

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

Patrick J. Wolf
University of Arkansas

SCDP Milwaukee Evaluation
Report #36
February 2012





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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 *Wall Street Journal* (2011) proclaimed 2011 “The Year of School Choice”. Seven new private school choice programs were launched and 11 existing programs were expanded (Glenn and Gininger 2012, p. 11). Enrollments in public charter schools surged to over 2 million for the first time. An educational intervention once limited to large northern cities, school choice is spreading across entire states and every region of the country. When legislators consider private school choice programs, and 41 state legislatures and the U.S. Congress did so in 2011, traditionally they have looked to Wisconsin for guidance. The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP), also called the “Choice” program, was the first private school voucher program in the country when it was established 22 years ago. Today the program—one of the 11 expanded last year when the legislature raised the income eligibility ceiling and removed the enrollment cap—allows over 23,000 low-income Milwaukee students to attend one of 106 different schools with the assistance of a government voucher worth up to \$6,442 (Wisconsin DPI 2011a). Racine, Wisconsin, became host to the second school voucher program in the state with the establishment of the Parental Private School Choice Program in 2011 which enrolled 228 students in its inaugural year.

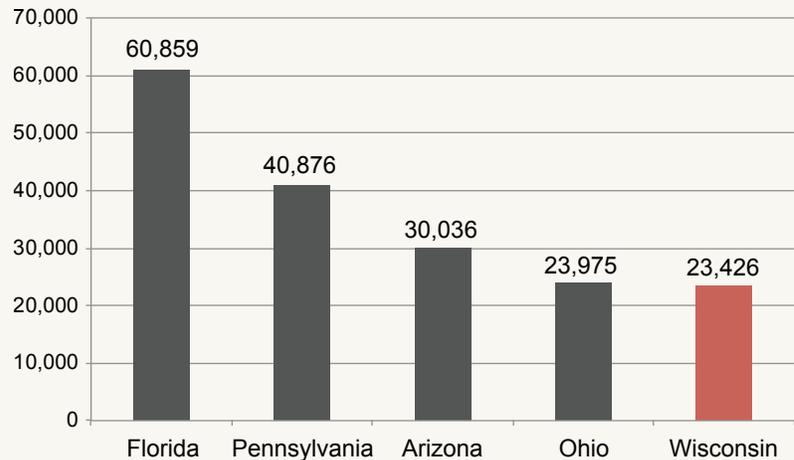


But private school choice initiatives in the form of vouchers or tax-credit scholarships are prominent elsewhere, as well. Four states currently enroll more students in private school choice programs than does Wisconsin (Figure 1). When we factor in the size of statewide K-12 enrollments, Arizona leads the country with 6.3 percent of students attending private schools with the support of vouchers or scholarships (Figure 2). Wisconsin is a distant second with 2.7 percent of K-12 enrollments in its voucher programs.

Still, Wisconsin has more years of experience with more forms of parental school choice than any other state. In addition to the voucher programs in Milwaukee and Racine, 206 public charter schools operated in Wisconsin in 2010, serving over 37,000 students (School Management Services 2011). Even students in Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) have a variety of magnet, community, open enrollment, and even inter-district school choice options available to them, so long as transportation funding is available. The world still has much to learn from the Badger State regarding parental school choice.

