children's school but there was no clear evidence that the program increased student test scores, a claim that was disputed by other researchers who analyzed the same data using alternative methods.² The Witte evaluation was ended in 1995 and the program was expanded beyond the initial small set of secular private schools to include religious schools as well. It survived a constitutional challenge and has grown dramatically since 1997, when it enrolled only 1,700 students.

After a decade of MPCP program expansion in the absence of a scholarly evaluation, in 2006 Wisconsin policymakers identified The School Choice Demonstration Project (SCDP) as the organization to help answer lingering questions about the effects of the MPCP.³ The SCDP is a national research organization, based in the University of Arkansas' Department of Education Reform, dedicated to the comprehensive, objective, and nonpartisan evaluation of school choice programs. Researchers of the SCDP are spearheading the ongoing evaluation of the nation's first federally-funded school voucher initiative, the Opportunity Scholarship Program

1 John F. Witte, *The Market Approach to Education: An Analysis of America's First Voucher Program* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

2 Jay P. Greene, Paul E. Peterson, and Jiangtao Du, "Effectiveness of School Choice: The Milwaukee Experiment," *Education and Urban Society*, 31, January 1999; Cecilia E. Rouse, "Private School Vouchers and Student Achievement: An Evaluation of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, May 1998.

3 See Wisconsin 2005 Act 125, enacted on March 10, 2006, which primarily modified Wisconsin Laws 119.23.

in Washington, DC.⁴ The veteran leadership of the SCDP's Milwaukee evaluation – Principal Investigator Patrick J. Wolf and Co-Principal Investigators Jay P. Greene and John F. Witte – have led or participated in nearly every major field study of school vouchers in the U.S., from Charlotte to New York, the District of Columbia to Milwaukee. We are drawn together for this project by the opportunity to examine what effects the mature MPCP is having on the students, parents, taxpayers, schools, and communities of the city and state. Our shared commitment is to carefully and faithfully follow the evidence, wherever it may lead.

In February of 2008 we released our initial set of five baseline reports on the MPCP, covering specific topics such as the fiscal impact of the program,⁵ characteristics of participating schools,⁶ average test scores for students in the program in mandatory testing grades,⁷ and descriptive information about the panels of MPCP and MPS students carefully selected to inform a rigorous longitudinal evaluation of the program.⁸ The fifth baseline report of our study summarized those four topical reports and presented our plan for the entire comprehensive longitudinal study.⁹

This report discusses the progress of our MPCP evaluation and presents a brief summary of the main findings of the seven distinct topical reports that we have completed for 2007-08



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- 4 See the reports at http://www.uaedreform.org/SCDP/DC_Research.html.
- 5 Robert M. Costrell, *The Fiscal Impact of the MPCP in Milwaukee and Wisconsin, 1993-2008*, School Choice Demonstration Project, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AR, SCDP Milwaukee Evaluation Report #2, February 2008, available at http://www.uark.edu/ua/der/SCDP/Milwaukee_Research.html. For a shorter version, see Robert M. Costrell, "Who Gains, Who Loses?" *Education Next*, Winter 2009, pp. 62-69, http://media.hoover.org/documents/ednext_20091_62.pdf.
- 6 Brian Kisida, Laura Jensen, James C. Rahn, and Patrick J. Wolf, *The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program: Baseline Descriptive Report on Participating Schools*, School Choice Demonstration Project, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AR, February 2008, SCDP Milwaukee Evaluation Report #3, available at http://www.uark.edu/ua/der/SCDP/Milwaukee_Research.html.
- 7 Nathan L. Gray, Patrick J. Wolf, and Laura I. Jensen, *Milwaukee Parental Choice Program: Annual School Testing Summary Report*, School Choice Demonstration Project, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AR, SCDP Milwaukee Evaluation Report #4, February 2008, available at http://www.uark.edu/ua/der/SCDP/Milwaukee_Research.html.
- 8 John F. Witte, Patrick J. Wolf, Joshua M. Cowen, David J. Fleming, and Juanita Lucas-McLean, *The MPCP Longitudinal Educational Growth Study Baseline Report*, School Choice Demonstration Project, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AR, SCDP Milwaukee Evaluation Report #5, February 2008, available at http://www.uark.edu/ua/der/SCDP/Milwaukee_Research.html.
- 9 Patrick J. Wolf, *The Comprehensive Longitudinal Evaluation of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program: Summary of Baseline Reports*, Report of the School Choice Demonstration Project, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AR, February 2008, Milwaukee Evaluation Report #1, available at: http://www.uark.edu/ua/der/SCDP/Milwaukee_Research.html.

