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# New data shows similar academic results between voucher and MPS students

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

Posted: April 7, 2010 | [\(19\) Comments](#)

About halfway into a five-year evaluation of Milwaukee's 20-year-old school voucher program, new data shows that groups of low-income students in the city who use public vouchers to attend private schools are still scoring about the same academically as their peers in Milwaukee Public Schools.

The new results come from a series of reports released Wednesday by researchers working under the umbrella of the School Choice Demonstration Project, a national research organization that randomly selected 800 kids in the Milwaukee Parental Choice (voucher) Program in the 2005-'06 school year and matched them to 800 peers in MPS, with the goal of following them through the 2011-'12 school year.

The effort is intended to result in the first full-scale longitudinal study tracking the effects of the country's first and oldest voucher school program. Funding comes from several prominent foundations, such as Lynde and Harry Bradley, Annie E. Casey, Joyce, and the Kern and Walton families.

This year's data is similar to what the same researchers reported one year ago: Neither student group is out-scoring the other overall in reading and math, but voucher schools could be considered more efficient because they are achieving similar results with less public money per-pupil than public schools.

In one method of comparing the data, "voucher students are slightly behind MPS students in mathematics achievement growth," according to the study.

But statistically speaking, neither group has yet to pull "significantly ahead" of the other in terms of their math and reading scores in third through eighth grade and in 10th grade on the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Exam, said Patrick Wolf, head of the School Choice Demonstration Project and an education professor at the University of Arkansas.

Critics of the voucher program say that if it was working as well as initially predicted, students in those schools would be outperforming MPS students by now. Many also point out that MPS is at a disadvantage because it has to educate far more special education students - who use up substantial resources - than voucher schools with historically lower rates of special-education students.

Wolf said that about 18% of kids in MPS are classified as special needs while only 3% of voucher-school children are officially classified as such. In parent surveys his team collected, Wolf said that 10% of voucher-school parents responded that their children required special-education services.

He said that special-education services eat into the cost of educating students a little bit, but that voucher schools are still educating students "somewhat more efficiently" than Milwaukee's public schools.

In the 2008-'09 school year, the latest year covered by the study, 127 schools participated in the choice program, and 19,803 students in the city attended the private schools on vouchers worth up to \$6,607 per student.

The number of voucher schools and public schools that have closed over the past few years have done so mostly because of low-levels of academic achievement, according to another study in the latest round of reports.

That means competition is working in the city, Wolf said, and it also means that voucher schools are responding to a more rigorous set of accountability measures that have been written into state law.

Several of the new reports examine other aspects of the program, such as the effect of student mobility in Milwaukee. MPS Superintendent William Andrekopoulos said Wednesday that the high rates of mobility - students moving between voucher schools, between MPS schools, and back and forth from the private to the public system - suggests the need for standardization of curriculum across both sectors.

"Mobility does not have a positive impact on student achievement," Andrekopoulos said. State representative Brett Davis (R-Oregon), the ranking Republican member of the Assembly Education Committee, said the latest round of reports indicates the money isn't the answer to providing kids with a better education. Rather than argue about funding, he said, politicians need to be debating the effective strategies that work for student achievement.

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1. [vino2015 - Apr 08, 2010 12:55 AM](#)

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Competition is a good thing. What we do know is WEAC is trying to kill school choice. WEAC will take private sector money through generous property tax to keep kids in public schools. Citizens all way seem amazed at the money democratic politicians can produce but when you have the government behind you,.....you control the citizen's wallet.

2. [been there - Apr 08, 2010 6:44 AM](#)

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If competition was really working, then one of the sectors would see significantly better outcomes for kids. It wasn't competition that forced the closure of the lowest performing schools. It was the failure of the schools to meet their newly imposed accountability requirements. In MPS, they were mostly charters that failed to meet their contract requirements, while the vouchers failed to meet the accreditation or other paperwork requirements. I think it's really important to note that no schools explicitly closed because of poor outcomes for kids, and that's especially the case in the

voucher sector where individual school's performance is a cloistered secret.

Private schools that want public money for educating kids ought to be publicly accountable for their individual outcomes, just like MPS. It's time for the researchers in Arkansas to admit they aren't objective after all. If they were, they would not have negotiated confidentiality of SCHOOL results (something that is not necessary under federal privacy laws) to their IRB. It sure is convenient cover now, though.

Anyway, now that we have two years of data that say voucher kids perform similarly to MPS (except that MPS kids are growing faster in math than their peers in vouchers), I wonder when the mayor will announce plans to take over the voucher system? After all, if they perform similarly, then shouldn't the public be outraged and demand governance changes and accountability in the vouchers as well???