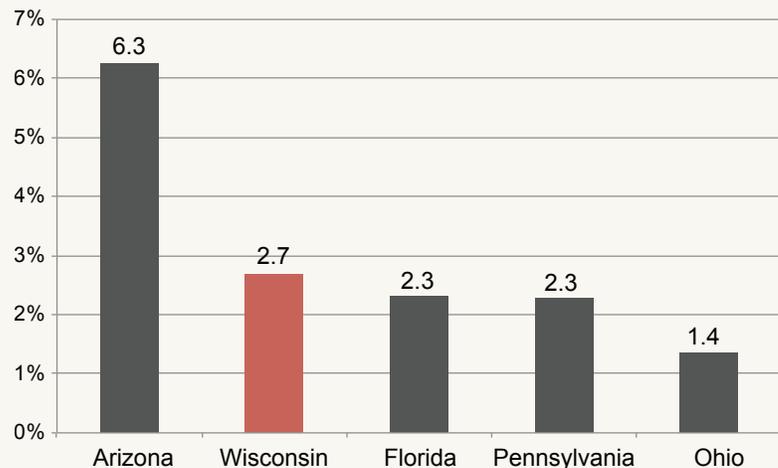
In 2006 Wisconsin policymakers identified the School Choice Demonstration Project (SCDP) as the organization to help answer lingering questions about the effects of school choice in Milwaukee.¹ The SCDP is a national research organization, based in the University of Arkansas' Department of

Figure 1. Enrollments in School Voucher/Scholarship Tax-Credit Programs, 2011-12



Source: Glenn and Gininger 2012.

Figure 2. Voucher/Scholarship Tax-Credit Enrollments as a Percent of All K-12, 2011-12



Source: Glenn and Gininger 2012.

Note: All K-12 means total K-12 enrollments in the state, public and private, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

¹ Wisconsin 2005 Act 125, enacted on March 10, 2006, which primarily modified Wisconsin Law 119.23.

Education Reform, dedicated to the comprehensive, objective and nonpartisan evaluation of school choice programs. Researchers of the SCDP were selected by the U.S. Department of Education to lead the recently completed evaluation of the nation's first federally-funded school voucher initiative, the Opportunity Scholarship Program in Washington, DC.²

The veteran leadership of the SCDP's Milwaukee evaluation – Principal Investigator Patrick J. Wolf and Co-Principal Investigators John F. Witte and Jay P. Greene – 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 have served on dozens of scientific review boards, sponsored by the U.S. federal government and prominent national scientific organizations, aimed at developing and implementing sound methods for the evaluation of education programs. We are drawn together for this project, along with a highly skilled group of junior colleagues, by the opportunity to examine how the mature MPCP has affected students, parents, taxpayers, schools and communities of the city and state. Our shared commitment has been to carefully and faithfully follow the evidence, wherever it leads.

This report contains a summary of the findings from the various topical reports that comprise our comprehensive longitudinal study. As a summary, it does not include extensive details regarding the study samples and scientific methodologies employed in those topical studies. Readers who are interested in the data and methods that gave rise to these findings are strongly encouraged to read the 31 topical reports, all of which are listed in the references to this summary and available for download at http://www.uark.edu/ua/der/SCDP/Milwaukee_Research.html.

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 is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily reflect any official positions of the various funding organizations or research institutions involved. We also express our gratitude to officials at MPS, the private schools in MPCP, and the state Department of Public Instruction (DPI) for willing cooperation, advice, and assistance.

We are extremely grateful to Marlo Crandall at Remedy Creative for his skilled graphical design of the reports and to Martha Melendez of the University of Arkansas for supervising the entire report production process. Thanks to Anna Jacob and Michael McShane for their editorial assistance. We also recognize the guidance of the largest and most esteemed Research Advisory Board ever to oversee a school choice evaluation. Our thanks to David E. Campbell, University of Notre Dame; Anneliese Dickman, Public Policy Forum; David Figlio, Northwestern University; Laura Hamilton, RAND; Jeffrey Henig, Teachers College; Frederick Hess, AEI; Tom Loveless, The Brookings Institution; Thomas Nechyba, Duke University; Paul E. Peterson, Harvard University; Andy Rotherham, Bellwether Education Partners; and Robert K. Yin, COSMOS Corporation.

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

Their contributions of information, advice, and encouragement have improved our research process and products substantially.