– the second year of the evaluation. Those seven specialized reports build on the five reports that we released in 2008 and are:¹⁰

- The Fiscal Impact of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program: 2009 Update (Report #7)
- Milwaukee Longitudinal School Choice Evaluation: Annual School Testing Summary Report 2007-08 (Report #8)
- The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program: Descriptive Report on Participating Schools (Report #9)
- The MPCP Longitudinal Educational Growth Study: Second Year Report (Report #10)
- The Effect of Milwaukee’s Parental Choice Program on Student Achievement in Milwaukee Public Schools (Report #11)
- School Choice and Home Prices: Evidence from Milwaukee, Wisconsin (Report #12)
- Parent and Student Experiences with Choice in Milwaukee, Wisconsin (Report #13)

This project is being funded by a diverse set of philanthropies including the Annie E. Casey, Joyce, Kern Family, Lynde and Harry Bradley, Robertson, and Walton Family foundations. We thank them for their generous support and acknowledge that the actual content of our reports are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect any official positions of the various funding organizations or research institutions involved. We also express our gratitude to officials at the MPS, the private schools in the MPCP, and the state Department of Public Instruction for willing cooperation, advice, and assistance.¹¹

Overview of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program

The MPCP was established in 1990 as the first urban education reform in the U.S. built around the idea of permitting parents to enroll their children in private schools of their choosing at government expense. In its first year of operation, the MPCP or “Choice” program enrolled 341 students in the seven secular private schools participating in the program.¹² The Choice program remained a small pilot project throughout the period of Witte’s government-authorized evaluation of 1990-95 (Figure 1). Although Wisconsin lawmakers created the conditions for program expansion in 1995 – raising the enrollment cap from 1 to 15 percent of K-12 students in

10 These additional reports on the MPCP are available in written form by requesting a copy from the SCDP. Electronic versions of the reports are available for download from: http://www.uark.edu/ua/der/SCDP/Milwaukee_Research.html.

11 We are grateful to Marlo Crandall of Remedy Creative for his skilled graphical design and Lori Foster of the University of Arkansas for her careful copy editing of the reports. We also recognize the guidance and assistance of the largest, most balanced, and most expert Research Advisory Board ever to oversee a school choice evaluation. Our thanks to David E. Campbell, University of Notre Dame; Anneliese Dickman, Milwaukee Public Policy Forum; David Figlio, Northwestern University; Laura Hamilton, RAND; Jeffrey Henig, Teachers College; Tom Loveless, The Brookings Institution; Thomas Nechyba, Duke University; Paul E. Peterson, Harvard University; Margaret Raymond, The Hoover Institution; Andy Rotherham, Education Sector; and Robert K. Yin, COSMOS Corporation. Their contributions of information and advice have been all to the good. Any remaining flaws are solely the responsibility of the researchers.

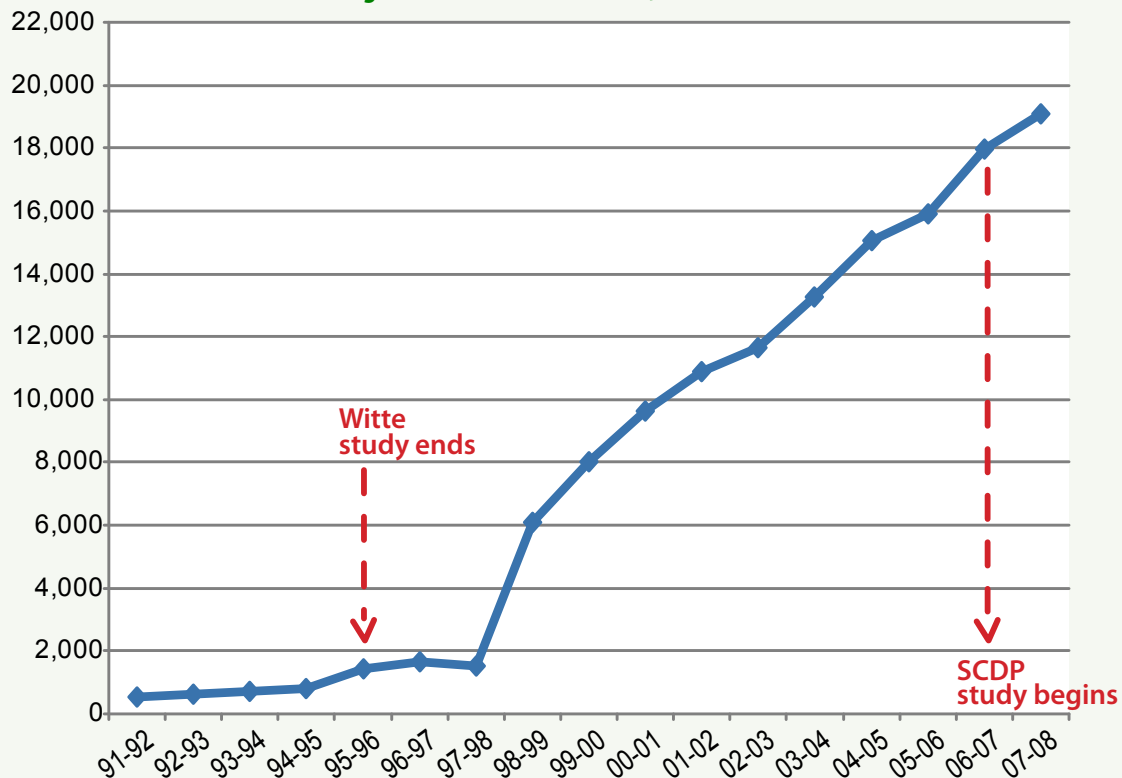
12 Witte, *The Market Approach to Education...*, op. cite in FN #1 p. 56.

