

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

Patrick J. Wolf
University of Arkansas

SCDP Milwaukee Evaluation
Report #14
April 2010





The University of Arkansas

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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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The Comprehensive Longitudinal Evaluation of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program: Summary of Third 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 19 years to enroll 19,803 students in 127 different private schools in 2008-09. A total of 59 public charter schools operate within the city's boundaries, enrolling 17,158 students last year. Even students in the Milwaukee Public School (MPS) system have a variety of magnet, community, open enrollment, and 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 makes 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 resulting in effective public and private schools thriving and ineffective ones closing down? What is it like to experience school choice in Milwaukee? Does Milwaukee's school voucher program lead to better racially integrated or worse racially integrated schools? 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 schools 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.

An important element of the MPCP design likely influenced its explosive



- 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.

growth over the past decade, namely the fact that students enroll in the program through participating schools. Other school voucher programs, such as the District of Columbia Opportunity Scholarship Program and the Louisiana Student Scholarships for Educational Excellence Program, require families to apply to a single voucher-granting organization that determines student eligibility and then provides vouchers to students to redeem at their school of choice. Typically, “going voucher” is a two-step process: gain access to the program and then select a school. In Milwaukee, in contrast, voucher students typically enroll in a participating private school first and only then apply to the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI), through the school, for a voucher. Initial school selection precedes participation in the voucher program. This design feature of the Milwaukee program creates strong incentives for voucher schools to recruit program participants. It also likely reduces the burden of “school-shopping” for families -- a development that could have benefits and costs for new education consumers.



Another implication of the rapid growth of the MPCP over the past decade was increased interest in a rigorous evaluation of the voucher program. 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 in Washington, DC.⁴ The veteran leadership of the SCDP's Milwaukee evaluation – Principal Investigator Patrick J. Wolf and Co-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 how the mature MPCP affects students, parents, taxpayers, schools, and communities of the city and state. Our shared commitment is to carefully and faithfully follow the evidence, wherever it leads.

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

4 See the reports at http://www.uaedreform.org/SCDP/DC_Research.html

This report provides an overview of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program and our plan for evaluating it over the five-year period from 2006–2007 to 2010–2011. In February of 2008 we released our initial set of five baseline reports, covering specific topics such as the fiscal impact of the program, characteristics of participating schools, average test scores for students in the program in mandatory testing grades, and descriptive information about the panels of MPCP and MPS students carefully selected to inform a rigorous longitudinal evaluation of the program, as well as a brief summary report like this one.⁵ In March of 2009 we released our second set of reports, including a summary report, an update of the positive fiscal impact of the program on Wisconsin taxpayers, information on participating schools, results of school testing, and the first outcome analysis in the growth study. Last year we also released new reports on the positive effect of the MPCP on student achievement in Milwaukee Public Schools, the minimal effect of the MPCP on equalizing real estate prices across Milwaukee neighborhoods, and how families experience the MPCP and the MPS.⁶

This report discusses the progress of our MPCP evaluation and presents a brief summary of the main findings of the six distinct topical reports that we have completed for 2008–09 – the third year of the evaluation and the second year since baseline data were collected. Those six specialized reports build on the 13 reports that we released in 2008 and 2009 and are:⁷

- The MPCP Longitudinal Educational Growth Study: Third Year Report (Report #15)
- School and Sector Switching in Milwaukee (Report #16)
- The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program: Descriptive Report on Participating Schools, 2008–2009 (Report #17)
- The Milwaukee Longitudinal School Choice Evaluation: Annual School Testing Summary Report 2008–09 (Report #18)
- Family Voice on Parental School Choice in Milwaukee: What can we learn from low-income families? (Report #19)
- The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program’s Effect on School Integration (Report #20)

So far this project has been 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

5 See the Year 1 reports at http://www.uark.edu/ua/der/SCDP/Milwaukee_Research.html

6 See the Year 2 reports at http://www.uark.edu/ua/der/SCDP/Milwaukee_Research.html

7 These Year 3 reports on the MPCP evaluation 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

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.⁸

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.⁹ 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 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.