Summary of What We Learned About School Choice in Milwaukee

Our research revealed a pattern of school choice results that range from neutral (no significant differences between Choice and MPS) to positive (clear benefit to Choice). Although we have examined virtually every possible way that school choice could systematically affect people, schools, and neighborhoods in Milwaukee, we have found no evidence of any harmful effects of choice. The major findings from this last set of seven topical reports are that:

- Participation in MPCP continues to grow even as both MPCP and MPS have succeeded in closing or at least denying public funds to a substantial number of low-performing schools over the past five years (Report #33).
- Enrolling in a private high school through MPCP increases the likelihood of a student graduating from high school, enrolling in a four-year college, and persisting in college by 4-7 percentage points (Report #30).
- When similar MPCP and MPS students are matched and tracked over four years, the achievement growth of MPCP students compared to MPS students is higher in reading but similar in math. The MPCP achievement advantage in reading is only conclusive in 2010-11, the year a high-stakes testing policy was added to the MPCP (Report #29).
- When a snapshot of all MPCP students who took the state accountability test is compared to a snapshot of the performance of MPS students with similar income disadvantages, the MPCP students are performing at higher levels in the upper grades in reading and science but at lower levels in math at all grade levels examined and in reading and science in 4th grade (Report #32).
- Based on MPCP and MPS administrative data on MPCP students as well as parent surveys, between 7.5 and 14.6 percent of MPCP students have a disability, a rate at least four times higher than previously reported by DPI (Report #35).
- Visits to 13 MPCP schools revealed that many Choice students come to the schools behind by 1-2 years academically; the MPCP schools use various strategies to try to “catch them up” and prepare them for college and succeed with some but not all of them (Report #34).
- When similar independent public charter and MPS students are matched and tracked over four years, the achievement growth of the charter students compared to MPS students is similar in both reading and math, though conversion charters, which used to be private schools, clearly deliver higher achievement growth than MPS (Report #31).

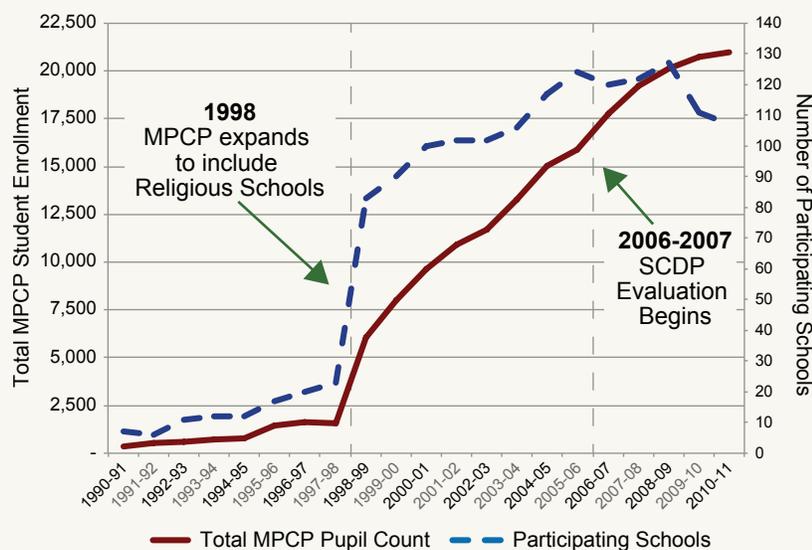
Findings from previous topical reports in our study, relevant to interpreting these recent findings, show that:

- MPS students themselves are performing at somewhat higher levels as a result of competitive pressure from the school voucher program (Report #11).
- The MPCP saves the state money -- nearly \$52 million in fiscal year 2011 -- although not all types of Wisconsin taxpayers benefit from the savings (Report #22).
- The MPCP has had no discernible effect on the racial segregation of schools or housing costs across neighborhoods (Reports #20 & #12).
- Students switch schools frequently in Milwaukee, with MPS students typically changing from one MPS school to another MPS school and MPCP students typically changing from an MPCP school to an MPS school (Report #16).

