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MPS, voucher students boost graduation rates

Kids in choice program still 17% more likely to finish, study says

By Erin Richards of the Journal Sentinel

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High school graduation rates increased for both Milwaukee Public Schools students and low-income city children using vouchers to attend private schools in 2008-'09, but voucher students are still more likely to graduate than their public school peers, according to data released Monday.

The latest findings add a seventh year of data - for 2008-'09 - to a study that has followed the graduation rates of both groups of students since 2002-'03.

Because the latest graduation rate went up 5 percentage points from the previous year for both Milwaukee Parental Choice Program and MPS students, the report contends that choice (also called voucher) students were 17% more likely to graduate from high school than children in MPS over the past two years of the study.

For voucher school students, the graduation rate increased to 82% in 2008-'09; for MPS students, it increased to 70%, the study says.

The information is derived from the seven choice schools and 23

public high schools that could provide complete data for all years between 2003 and 2009.

MPS officials continue to question the accuracy of "[Graduation Rates for Choice and Public School Students in Milwaukee](#)," funded by School Choice Wisconsin, a voucher advocacy group. They point out that the names of the schools analyzed in the study are withheld, which makes it difficult to tell whether similar schools are being compared. Also, voucher schools generally do not serve as many students with special education needs, which can affect diploma rates.

The study is by John Robert Warren, a sociologist at the University of Minnesota who has studied graduation rates for years. Warren estimated the graduation rate in voucher schools to be 77% in 2007-'08, and the graduation rate in MPS to be 65%.

The numbers are adjusted to account for an estimated 5% of ninth-graders held back in choice schools and an estimated 25% of ninth-graders held back in MPS. The estimates do not account for the exact number of students each year who died, repeated grades or migrated out of the school.

Because accounting for these factors is difficult unless each child is specifically tracked, graduation rates are notorious for being calculated a variety of ways.

According to the method the district uses to report its rates to the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, MPS had a 67% graduation rate in 2008-'09.

Susan Mitchell, president of School Choice Wisconsin, wrote in the report's introduction that the benefits for high school students in the voucher program are at risk because of "increased regulation and funding cuts."

Private schools receive \$6,442 from the state for each qualifying voucher student. That's about half of what MPS receives in state aid for each child it serves.

The principal of Milwaukee Lutheran High School, Paul Bahr, said Monday that his school may cut the number of seats open to incoming ninth-grade voucher students by one-third next year unless state aid is increased.

The high school, which sits near the border of Wauwatosa at 9700 W. Grantosa Drive, has almost 700 students. About half of them are low-income Milwaukee students who attend the school with the help of a voucher.

Warren has said that higher graduation rates for students in the voucher program does not prove that private schools in the program caused those results. For example, parents might be more actively involved in helping their children graduate.

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