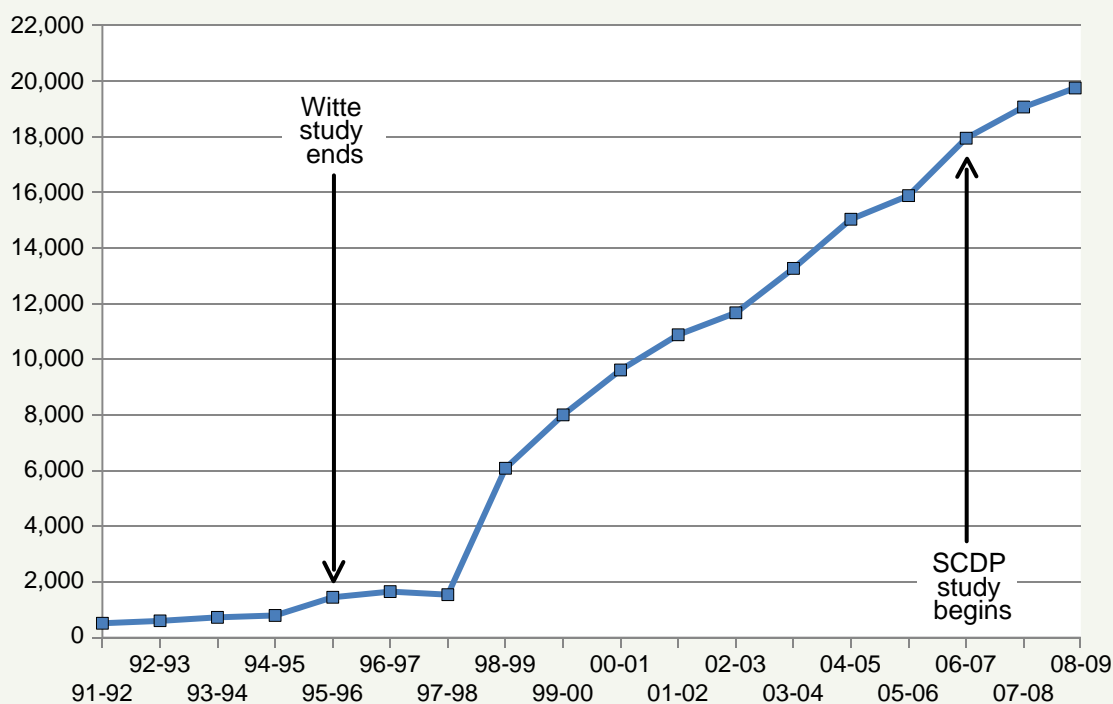
Genesis of the School Choice Demonstration Project Study

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 1995.¹⁰ 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.

8 We are grateful to Marlo Crandall at Remedy Creative (remedy5.com) for his skilled graphical design of the reports and to Lori Foster for her expert copyediting. We also recognize the guidance and assistance of the largest, most balanced 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, Bellwether Education Partners; 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.

9 Witte, *The Market Approach to Education...* p. 56.

10 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.

Figure 1: MPCP Enrollment, 1991-2009

Meanwhile, the School Choice Demonstration Project was established in 2003 to design and implement the next generation of rigorous and comprehensive evaluations of school voucher programs.¹¹ 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.¹² 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;

¹¹ 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.

¹² 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 3 impact report see <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/20094050/>

- 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 over the five-year period of 2006-07 to 2010-11.¹³

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

In the summer of 2009, near the mid-point of our planned five-year longitudinal evaluation of the MPCP, Governor Doyle and the legislature again enacted substantial modifications to the MPCP in the form of 2009 Wisconsin Act 28. Beginning in the fall of 2010, among other requirements, all schools participating in the MPCP must:

- Administer the WKCE in reading, math, and science to all of their students enrolled in the MPCP in grades 3-8 and 10;
- Adopt formal policies for promoting students to 5th and 9th grades and for granting a high school diploma;
- Adopt curricular standards in math, science, reading, writing, geography, and history;
- Certify that all MPCP teachers and administrators have bachelor's degrees from accredited colleges and universities;
- Provide the DPI with copies of all student test scores administered at the school over the previous five years.