Finding 1: MPCP Continues to Expand While Excluding Underperforming Schools (Report #33)

The opportunity to select a private school through the voucher program continues to grow in popularity. The MPCP remained a small pilot program limited to secular private schools and subject to a strict enrollment cap during its first eight years of operation. After the enrollment cap was raised from 1 percent to 15 percent of Milwaukee K-12 students and the courts ruled that religious schools could participate in the program, the MPCP expanded dramatically, doubling in size 11 times between 1997-98 and 2006-07 (Figure 3). Enrollments continued to grow throughout the five years of our evaluation, increasing by 18 percent from 17,749 students during the 2006-07 school year to 20,996 students in 2010-11. After our study was completed and the program was expanded to middle-income families and schools outside of Milwaukee enrollment grew an additional 12 percent to 23,426 students in 2011-12 (Public Policy Forum 2012).

Figure 3. Students and Schools in MPCP, 1990-1991 through 2010-11.



Source: Data obtained from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction.

Over the five-year period of our study the number of different private schools participating in the program declined from 120 to 107. The drop in the number of schools was especially steep from 2008-09 to 2009-10, a net loss of 14 schools. The 2009 school year brought a new set of accountability regulations for schools in the MPCP as well as a maximum voucher value of \$6,442 which was 2.5 percent lower than the previous ceiling. The new regulations included a requirement that MPCP schools administer the state test—the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examinations (WKCE)—

to all of their voucher students in grades 3-8 and 10, starting in 2010-11. The Choice schools also faced new requirements to adopt formal standards for student graduation and promotion, implement curricula standards in most subject areas, and verify that all of their teachers and administrators have degrees from accredited colleges and universities. We cannot be certain if these new regulations, the lower voucher value, both, or some other factors led to the drop in the number of participating schools from 2009 to 2011. All we can say for sure is that in 2010-11 the MPCP enrolled more students in fewer participating private schools than was the case two years previously. The schools that recently left the program had much lower student test scores than the schools that remained in MPCP (Report #27).

Finding 2: MPCP Boosts Educational Attainment (Report #30)

Educational attainment is a measure of how far a student goes in school. Attainment is an important student outcome because a number of studies have connected higher levels of attainment with a variety of quality-of-life indicators including greater longevity, higher lifetime earnings, and a lower likelihood of incarceration (e.g. Meara, Richards and Cutler 2008; Rouse 2005; Day and Newburger 2002; Belfield and Levin 2009).

At the start of our evaluation we carefully matched the entire group of 801 9th grade students enrolled in the MPCP with a similar group of 801 9th graders in MPS. We also matched a representative sample of 290 8th grade MPCP students with 290 similar 8th graders in MPS. Five years later, the students originally in 9th grade had the opportunity to have graduated high school, enrolled in college, and persisted in college for one year. The 8th grade students had the opportunity to have graduated high school and enrolled in college.

We used administrative data from schools, parent surveys, and the National Clearinghouse on College Enrollments to confirm the rates at which MPCP and MPS students reached these various milestones of educational attainment. These data indicate that MPCP students were 4 percentage points more likely ever to have graduated from high school than were their MPS counterparts and 7 percentage points more likely to have graduated in four years (i.e. “on time”).

The voucher students also were 4 percentage points more likely to have enrolled in a four-year college or university than were similar MPS students. Since less than 22 percent of MPS students enrolled in a four-year college, the MPCP advantage on this important metric represents almost a 20 percent gain in the likelihood of college enrollment. MPCP students persisted in college through their first year at a rate 6 percentage points higher than similar MPS students.

All of these differences were statistically significant. Access to the voucher program increased the educational attainment of the students in our study who were old enough to have completed high school and attend college.