the MPS and allowing religious schools to participate – those changes were not implemented until the Wisconsin State Supreme Court ruled them constitutional in 1998. Program enrollment immediately jumped more than 400 percent and the MPCP was quickly transformed from a small pilot initiative to a large and maturing parental school choice program.

Genesis of the School Choice Demonstration Project Study

The same 1995 legislation that established the conditions for the dramatic expansion of the MPCP also ended the initial program evaluation (Figure 1). Although the Choice program has been discussed, reported upon, and studied using administrative data, no comprehensive evaluation of the participant effects of the Choice program using individual-level student data has been conducted since the pilot program expanded in 1995.¹³ The academic and policymaking communities have been eager to learn more about the effects of the full-scale Milwaukee Choice program on students, parents, taxpayers, schools, and communities.

Figure 1: MPCP Enrollment, 1991-2008



13 For studies of the “systemic” or competitive effects of the Choice program on student achievement in Milwaukee Public Schools see Martin Carnoy, Frank Adamson, Amita Chudgar, Thomas F. Luschei, and John F. Witte, *Vouchers and Public School Performance: A Case Study of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program* (Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute, 2007); Emily Van Dunk and Anneliese M. Dickman, *School Choice and the Question of Accountability: The Milwaukee Experience* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004); Caroline M. Hoxby, “School Choice and School Productivity: Could School Choice be a Tide that Lifts All Boats?” *The Economics of School Choice*, edited by Caroline M. Hoxby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Jay P. Greene and Greg Forster, *Rising to the Challenge: The Effect of School Choice on Public Schools in Milwaukee and San Antonio*, New York: Manhattan Institute Civic Bulletin, No. 27, October 2002.

Meanwhile, the SCDP was established in 2003 to design and implement the next generation of rigorous and comprehensive evaluations of school voucher programs.¹⁴ Comprised of a national network of prominent social scientists and education researchers, the SCDP is a major part of the research team selected by the U.S. Department of Education's Institute for Education Sciences to conduct a scientifically rigorous evaluation of the nation's first federally funded school voucher initiative, the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program.¹⁵ Researchers at the SCDP have been consulted by officials across the country regarding how to conduct reliable evaluations of school voucher programs.

Meanwhile, during the 2005-06 school year, the Choice program was approaching its statutory enrollment cap of 15 percent of Milwaukee K-12 students, or about 15,000 students. To avoid the need to ration the permissible number of vouchers among the existing group of Choice students and new applicants, Governor Jim Doyle and Wisconsin legislators negotiated a set of changes to the MPCP that involved a combination of expansion and accountability provisions, namely:

- The MPCP enrollment cap was raised to 22,500 students;
- A set of accreditation requirements were established for participating schools;
- Schools were required to administer standardized tests to their Choice students in grades 4, 8, and 10;
- Schools were obligated to submit copies of their student test scores to the SCDP for analysis and subsequent submission to Wisconsin's Legislative Audit Bureau; and,
- The SCDP was further directed to administer the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examinations (WKCE) to a representative panel of MPCP students in order to compare their performance to that of similar students in MPS.¹⁶



The last three new program requirements listed above created the conditions for the comprehensive longitudinal study described here.

14 Initially based at Georgetown University, the SCDP moved to the University of Arkansas' Department of Education Reform along with principal investigator Patrick J. Wolf in 2006.

15 The other institutions involved in the study are Westat (the prime contractor) and Chesapeake Research Associates. For a copy of the research team's Year 2 impact report, see <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/20084023/>.