Thus, the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program was altered in substantial ways even while our state-mandated longitudinal evaluation was being conducted.

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, educational attainment in the form of high school graduation and college enrollment, 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, student achievement in public schools, 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 and integration in Milwaukee

¹³ Wisconsin 2005 Act 125 which primarily modified Wisconsin Statute 119.23.

neighborhoods. Milwaukee's charter school sector will be a subject of special evaluation 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 develop evidence-based 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.

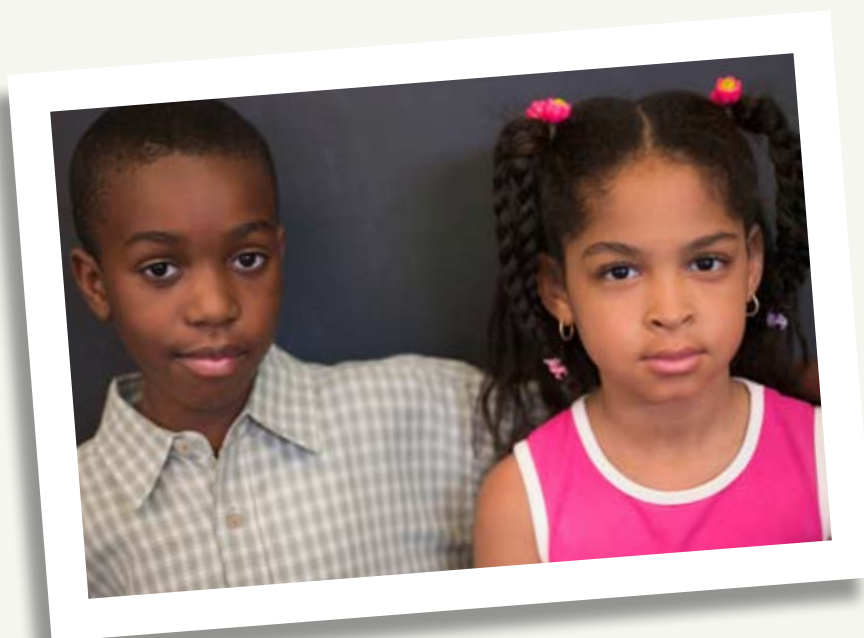


Table 1. SCDP Evaluation of the MPCP: Components, Deliverables, and Schedule

Question	Deliverable	06-07	07-08	08-09	09-10	10-11
What are we finding?	Summary of Reports	X	X	X	X	X
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
How well are MPCP students performing?	School Testing Summary Report	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 school switching and the financing of education?	Fiscal Impact & Switching Reports	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	7	6	10

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

The SCDP MPCP Evaluation Team

Completing this ambitious project requires 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. David J. Fleming, Furman University

Senior Research Associate:	Dr. Nathan L. Gray, Young Harris College
Senior Research Associate:	Dr. Thomas Stewart, Qwaku & Associates
Senior Research Associate:	Dr. Marcus Winters, Manhattan Institute
Doctoral Fellow:	Mr. Stuart Buck, University of Arkansas
Doctoral Fellow:	Ms. Meghan R. Condon, University of Wisconsin-Madison
Doctoral Fellow:	Ms. Alicia Dean, University of Wisconsin-Madison
Research Associate:	Mr. Yu Cao, 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:	Mr. Jonathan N. Mills
Research Associate:	Ms. Sylvia Segovia, Westat
Research Assistant:	Ms. Christina Fetzko, Westat
Research Assistant:	Ms. Bonnie Ho, Westat
Research Assistant:	Ms. Kerri Wills, Westat

Collectively, the ten senior researchers on the project have over 150 years of experience evaluating education policies and programs.