Finding 3: MPCP Students Experienced Higher Achievement Growth in Reading but Similar Growth in Math (Report #29)

Our primary mandate from the state of Wisconsin was to track the performance on the WKCE of a representative sample of MPCP students with a similar group of MPS students over a five-year period. To do so we carefully matched a random sample of 2,727 MPCP students in grades 3-9 in 2006 with an equal number of MPS students who were identical to the MPCP students in their grade level and neighborhood and similar

to them in initial test scores, race, gender, and English Language Learner status. These two large panels of students were the basis of our Longitudinal Educational Growth Study (LEGS).

This study found no significant differences in achievement growth between MPCP and MPS students one, two, or three years after they had been carefully matched at baseline (Report #10, Report #15, & Report #23). For 2010-11, the final year in which data were collected for our study, the schools in MPCP were required to test all of their voucher students using the WKCE and report the scores by named school for the first time. Thus the MPCP student

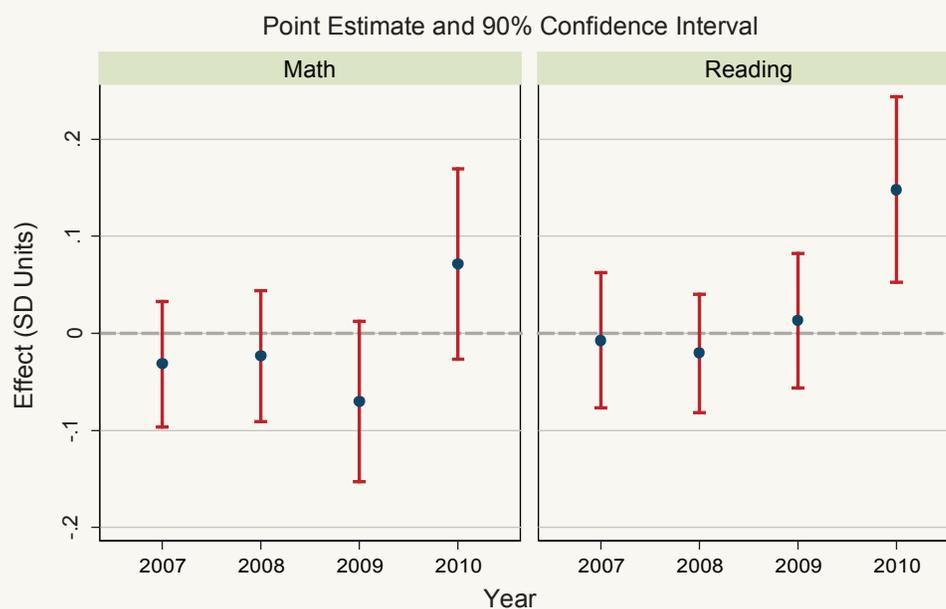
performance in the final year of our study was the result of combining the Choice program with a new high-stakes testing accountability policy.

In the final year of our study the MPCP students demonstrated a level of achievement growth in reading that was significantly higher than the matched sample of MPS students, as evidenced by the fact that the average difference (the dot)

and the confidence interval (the bracket) both are clearly above the 0 line in Figure 4. The size of the reading advantage for the MPCP students is about 15 percent of a standard deviation, generally viewed as a modest but meaningful educational difference. Achievement growth in math was similar for the MPCP and MPS student samples in year four as it had been in all previous years of the LEGS evaluation.

Additional analyses that we discuss in the final LEGS report (#29) suggest that the new test-based accountability policy played a role in generating the achievement gains we observed for the MPCP students in year 4. We cannot determine conclusively how big a role the accountability policy played, however, only that the combination of Choice and accountability left the MPCP students in our study with significantly higher levels of reading gains than their carefully-matched peers in MPS after four years.