16 Wisconsin 2005 Act 125.

The SCDP MPCP Evaluation

Our plan for evaluating the Choice program is comprehensive, multi-method, rigorous, and longitudinal. It is comprehensive in that we recognize that school choice programs could affect a wide variety of individuals and institutions in positive and negative ways. Our research will evaluate the participant effects of the MPCP on such important outcomes as student achievement, parent and student satisfaction, civic values, and how parents and students experience the program. We will determine the systemic effects of the Choice program on education finance, public schools, non-participating students, private school capacity, and school-level racial integration. We will examine the under-explored question of the possible broader “community” effects of the MPCP on the levels of economic and racial segregation in Milwaukee neighborhoods. Milwaukee’s charter school sector will be a subject of special project reports beginning next year. This project represents the most comprehensive evaluation of school choice in a single place ever attempted.



Our team is equipped to use a rich variety of research methods to gain evidence-driven answers to the many questions that surround the issue of parental school choice. We have experts in both quantitative and qualitative research approaches. We collect test score data, administer extensive parent and student surveys, query and visit schools, and conduct focus groups with parents and students attending MPCP, public charter, and traditional MPS schools. Our goal is to gather and analyze a treasure trove of information, from many sources and using multiple methods, about the complete educational reality of Milwaukee and how school choice shapes it.

We are committed to using the most rigorous methods possible in conducting all aspects of this important research. That commitment to scientific evaluation has led us to develop the Longitudinal Educational Growth Study (LEGS) as the primary mechanism for generating causal claims about the effects of the MPCP on participants. The quest for apples-to-apples comparisons drives the design of the LEGS -- from

the carefully-matched representative panels of MPCP and MPS students, to the administration of the same test to those students under similar testing conditions, to the focus on evaluating student gains over time. Whenever or wherever our data fall short of what is necessary to make reliable claims about what the MPCP has and has not “caused,” we carefully qualify our results as merely descriptive. Description is an important aid to analysis; however, it should be the starting point and not the ending point of an evaluation.

To enhance the scientific rigor of our evaluation, it is designed to be longitudinal. Over the planned five-year life of the study, we expect to issue a total of 36 reports evaluating at least 10 distinct areas of possible MPCP effects (Table 1). Many of these reports will be informed by evidence collected at multiple points in time, so that clear trends can be identified. Through the course of our study, scholars, policymakers, and the public in general will learn a great deal about America’s oldest and largest urban school voucher program.

Table 1. SCDP Evaluation of the MPCP: Components, Deliverables, and Schedule

Question	Deliverable	06-07	07-08	08-09	09-10	10-11
What are we finding?	Summary of Reports	X	X	X	X	X
How well are MPCP students performing?	School Testing Summary Report	X	X	X	X	X
What is the Program's average effect on achievement growth, attainment, civic values, safety, and satisfaction?	Longitudinal Educational Growth Study	X	X	X	X	X
What are the characteristics of MPCP and MPS schools? Which factors impact achievement gains?	Schools and Best Practices Report	X	X	X	X	X
What is the effect of the Program on achievement in public schools?	Competitive Effects Report		X		X	
Is the supply of private schools and slots responding to demand?	Supply-Side Report					X
How are charter schools performing relative to traditional public schools?	Charter School Study			X		X
How has the Program influenced the financing of education?	Education Finance Report	X	X	X		X
Have real estate values or demography changed in response?	Community Effects Report		X			X
What is the Program's impact on school-level integration by race?	Integration Report			X		X
How are parents choosing schools, addressing challenges, and how might the Program be improved?	Parent & Student Voices Report		X	X		X
Total Reports (36 over 5 years)		5	8	8	5	10

Black Xs signify completed reports. Purple Xs signify planned future reports.

The SCDP MPCP Evaluation Team

Completing this ambitious project will require a great deal of effort from a large, experienced, and skilled research team. Three major research institutions – the University of Arkansas, the University of Wisconsin, and Westat – are providing the bulk of the personnel for the evaluation:

Principal Investigator:	Dr. Patrick J. Wolf, University of Arkansas
Co-Principal Investigator:	Dr. Jay P. Greene, University of Arkansas
Co-Principal Investigator:	Dr. John F. Witte, University of Wisconsin-Madison
Director of Field Research:	Ms. Juanita Lucas-McLean, Westat
Senior Research Associate:	Dr. Robert M. Costrell, University of Arkansas
Senior Research Associate:	Dr. Joshua M. Cowen, University of Kentucky
Senior Research Associate:	Dr. Thomas Stewart, Independent Researcher
Senior Research Associate:	Dr. Marcus Winters, Manhattan Institute
Doctoral Fellow:	Ms. Alicia Dean, University of Wisconsin-Madison
Doctoral Fellow:	Mr. David J. Fleming, University of Wisconsin-Madison
Doctoral Fellow:	Mr. Nathan L. Gray, University of Arkansas
Research Associate:	Mr. Yu Cao, Westat
Research Associate:	Ms. Christina Fetzko, Westat
Research Associate:	Ms. Laura I. Jensen, University of Arkansas
Research Associate:	Mr. Brian Kisida, University of Arkansas
Research Associate:	Mr. Ryan H. Marsh, Northwestern University
Research Associate:	Ms. Sylvia Segovia, Westat
Research Associate:	Ms. Kerri Willis, Westat

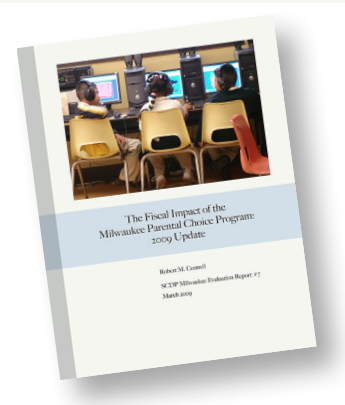
Collectively, the eight senior researchers on the project have over 100 years of experience evaluating education policies and programs.

Findings from the Second Year Reports

What did we uncover in our research this year? The seven specialized reports from the second year of the evaluation (2007-08) revisit the fiscal impact of the Choice program on Wisconsin taxpayers; provide descriptive information about MPCP schools and the average performance of the 4th, 8th, and 10th graders attending them; compare the average gain scores from the carefully matched panels of MPCP and MPS students that comprise the LEGS initiative; examine the competitive effects of the MPCP on the achievement of students in the MPS; consider the likely effects of the program on housing prices and the income integration of neighborhoods; and present qualitative data regarding how MPCP and MPS families evaluate, choose, and experience Milwaukee schools.

[The Fiscal Impact of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program: 2009 Update \(Report #7\)](#)

In this report Robert Costrell extends his previous analysis of the fiscal impact of the MPCP on Wisconsin taxpayers. Last year, based on a thorough analysis of the educational funding formulas associated with the program and enrollment patterns over time, Costrell reported that the MPCP saved Wisconsin taxpayers approximately \$25 million in fiscal year (FY) 2007 and \$32 million in FY 2008.¹⁷ However, those savings were distributed unevenly among Wisconsin taxpayers, due to a “funding flaw,” so that the payers of statewide Wisconsin taxes (e.g. income and sales taxes) and non-Milwaukee property taxpayers benefited financially from the program whereas residents of Milwaukee pay higher property taxes than they would absent the program. Costrell draws upon updated financial and enrollment data to reach the following conclusions about the estimated fiscal impact of the MPCP through FY 2009:¹⁸

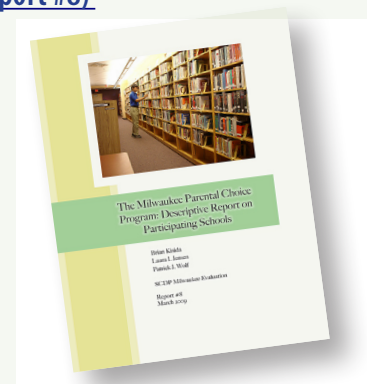


1. The operation of the MPCP continues to save the state money, because a student in the MPCP costs taxpayers less than does a student in the MPS;
2. Since enrollments in the MPCP are growing, the net savings to the state in FY 2009 is estimated to be over \$37 million;
3. The fiscal impact of the MPCP continues to vary across types of taxpayers, with the payers of statewide income and sales taxes saving \$30 million and the payers of property taxes outside of Milwaukee saving \$52 million, whereas the payers of property taxes inside Milwaukee suffer an adverse impact of \$45 million.

Claims that the program’s “funding flaw” has been fixed are inaccurate, according to Costrell, due to a misunderstanding of how the funding formulas actually work.

[The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program: Descriptive Report on Participating Schools \(Report #8\)](#)

Brian Kisida and his colleagues have assembled a wealth of information about the population of 124 private schools that participated in the MPCP in 2007-08.¹⁹ Their study builds upon the findings of an initial report on MPCP participating schools issued last year.²⁰ The important findings from this year’s report include that:



17 Robert M. Costrell, *The Fiscal Impact of the MPCP...*, op. cite at FN #5.

18 Robert M. Costrell, *The Fiscal Impact of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program: 2009 Update*, School Choice Demonstration Project, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AR, SCDP Milwaukee Evaluation Report #7, March 2009, available at http://www.uark.edu/ua/der/SCDP/Milwaukee_Research.html.