Findings from the Third Year Reports

What did we uncover in our research this year? The six specialized reports from the third year of the evaluation (2008-09) compare the average gain scores two years after baseline for the carefully matched panels of MPCP and MPS students that comprise the LEGS initiative; describe the common occurrence of school-switching in Milwaukee and what factors may be driving decisions to change schools; provide descriptive information about MPCP schools and the average performance of the 4th, 8th, and 10th graders attending them; present qualitative data regarding how MPCP and MPS families evaluate, choose, and experience Milwaukee schools; and examine the effects of the MPCP on the level of racial integration in Milwaukee schools.

The MPCP Longitudinal Educational Growth Study: Third Year Report (Report #15)



John Witte, the nation's foremost academic authority on the MPCP, and his colleagues report on the results from their comparison of the average test-score gains of comparable MPCP and MPS student panels in grades 4-8 and 10 tested in the fall of 2008.¹⁴ The student panels for the Longitudinal Educational Growth Study (LEGS) were carefully matched to each other two years previously regarding student grade, neighborhood, test scores, and

14 John F. Witte, Joshua M. Cowen, David J. Fleming, Patrick J. Wolf, Meghan R. Condon, and Juanita Lucas-McLean, *The MPCP Longitudinal Educational Growth Study: Third Year Report*, School Choice Demonstration Project, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AR, SCDP Milwaukee Evaluation Report #15, April 2010, available at http://www.uark.edu/ua/der/SCDP/Milwaukee_Research.html

other educationally relevant characteristics.¹⁵ Their outcomes will be tracked carefully over at least four years. 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 third year report indicates if either side is “ahead” at the halfway mark. The main results of this year’s LEGS report are:

1. Of 42 statistical comparisons made between similar MPCP and MPS students, no statistically significant differences in student achievement growth were reported in 36 cases (86%).
2. The overall statistical comparison that is most like an experimental evaluation, because it maintains the initial school-sector assignment of students and only controls for baseline characteristics, yields achievement gains for the MPCP students that are higher than but not significantly different from similar MPS students after two years.
3. Three statistically significant differences in achievement growth favored the sample of MPCP students. All three involved the sample of seventh graders in 2008, who demonstrated significantly higher growth in math achievement if they were in the MPCP.
4. Three statistically significant differences in achievement growth favored the matched sample of MPS students. Two of those advantages involved achievement growth that was higher than MPCP students after one year but comparable to them after two years. The third statistically significant result favoring the MPS students was an additional overall gain of 3.4 scale score points in math after two years. This estimate came from a regression model that included a control variable for the effect of school-switching run only on the subgroup of students who remained in their original school sector from 2006 to 2008.

In sum, the evidence in the LEGS report suggests that students in the Choice program generally are experiencing achievement growth rates that are comparable to similar MPS students. The authors of the LEGS Third Year Report caution that the comparisons they make between MPCP and MPS students at this early point in the longitudinal study remain preliminary. More data-rich analyses of achievement gains over a longer period of time will be forthcoming.

15 John F. Witte, Patrick J. Wolf, Joshua M. Cowen, David J. Fleming, and Juanita Lucas-McLean, *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

School and Sector Switching in Milwaukee (Report #16)



In this report Joshua M. Cowen and his colleagues carefully examine the relatively common practice of school switching in Milwaukee and its possible motivations.¹⁶ There are many varieties of school switching. School changes can take place within the private or public school sectors (within-sector switching) or across them (sector switching). Students may be forced to switch schools because they have completed a terminal grade (structural switching) or they may switch due to a residential move or because of dissatisfaction with their existing school (discretionary switching). School-switching of all kinds is likely to be especially common in Milwaukee, given the many varieties of school choice available to parents within the public school system and across school sectors. The main findings of this report are that:

1. Barely half of MPS students in the longitudinal panel remained in the same school for two consecutive years, either from 2006 to 2007 or from 2007 to 2008. MPCP students were more stable than their MPS peers from 2006 to 2007 (63% did not switch) but less stable from 2007 to 2008 (44% did not switch);
2. Most school-switching involving MPS students occurs within the public school sector whereas most school-switching involving MPCP students occurs across the school sectors -- from the MPCP to MPS;
3. African American students in both the MPCP and the MPS appear to switch schools more frequently than students of other races;
4. Students who switch schools tend to have lower test scores in the year preceding the switch than do students who stay in their schools; and,
5. Parent responses to surveys indicate that both MPCP and MPS students switch schools for similar reasons, primarily "next grade not offered" (42% MPS and 29% MPCP), "child uncomfortable at school" (10% MPS and 11% MPCP), and "inconvenient school location" (8% MPS and 13% MPCP).