3. [CCSWaukesha - Apr 08, 2010 6:54 AM](#)

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"19,803 students in the city attended the private schools on vouchers worth up to \$6,607 per student."

I just want to point out that the tuition for UW-Madison is \$8313. Too bad the voucher program couldn't send 20,000 kids to Madison on a deeply discounted scholarship instead. It would probably be a better investment, especially if they agreed to stay in state for 10 years after graduation.

4. [mustangman - Apr 08, 2010 7:12 AM](#)

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Great point CCSWaukesha, how about we give the money to people who have a history of academic success instead of spending money to SHIFT around the problem.

If I've said it once, I've said it a million times. It is not the schools, it is not the teachers, it is not any sort of lack of funding that is causing MPS to fail, the people at fault are the parents (or parent in most cases) that are raising the children! Women having children far too young, absent fathers, rampant drug abuse, relying on government entitlement programs for housing and food.

There needs to be a minimum level of education and wealth required before anyone is allowed to have children.

5. [StevenR - Apr 08, 2010 8:22 AM](#)

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How about we just equalize incomes? How about we really DO SOMETHING to reduce poverty. How about we SHUT DOWN the banks that redline?

I got new for you all. It is NOT the schools, it is society. We are one of the MOST SEGREGATED cities in the country. Is it any wonder school performance is lagging? Get off the teachers backs and look in the mirror.

6. [samiam2010 - Apr 08, 2010 8:23 AM](#)

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This study does (at least in the short term analysis) show that it may not be the MPS teachers/schools that are the problem. Unfortunately, the govt will look at this being a success solely from a \$\$ viewpoint instead of analyzing why the students are not performing better in the choice program.

7. [tompeters - Apr 08, 2010 9:02 AM](#)

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13

This study is bunk. I work at a voucher school. Basically what they are doing is taking a small sample of kids out of regular class to take the WKCEs. This is like comparing apples to oranges since when MPS gives the WKCEs, all of their efforts to get the kids 'test ready' are ramped up for a full month, while our kids are pulled out of the blue to take the test, and have no clue that they are even scheduled to take a test that day. It would be like if you took your ACTs on a random day and nobody gave you any indication that they were coming up.

An effective study would have ALL of our kids take the WKCES and then compare numbers...I am pretty sure that most voucher schools would be way above MPS in that case. Also, they are only comparing kids who actually take the test. All schools should get zeros averaged in for kids who drop out in that given year...if the study makers considered that aspect, MPS would actually be significantly behind voucher schools, since most kids at voucher schools ACTUALLY FINISH SCHOOL, unlike MPS.

8. [Whiffleball Tony - Apr 08, 2010 9:35 AM](#)

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Ok - first of all, they have to cherry pick the students from the voucher schools because they can only take the data from the students who are in your school on a voucher. That is apples to apples. If they test everybody in the voucher school (including those who are there because their parents paid tuition) THAT would be apples to oranges. Of course you would do better if they tested all your students, then they would also be looking at students who are not living in poverty and have

parents who give a damn. They took 800 students from both public and voucher schools, so they are not counting ALL MPS students either. Plus they are only choosing the low-income students. Thats about as apples to apples as you can get.

I do agree with you though that it is probably more likely they will actually finish school though. Would like to see some data on that.

9. [khone - Apr 08, 2010 9:39 AM](#)

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tompeters...if the students are being prepared academically, it really should not matter when they are pulled out. The WKCE measures what was learned over the course of previous years of schooling, and you cannot truly prep students for that.

10. [Whiffleball Tony - Apr 08, 2010 9:59 AM](#)

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good point khone - the WKCE intends to measure basic stuff that should be part of every education. It shouldn't matter if they drill it into them for the month prior (which I don't think is really true anyway) because all students should have that background and refreshers throughout their education regardless of where they go to school.

11. [Cream City - Apr 08, 2010 10:42 AM](#)

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Why were the earliest comments (including mine) "disappeared" here?

12. [tompeters - Apr 08, 2010 12:22 PM](#)

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The school I am at is about 80% voucher. They pull a small sample of the kids who are on vouchers. It is not even a random sample, as they can only test kids whose parents give consent.

To the poster who is claiming that preparation for a test does not matter, why does MPS take the entire month of October and drill on test taking? Do not try to claim that they do not do that...I am close friends with a few MPS teachers, and they say that is par for the course at MPS.

I would love nothing more to put all schools on the voucher program, open it up to everyone, and then compare test scores. You have to remember that everybody in MPS isn't poor either...there are plenty of middle to lower-middle class kids who are in the MPS system too.