19 Brian Kisida, Laura Jensen, and Patrick J. Wolf, *The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program: Descriptive Report on Participating Schools*, Report of the School Choice Demonstration Project, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AR, March 2009, Milwaukee Evaluation Report #8, available at: http://www.uark.edu/ua/der/SCDP/Milwaukee_Research.html.

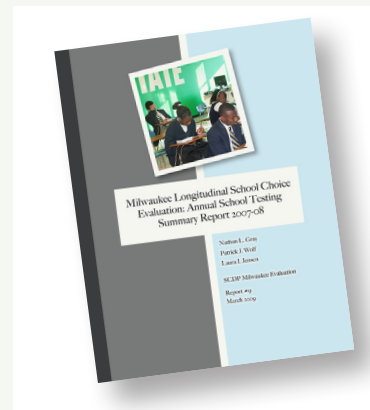
20 Brian Kisida, Laura Jensen, James C. Rahn, and Patrick J. Wolf, *The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program: Descriptive Report on Participating Schools...*, op. cite at FN #6.

1. Participating schools are most likely to serve students in the early grades, as 90 percent included elementary school grades, 80 percent served middle school grades, and 22 percent included high school grades;
2. Nearly 82 percent of the Choice schools self-identify as affiliated with one of 10 distinct religions;
3. The average student body of MPCP schools is 79 percent minority, compared to a school-level average of 86 percent minority in the MPS;
4. A higher percentage of teachers in MPS schools have graduate degrees and formal teacher certification than do teachers in MPCP schools;
5. The average MPCP school has about half the number of students as the average MPS school as well as a smaller student/teacher ratio.

Annual School Testing Summary Report (Report #9)

Nathan Gray and his colleagues received and processed test scores from 114 MPCP schools that administered various nationally-normed standardized tests or the WKCE to 7,498 of their Choice students.²¹ Their report provides descriptive information about the performance of the MPCP students in the mandatory testing grades of 4, 8, and 10. This snapshot of the performance of these low-income inner-city students indicates that:

1. The MPCP students in grades 4, 8, and 10 that were administered norm-referenced standardized tests demonstrate average performance in reading, math, and science between the 33rd and 41st percentile compared with the average student in the U.S.;
2. The average performance of the MPCP students relative to national norms is somewhat higher in grade 10 than in grades 4 and 8;
3. Consistent with the results reported last year,²² the subset of MPCP students that took the WKCE scored somewhat lower than income-disadvantaged MPS students in 4th grade but somewhat higher than their MPS peers in 8th grade;
4. When matched against the state of Wisconsin's proficiency levels, MPCP students are performing at lower proficiency rates than income disadvantaged MPS students in 4th grade but at higher proficiency rates than such students in two of the three subjects in 8th grade;



21 Nathan L. Gray, Patrick J. Wolf, and Laura I. Jensen, *Milwaukee Parental Choice Program: Annual School Testing Summary Report (2007-08)*, School Choice Demonstration Project, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AR, SCDP Milwaukee Evaluation Report #9, March 2009, available at http://www.uark.edu/ua/der/SCDP/Milwaukee_Research.html.

22 Nathan L. Gray, Patrick J. Wolf, and Laura I. Jensen, *Milwaukee Longitudinal School Choice Evaluation: Annual School Testing...*, op. cite at FN #7.

- The distribution of school-level test scores indicates that the Choice students at a handful of MPCP schools are performing at high levels that are well above the average performance in typical MPCP schools.

The authors repeatedly caution that their data are merely descriptive. “Snapshot” test score reports such as this one cannot establish whether the levels of student performance in the data are the result of student characteristics that drew students to the MPCP or their educational experience once there.

[The MPCP Longitudinal Educational Growth Study: Second Year Report \(Report #10\)](#)

John Witte, the nation’s foremost academic authority on the MPCP, and his colleagues report on the initial results from their comparison of the average test-score gains of comparable MPCP and MPS student panels in grades 4-8.²³ The student panels for the Longitudinal Educational Growth Study (LEGS) were carefully constructed in 2006-07 based on matches in student grade, neighborhood, test scores, and other educationally relevant characteristics, and their outcomes will be tracked carefully over at least four years.²⁴ The sophisticated matching protocol implemented by the researchers had the practical effect of placing a large group of MPCP and MPS students at a common initial starting line. The gun has sounded, they have begun their LEGS race, and the second year report provides an initial “split time” that shows if either group is clearly “ahead” at this early point in the contest. The main results of this year’s LEGS report are:



- No overall statistically significant differences between MPCP and MPS student achievement growth in either math or reading one year after they were carefully matched to each other. Average achievement growth in the MPCP panel tended to be somewhat higher than average achievement growth in the MPS panel, especially in math, but those differences did not reach standard levels of statistical significance;
- The effect of the MPCP on achievement growth may vary by gender, as growth for boys in reading was 6.4 scale score points higher in the MPCP compared to the MPS, whereas growth for girls in reading was 5.2 points lower in the MPCP compared to the MPS;
- Achievement growth in the MPCP compared to the MPS did not vary significantly by student race or ethnicity;
- School-switching was relatively common among students in our panels, as 25 percent of the MPCP students and 38 percent of the MPS students switched schools from the baseline to the second year. MPCP switchers primarily moved to an MPS school, while MPS switchers tended to remain in the public school sector.

23 John F. Witte, Patrick J. Wolf, Joshua M. Cowen, David J. Fleming, and Juanita Lucas-McLean, *The MPCP Longitudinal Educational Growth Study: Second Year Report*, School Choice Demonstration Project, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AR, SCDP Milwaukee Evaluation Report #10, March 2009, available at http://www.uark.edu/ua/der/SCDP/Milwaukee_Research.html.

24 John F. Witte, Patrick J. Wolf, Joshua M. Cowen, David J. Fleming, and Juanita Lucas-McLean, *MPCP Longitudinal Educational Growth Study Baseline Report...*, op. cite at FN #8.

The authors of the LEGS Second Year Report caution that the comparisons they make between MPCP and MPS students at this early point are preliminary. We will have much greater confidence in these findings if the patterns are confirmed and extended in the analysis of the 2008-09 data.

The Effect of the MPCP on Student Achievement in MPS

One of the most important questions surrounding school choice programs is how they affect the students “left behind” in public schools. Do school vouchers pressure public school systems to improve, generating a “rising tide that lifts all boats?”²⁵ Or, instead, do school vouchers produce two distinct groups: choosers and losers?²⁶ Jay Greene and Ryan Marsh apply an innovative approach to identifying the effect of the expansion of the MPCP on the achievement of students in the MPS. They observe that the number of schooling options available to each student in Milwaukee varies based upon family income, grade, and the number of private schools in operation. Using individual student-level MPS data from 1999 to 2006, and individual fixed effects to control for possible selection bias, Greene and Marsh estimate the change in achievement for MPS students as their number of educational options has increased due to MPCP expansion.²⁷ They find that:



1. Competition induced by the MPCP has led to improved performance by non-choosing students who have remained in the MPS;
2. Though positive, statistically significant, and robust to different estimation models, the competitive effect of the MPCP is modest in size, as an increase of 37 choice schools (one standard deviation) is associated with a gain of about 2 Normal Curve Equivalent (NCE) points (one-tenth of a standard deviation) in achievement for MPS students;
3. Since 124 private schools now participate in the MPCP, the total effect of the Choice program expansion on achievement in the public schools over the past twenty years has been a gain of about 6.7 NCE points.

Greene and Marsh’s results support the conclusion that the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program has produced a rising tide that has lifted all boats, but that tide has not exactly been a Tsunami.

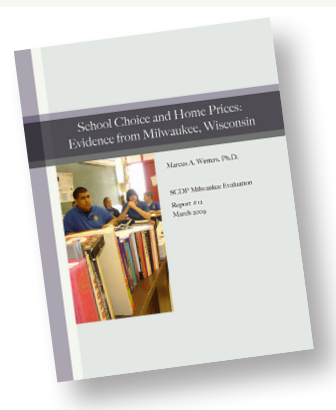
25 Caroline M. Hoxby, “The Rising Tide,” *Education Next* 2:4, Winter 2001.

26 Bruce Fuller, Richard F. Elmore, with Gary Orfield, *Who Chooses? Who Loses? Culture, Institutions, and the Unequal Effects of School Choice* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1996).

27 Jay P. Greene and Ryan H. Marsh, *The Effect of Milwaukee’s parental Choice Program on Student Achievement in Milwaukee Public Schools*, Report of the School Choice Demonstration Project, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AR, March 2009, Milwaukee Evaluation Report # 11, available at: http://www.uark.edu/ua/der/SCDP/Milwaukee_Research.html.