The reality that students generally enroll in the MPCP through a specific private school likely explains the fact that Choice students tend to move to MPS when switching schools. Choice parents report, on average, only visiting 1.3 private schools prior to making their school selection, suggesting that they are choosing a specific private school by joining the MPCP. This contrasts with other school voucher programs that parents apply to in order to gain access to a broad array of private school choices.

¹⁶ Joshua M. Cowen, David J. Fleming, John F. Witte, and Patrick J. Wolf, *School and Sector Switching in Milwaukee*, School Choice Demonstration Project, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AR, SCDP Milwaukee Evaluation Report #16, April 2010, available at http://www.uark.edu/ua/der/SCDP/Milwaukee_Research.html

Descriptive Report on Participating Schools, 2008-2009 (Report #17)



Brian Kisida and his colleagues have assembled a wealth of updated information about the population of 127 private schools that participated in the MPCP in 2008-09.¹⁷ The important findings from this year's report include that:

1. Participating schools are most likely to serve students in the early grades, as 88 percent included elementary school grades, 80 percent served middle school grades, and 25 percent included high school grades;
2. Nearly 83 percent of the Choice schools self-identify as affiliated with one of 10 distinct religions;
3. The average student body of MPCP schools is 80 percent minority, compared to a school-level average of 89 percent minority in the MPS;
4. A higher percentage of teachers in MPS schools (86%) than MPCP schools (62%) are certified by the State of Wisconsin;
5. The MPCP schools that continue to operate in the Choice program demonstrate student achievement levels that are significantly higher than the average achievement of the MPCP schools no longer receiving public funds. The same relationship holds for continuing and recently closed schools in the MPS.

Annual School Testing Summary Report (Report #18)



Jeffrey R. Dean and Patrick J. Wolf led an Arkansas-based research team that received and processed test scores from 113 MPCP schools that administered various nationally-normed standardized tests or the WKCE to 6,808 of their Choice students.¹⁸ 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 demonstrated average performance in reading, math, and science between the 30th and 40th percentile compared with the average student in the U.S.;

17 Brian Kisida, Laura I. Jensen, and Patrick J. Wolf, *The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program: Descriptive Report on Participating Schools, 2008-2009*, Report of the School Choice Demonstration Project, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AR, Milwaukee Evaluation Report #17, April 2010, available at http://www.uark.edu/ua/der/SCDP/Milwaukee_Research.html

18 Jeffrey R. Dean and Patrick J. Wolf, *Milwaukee Parental Choice Program: Annual School Testing Summary Report 2008-09*, School Choice Demonstration Project, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AR, SCDP Milwaukee Evaluation Report #18, April 2010, available at http://www.uark.edu/ua/der/SCDP/Milwaukee_Research.html

2. The average performance of the MPCP students relative to national norms is somewhat higher in grades 8 and 10 than in grade 4;
3. The average performance of the MPCP students who took nationally normed tests was somewhat higher than the average percentile scores of all low-income urban students in the U.S. on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP);
4. Consistent with the results reported in previous years, 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;
5. 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. Cross-sectional 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. Still, the finding that MPCP students on average score higher than low-income urban students nationally is consistent with the results of previous studies showing that educational competition in urban environments like Milwaukee produce a “rising tide” of increased achievement for students throughout the city.¹⁹

Family Voices on Parental School Choice in Milwaukee (Report #19)



Thomas Stewart and his colleagues present updated results of a focus group study of parents and high school students in the MPCP and the MPS.²⁰ This qualitative research is designed to complement the quantitative elements of the evaluation and provide a more complete picture of the educational realities of families in Milwaukee. Using a combination of open-ended focus group discussions and interactive wireless technology to “poll” 57 parent and student participants about their experiences, Stewart et al. report that:

1. Neither MPCP nor MPS families appear to factor gender into their school-selection decisions;

19 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, SCDP Report #11, March 2009, available at http://www.uark.edu/ua/der/SCDP/Milwaukee_Research.html; Caroline M. Hoxby, “The Rising Tide,” *Education Next*, Winter 2001.

