

# Voucher testing data takes a new twist

## Voucher, MPS kids on par, study finds

By [Erin Richards](#) of the Journal Sentinel

March 30, 2011 | [\(182\) Comments](#)

A day after the release of state test scores showed voucher-school students in Milwaukee achieving lower levels of reading and math proficiency than students in Milwaukee Public Schools, new data from researchers studying the voucher program's results over multiple years shows those students are doing about the same as MPS students, not worse.

The contradictory report is part of the latest installment of data from a group of researchers at the University of Arkansas who have been tracking a sample of Milwaukee voucher students matched to a set of MPS peers since 2005-'06.

After looking at achievement results on state tests over three years for those matched samples of students, the researchers' data continues to show little difference in academic achievement between both sectors in 2009.

For a matched sample of ninth-grade students in 2005-'06, the researchers found slightly higher graduation rates and college enrollment for voucher students three years later.

The reports are set to be released Wednesday at a conference in Madison, at a time when the spotlight is burning hot locally and nationally on school choice issues.

The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program - which allows more than 20,000 low-income students in the city to attend 111 private schools with public dollars - could see the income requirement phased out, and Milwaukee County private schools added to the program under Gov. Scott Walker's budget proposal.

In Milwaukee and elsewhere, supporters and critics of school choice often disagree about whether such programs are providing low-income students with better alternatives to their public schools.

Critics in Milwaukee take issue with the fact that vouchers were sold as a way to improve educational outcomes for poor city children, not produce for less money the same academic results students were getting before.

But Patrick J. Wolf, the lead researcher on the latest voucher-school study results, said the type of studies he's involved in don't always produce clear answers because they can be like Rorschach tests: People see different arguments in the same basic set of facts

"If voucher school students aren't doing dramatically better than public school students, some people view the program as a failure," Wolf said. "But some people can look at the same results and say that's

success, you've expanded choice and opportunity and there's no harm caused by it.

"Then you look at finances, and the fact that vouchers cost less than half the amount of money spent per student in public schools (in Milwaukee)."

## Summary of findings

According to the fourth-year results of the five-year voucher school evaluation, Wolf and other researchers found:

- No meaningful differences over three years in student achievement growth in either math or reading between a matched set of voucher and MPS students. The first year was used as a baseline for student test scores.
- A sample of ninth-graders in the voucher program had slightly higher rates of graduation and enrollment in a four-year college than at matched sample of MPS ninth-graders. Some of the attainment benefit in voucher schools appears to be due to family background, such as mothers with higher levels of education.
- Independent charter schools in Milwaukee - public schools that are nonunion and authorized to operate by non-MPS entities - outperformed MPS students in both reading and math after three years, after controlling for baseline achievement and other student characteristics.

Researchers initially matched about 2,700 students each in voucher schools and MPS to come up with their results, but some students have gone missing from the study over time, Wolf said. Also, researchers have confidentiality agreements with the voucher schools participating in the study so the data doesn't show how individual voucher schools did with students.

That's different from the state test score results released Tuesday, which were ordered to be given to all voucher school students in tested grades for the first time because of a new state law.

About 10,600 voucher students in 96 private schools took the test, and those results showed lower mean scale scores for voucher students in math in elementary and middle school compared to low-income MPS students, and similar achievement in 10th grade math between voucher and low-income MPS students. In reading, voucher students scored about the same as low-income MPS students.

Among all MPS students, the percentage of those proficient or advanced math and reading was higher than for voucher students in private schools. Parents opted their students out of the tests in some choice schools.

Voucher-school advocates say comparisons can't be drawn from the widespread state test-score data because it's a point-in-time snapshot of student achievement from fall of 2010.

They favor using results from what they call the "gold standard of research" - assessing student achievement data over time with matched samples of students.

But special-education students proliferate MPS at higher rates than in voucher schools, which critics say skew the results because MPS has to teach higher-numbers of students with difficult learning needs. According to data released with the state test scores Tuesday, 1.5% of the voucher students were reported to have special-education needs while about 19% of MPS students were reported as special

education.

Wolf said that's much different from the percentages reported to them for their study. He said about 5% of the parents of the voucher-student sample initially reported their children had a disability, while about 10% of parents of the MPS student-sample said their child had special needs.

So what does the study tracking voucher students now over three years of achievement tell us?

Wolf, an expert in choice school research, said three years is usually the point at which researchers would expect to see a trend in one direction or the other.

"That isn't to say we wouldn't see some movement in the fourth year," he said. "But three years out you might expect to see differences (between the two programs) and we don't."

John F. Witte, a professor of political science and public affairs at the University of Wisconsin-Madison who's involved with research on the five-year study, said the program is justifiable because it gives low-income families more opportunities.

"Some higher-income people are free to switch schools or move their kids out of the city because they have resources, and some people don't have those resources, so the program balances that out," Witte said. "This was never intended to be a silver bullet."

**Find this article at:**

<http://www.jsonline.com/news/education/118886284.html>

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.