Anyways...this is all going to blow up sooner or later. I don't know what all these hard core unionites think will happen when then cost of health care goes up even more due to the new health policy, they are all carrying the highest cost health policies, and when the voters put two and two together, they will decide that gov't employees can do just as well on the national plan than they do with gold plated \$45000 a year benefits...then all union employees will strike/protest/whatever and the state of public schools will be in even more disarray than they are now. Enter the vouchers;

demand will skyrocket for them and the politicians, who have no allegiance to unionites whatsoever will privatize much of what is going on in the schools which will improve education, because we then will be educating only the students who truly want and appreciate a free education, which honestly is the way it should be.

13. [Padraig - Apr 08, 2010 12:28 PM](#)

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Tompeters - I have to disagree. I worked for an organization that ran a Milwaukee charter school. There was EXTENSIVE pre-preparation for the test. In fact - for fundraising purposes - standardized test results were a major focus of attention year-round for teachers and students. The study is not bunk.

14. [samiam2010 - Apr 08, 2010 12:37 PM](#)

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I would be interested to know what impact (if any) the implementation of the choice program has had on non-choice students in private schools. Are teachers able to spend as much time on them as they have in the past? Have their test scores remained the same during this period?

15. [Denise P - Apr 08, 2010 12:39 PM](#)

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There are a number of reasons, as to why some MPS students are failing. If a person says it's not because of some of the teachers, I hate to disappoint you but sometimes it is. I have been in the classrooms and I have seen some of the teaching methods. We have some teachers who don't even teach phonics and people are wondering why students can't read.

There are some teachers who should have quit teaching a long time ago. Some have stayed for all the wrong reasons and it needs to stop. Too many students are failing.

Yes the parents should be held more accountable however if there not, what do we do, give up on them? Most families I've met have dysfunction going on and that includes your so called middle class family.

We have forgotten that as a teacher, you are a role model whether you want to be one or not. Sometimes you are a parent whether you want to be or not. Sometimes a mentor, whether you want to be or not. A teacher has many roles and if you think it was just to teach, someone has seriously misled you.

16. [seriousminded - Apr 08, 2010 1:13 PM](#)

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My response to Denise P's comments are, "TELL IT LIKE IT TRULY IS". Unfortunatelly, this applies to far too many teachers who teach with the mindset that no matter what I do, these kids won't learn!

I have witnessed this mindset for a number of years and it is appalling. After observing the

teaching and learning environment, many teachers aren't teaching with a consistent cycle of instruction!

There are far too many teachers who rely on worksheets throughout the entire instructional period and it is sickening to observe.

There are a number of PD opportunities for teachers to engage in and many choose to stay within his/her comfort zone. I am sick and tired of listening to excuses, as educators our job is to work around those excuses and educate ALL students!

- 17. [sneagles - Apr 08, 2010 1:46 PM](#)

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Say what you will, this analysis is simply Bullsh-- What do we know about the School Choice Demonstration Project?? Anything?? Where is the analytical piece on who these clowns are?? The Journal simply publishes their findings as gospel.. Journalism at its best.. No where in the article do we find an in depth review of the publishers of the findings.. Why?? Not hard to figure that out..

- 18. [Free Bird - Apr 08, 2010 3:34 PM](#)

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Nobody is doing great or even average ... proceed.

- 19. [Wiscomke - Apr 08, 2010 11:07 PM](#)

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Trust me. I am a teacher in a relatively high performing MPS high school and we do not spend time preping for the WKCE. I'm not sure who funded this study, but I'm guessing it was by the Walton's et al who funded last years study that found the same results. In case you aren't aware, the Walton's are the founders of Walmart and are at the front of promoting the voucher program. So, voucher supports funded the study and the study still didn't come out in favor of the voucher program. In addition, the article notes that 18% of MPS students are in special education compared to 3% in the voucher program. In terms of formalized testing, that is a huge advantage for the voucher schools.

On a related note, I do believe that voucher schools have a place in the education of the students in our society and should exist. I simply believe that the issues have more to do with societal factors than what school they are in. Yes, all students can learn no matter where they come from. I firmly believe that. I also firmly believe that MPS and voucher school teachers are all capable and good teachers. The challenges that we face are immense though. If you don't like the results you read about (and you shouldn't), then help. Volunteer. There are so many great organizations that can help you positively affect the lives of children in Milwaukee. [Volunteermilwaukee.org](#), [volunteermatch.org](#), Big Brothers Big Sisters [www.bbbsmilwaukee.org](#)

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