20 Thomas Stewart, Juanita Lucas-McLean, Laura I. Jensen, Christina Fetzko, Bonnie Ho, and Sylvia Segovia, *Family Voices on Parental School Choice in Milwaukee: What can we learn from low-income families?* School Choice Demonstration Project, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AR, SCDP Milwaukee Evaluation Report #19, April 2010, available at http://www.uark.edu/ua/der/SCDP/Milwaukee_Research.html

2. Although some MPCP parents demonstrated knowledge of the governance and decision-making structure at their child's school, most MPCP parents and all MPS parents did not demonstrate such knowledge;
3. Both MPCP and MPS families draw upon student attitudes and behaviors regarding school, and not test scores, to assess educational progress;
4. Both MPCP and MPS families cited the economic downturn as their greatest non-educational challenge, with MPS families in particular expressing concern about employment and income.

The researchers plan to continue this focus group study for the remainder of the longitudinal evaluation and include results from public charter school families in subsequent reports.

The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program's Effect on School Integration (Report #20)



One of the most important questions surrounding school choice programs is how they affect the racial integration of public schools. Do the collective decisions of parents, when given more educational choices, result in more or less racial stratification in schools? Jay P. Greene, Jonathan N. Mills, and Stuart Buck apply straightforward analytic methods to identify the effect of the MPCP on the levels of racial integration in Milwaukee public and private schools.²¹ They observe that:

1. Both MPCP and MPS schools, on average, have racial compositions that deviate significantly from the Milwaukee metropolitan area in that they enroll more minorities;
2. When MPS students use any of the various school choice programs in Milwaukee to change schools, on average the change improves the level of racial integration of the school the student leaves but worsens the level of racial integration of the school the student switches into;
3. Both the MPCP and MPS have a large and approximately equal proportion of schools that might reasonably be classified as “racially homogeneous.”

The evidence from this study supports the conclusion that the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program is neutral in its impact on the racial integration of Milwaukee schools. The schools of the city are, on balance, no more or no less well integrated as a result of school choice.

²¹ Jay P. Greene, Jonathan N. Mills, and Stuart Buck, *The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program's Effect on School Integration, School Choice Demonstration Project, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AR, SCDP Milwaukee Evaluation Report #20, April 2010, available at http://www.uark.edu/ua/der/SCDP/Milwaukee_Research.html*

Conclusion

The third year of the comprehensive longitudinal evaluation of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program by the School Choice Demonstration Project has produced an interesting set of medium-term findings as well as the conditions for more far-reaching results in the future. We have established that, two years after being carefully matched on important characteristics, students in our MPCP and MPS panels are demonstrating achievement gains in reading and math that are generally equivalent. We have documented the frequency and patterns of school-switching in the city. We have confirmed that both the MPCP and the MPS have recently shed their respective sectors of many low-performing schools. We have displayed a rough and limited snapshot of the average performance of Choice students in certain grades that suggests they tend to perform at levels roughly comparable to similarly income-disadvantaged students in MPS and better than low-income students in urban areas across the U.S. We have found that Milwaukee families tell us that their child's commitment to education and study habits are more important harbingers of academic success to them than are test scores. Finally, we have determined that school choice in Milwaukee has neither worsened nor improved the levels of racial segregation in the city's public and private schools.

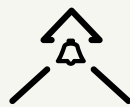
Much has been learned in the three years since the SCDP began a new longitudinal evaluation of school choice in Milwaukee. Much more remains to be determined. In particular, our next set of reports will include our first assessment of the effects of the MPCP on educational attainment in the form of high school graduation rates. Does participation in the Milwaukee voucher program increase a student's likelihood of graduating from high school? Soon we will know the answer to that important question.

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

About the Author



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