Figure 4. Achievement Growth Differences for MPCP Relative to MPS-Matched Students, 2007-10



NOTE: Point estimates and confidence intervals based on results in Table 4, Model 2

Finding 4: Descriptively, MPCP Students have Higher Test Scores Than Similar MPS Students in Some Grades and Subjects but Lower Scores in Others (Report #32)

We also received the test scores from all MPCP students who took the WKCE in 2010, not just the students in our representative panel, and were able to compare their average achievement scores with similarly low-income students in MPS. Descriptively, there are clear patterns in the student achievement data from 2010 presented in our Annual School Testing Summary Report (Report #32). The MPCP students, on average, scored higher than low-income MPS students in reading and science in grades 8 and 10. The MPCP students, on average, scored lower than low-income MPS students in reading and science in grade 4 and in math in grades 4, 8, and 10. Generally speaking, the performance of MPCP students compares favorably with low-income MPS students in reading and science and in the upper grades but unfavorably with low-income MPS students in math and in 4th grade. Our results for reading and math by grade are similar to those in the table in the DPI report of MPCP student achievement using these same data (Wisconsin DPI 2011b, p. 3). The DPI did not, however, report results from the science tests, as we do here.

As we repeatedly caution readers, such snapshot comparisons conducted by us here and by others (Wisconsin DPI 2011; Public Policy Forum 2012) cannot and should not be the basis for judging whether one educational sector is performing well, poorly, or the same as another sector. As we established in Report #16, Milwaukee students switch in and out of MPCP and MPS at moderately high rates, and the average performance of all students in a given school sector in a particular year is affected by the shifting background characteristics of student populations.

Social science dictates that any determination that a certain program or school sector *caused* observed differences in student outcomes requires such conditions as representative samples, controls for measureable student characteristics that influence outcomes (e.g. family income), measures of gains over time for a consistent group of students, a strategy or proxy to control for un-measureable student characteristics that influence outcomes (e.g. student motivation), and statistical tests that rule out study bias (Cook and Campbell 1979, pp. 37-91; Rossi, Lipsey and Freeman 2004, pp. 265-297). All of those conditions held for our Longitudinal Educational Growth Study (LEGS), from which we derive our conclusions about the extent to which MPCP caused differences in student achievement, but far fewer of them held for our Annual School Testing Summary Report or for other recent descriptive reports on MPCP (Table 1).

Table 1. Conditions for Determining if a Program Actually Caused Observed Differences

Condition	LEGS	Testing Report	DPI Report	PPF Report
Representative Samples	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Controls for measureable student characteristics	Many	One (FRL)	One (FRL)	None
Measures of gains over time	Yes	No	No	No
Proxy for un-measureable characteristics	Yes (neighborhood)	No	No	No
Tests for bias	Yes	No	No	No

Notes: FRL is the Federal Free/Reduced Lunch program for low-income students; LEGS is Report #29; Testing report is Report #32; DPI Report is Wisconsin DPI 2011b; PPF Report is Public Policy Forum 2012.

The reason why the LEGS findings are more favorable regarding the achievement effects of MPCP than all the snapshot studies is straightforward. The longitudinal and careful matching methodology of LEGS effectively controls for student disadvantage in MPCP. The snapshot studies instead compare a more disadvantaged population of MPCP students to a less disadvantaged population of MPS students, biasing the comparison against the MPCP students in a way that LEGS does not. For this same reason, aggregate test scores linked to specific MPCP schools primarily indicate how disadvantaged the school's students are but tell us nothing reliable about how well a given school teaches its students.

Finding 5: More MPCP Students Have Disabilities than has been Reported (Report #35)

We drew upon the wealth of information we collected from MPCP and MPS schools over five years, as well as surveys of the parents of students in our MPCP and matched-MPS study panels, to estimate the student disability rate in MPCP. The student disability rate in MPS is reported to be 19 percent (Wisconsin DPI 2011b, p. 2). Looking only at MPCP students who also attended MPS for one or more years of our study, we found that 14.6 percent of them were classified as having a disability while they were in MPS. A total of 11.4 percent of MPCP students have a physical or learning disability based on parent surveys. Parents of our matched MPS students, when responding to the same survey, described 20 percent of their students as having disabilities, a rate almost identical to the 19 percent official rate in MPS. Using MPS disability classifications for all MPCP students who attended MPS, and MPCP administrator classifications for all MPCP students who only attended MPCP, we arrive at our most conservative estimate that 7.5 percent of MPCP students have disabilities. Even that most conservative estimate is more than four times higher than the MPCP disability rate of 1.6 percent reported by DPI (Wisconsin DPI 2011b, p. 2). Importantly, the 1.6 percent DPI rate was merely based on the percentage of MPCP students who were given testing accommodations, not based on any actual measure of student disability.

