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 Education

# High turnover complicates study of choice schools' progress

## 60% of voucher school students left program in 3 years

By [Jason Stein](#) of the Journal Sentinel

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**Madison** — A long-range study evaluating voucher schools in Milwaukee is finding little difference in academic achievement between their students and those in public schools, state auditors said Thursday.

But the study is complicated by the fact that three years into the research, most of the private school students selected for it are no longer attending schools in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program.

Only 1,097, or 40.2%, of the 2,727 voucher school students selected for the study in the 2006-'07 school year were still part of the choice program by the 2008-'09 school year, according to [the report](#) by the nonpartisan Legislative Audit Bureau.

"It's a very mobile population," state Auditor Jan Mueller said of Milwaukee students.

The report analyzed data and results gathered by academics at the University of Arkansas to compare math and reading test scores of choice program students with those of similar students in Milwaukee Public Schools. The report looked at a representative sample of voucher students attending third through eighth grades during the 2006-'07 school year, as well as all ninth-graders.

In general, the report by auditors agreed with separate findings by the academic researchers that showed little difference in the performance of students in MPS and the taxpayer-supported voucher schools.

Of the voucher school students, 31% had transferred to an MPS school after three years.

That didn't necessarily mean that those students or families preferred MPS. The report noted that only 33 of the 127 voucher schools offer high school grades, meaning that most students have to switch to other schools when they enter high school.

Mueller said the Audit Bureau wasn't provided with the data needed to analyze how many students chose to leave their voucher school and how many were forced to do so to enter the next grade. Another 28.8% of the students leaving voucher schools had done so for reasons that could range from having moved out of the area to having dropped out of school.

Of the MPS students selected for the study, a much higher 77.6% remained in the district after three years, with 7.1% transferring to choice schools and 15.3% leaving for unknown reasons.

Patrick Wolf, an education professor at the University of Arkansas who is leading the academic study of the voucher program, said that the movement of students into and out of voucher schools could make it harder for them to help students see sustained improvement compared with their counterparts in public schools.

"There is a lot of movement into and out of the (voucher schools) and especially out of (them)," he said. "If kids are switching in and out of them at a pretty high rate, then the relative benefit would have to be much greater."

Wolf said he didn't see evidence so far that the switching was hurting voucher students.

Rep. Peter Barca (D-Kenosha), co-chairman of the Legislative Audit Bureau and a former public school teacher, said he would like to see further data on why more voucher students are leaving their schools.

Barca said he was also looking forward to new information being collected on how students in specific voucher schools are faring - a requirement included in last year's state budget. The University of Arkansas researchers don't release results broken down by individual schools.

"That's what's needed to really draw conclusions," Barca said.

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