School Choice and Home Prices: Evidence from Milwaukee, Wisconsin

A substantial research base confirms that when students are assigned to public schools primarily based on residence the cost of real estate is closely associated with the quality of neighborhood public schools.²⁸ Milwaukee may be atypical in this regard, as nearly 20 percent of its school-age students use vouchers to attend private schools, more than 15 percent attend public charter schools, and even students within the traditional public school system tend to have school choices besides their neighborhood school. School assignment has been largely decoupled from residence in Milwaukee. Does that mean that the performance of local public schools no longer factors into housing values? Marcus Winters examines this provocative question using home sale data from 2002 to 2007.²⁹ He finds that:



1. Home prices remain significantly influenced by the quality of local public schools, in spite of the widespread availability of school choice in Milwaukee;
2. The strength of the association between school quality and home prices is not significantly different in areas of the city with relatively more or less school choice opportunities.

Winters concludes by cautioning readers that the very fact that school choice pervades the neighborhoods of Milwaukee limited his ability to analyze the association between different degrees of school choice and the link between school quality and home prices. He recommends that more work be done in this area.

Parent and Student Experiences with Choice in Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Finally, Thomas Stewart and Patrick Wolf present the initial results of a focus group study of parents and high school students in the MPCP and the MPS. This qualitative research is designed to complement the quantitative work discussed above and provide a more complete picture of the educational realities of families in Milwaukee.³⁰ Using a combination of open-ended focus group discussions and interactive wireless technology to “poll” parents and students about their experiences, Stewart and Wolf report that:



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- 28 For examples see Thomas Nechyba, “Mobility, Targeting, and Private School Vouchers,” *American Economic Review* 90:1, 2000; Sandra Black, “Do Better Schools Matter? Parental Valuation of Elementary Education,” *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 114:2, 1999.
- 29 Marcus A. Winters, *School Choice and Home Prices: Evidence from Milwaukee, Wisconsin*, Report of the School Choice Demonstration Project, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AR, March 2009, Milwaukee Evaluation Report #12, available at: http://www.uark.edu/ua/der/SCDP/Milwaukee_Research.html.
- 30 Thomas Stewart and Patrick J. Wolf, *Parent and Student Experiences with Choice in Milwaukee, Wisconsin*, Report of the School Choice Demonstration Project, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AR, March 2009, Milwaukee Evaluation Report #13, available at: http://www.uark.edu/ua/der/SCDP/Milwaukee_Research.html.

1. Families tend to have a good working knowledge of the educational options available to them in Milwaukee;
2. School reputation appears to be an important consideration to both MPCP and MPS parents, with the parents of 9th grade students especially seeking schools focused on preparation for college;
3. Among the various focus groups, MPS 9th grade students and their parents are the most satisfied with their schools, whereas MPS elementary school parents and MPCP 9th grade students are the least satisfied with their schools;
4. The most common sources of school dissatisfaction among focus group participants were with “multiplex schools” (a.k.a. schools-within-a-school) and program cutbacks.

The researchers plan to continue this focus group study for the remainder of the longitudinal evaluation and include public charter school families in the project beginning this year.

Conclusion

The second year of the comprehensive longitudinal evaluation of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program by the School Choice Demonstration Project has produced an interesting set of initial findings as well as the conditions for more far-reaching results in the future. We have established that the Choice program continues to benefit Wisconsin taxpayers, but not necessarily all of them. We have painted a picture of a large and diverse set of MPCP schools that deliver education on a smaller scale than is typical in the MPS. We have displayed a rough and limited snapshot of the average performance of Choice students in certain grades that suggests they tend to perform below national averages and state proficiency targets but at levels roughly comparable to similarly income-disadvantaged students in MPS. An initial comparison of carefully matched panels of MPCP and MPS students reports few differences that are statistically significant but some suggestive evidence that boys might be gaining somewhat more in reading if they participate in the MPCP and girls may be gaining somewhat more in reading if they are enrolled in MPS. An innovative new analysis of the effects of the MPCP on student achievement in MPS indicates that the effect has been positive, statistically significant, and modest in size. The decoupling of school assignment from residence does not appear to have eliminated the premium that homeowners and renters pay to live near high-quality public schools. Finally, low-income families in both the MPCP and the MPS appear to be quite knowledgeable about their educational choices and recent educational developments in the city, particularly those such as multiplex public schools and resource cutbacks that they fear might reduce the quality of education in Milwaukee.

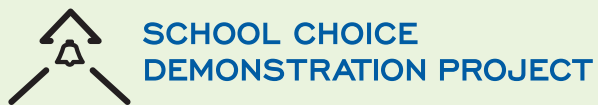
Much has been learned in the two years since the SCDP began a new longitudinal evaluation of school choice in Milwaukee. Much more remains to be determined. Stay tuned.

The Comprehensive Longitudinal Evaluation of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program: Summary of Second Year Reports

About the Author



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