Finding 6: MPCP Schools are Diverse in Many Approaches to Education but All Emphasize Graduation (Report #34)

In visits to six high schools and seven elementary schools in MPCP, school personnel consistently told us that many of their Choice students are one or two grade-levels behind academically. Each school employs strategies to try to catch students up to grade-level that vary from extra instructional times to a no-excuses approach to discipline and homework to integrating the artistic and the academic to counseling students with troubled home lives. All of the schools suggested that their strategies are successful for most students who buy into their educational approach, but that some students do not provide the buy-in.

Every high school and many of the elementary schools we visited emphasize high school graduation and college enrollment. For example, a religious elementary school we visited has the motto "Christ, College and Character" and begins preparing students for college in Pre-K. High school teachers, administrators, and guidance counselors at the high schools we visited reported using interest inventories, career websites, career nights, and assistance with college applications as strategies to keep students focused on college and career preparedness.

Finding 7: Only Formerly Private Independent Charter Schools are Clearly Outperforming MPS (Report #31)

Last year we reported that students attending independent public charter schools in Milwaukee demonstrated achievement growth in both reading and math that was significantly higher than matched MPS students after three years (Report #25). In the fourth and final year of our charter study, the pattern changed substantially, as the achievement growth of charter students remained above the matched MPS students, on average, but the differences were no longer statistically significant (Figure 5). Throughout our charter school study, the subgroup of independent charter schools that previously were private schools, what we call “conversion charters”, more clearly produced higher student achievement gains, especially in reading (Figure 6).

Figure 5. Effect of Independent Charter Attendance on Student Achievement, by Year

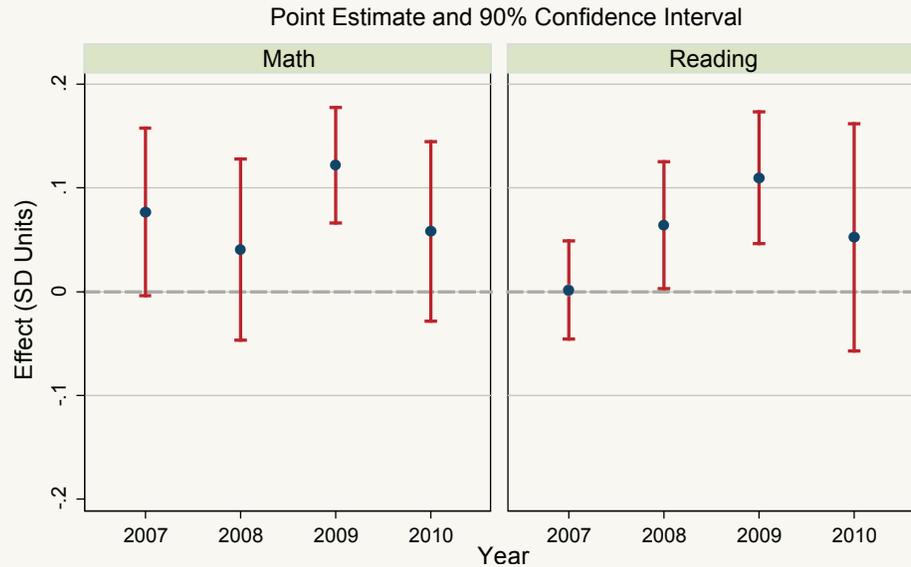
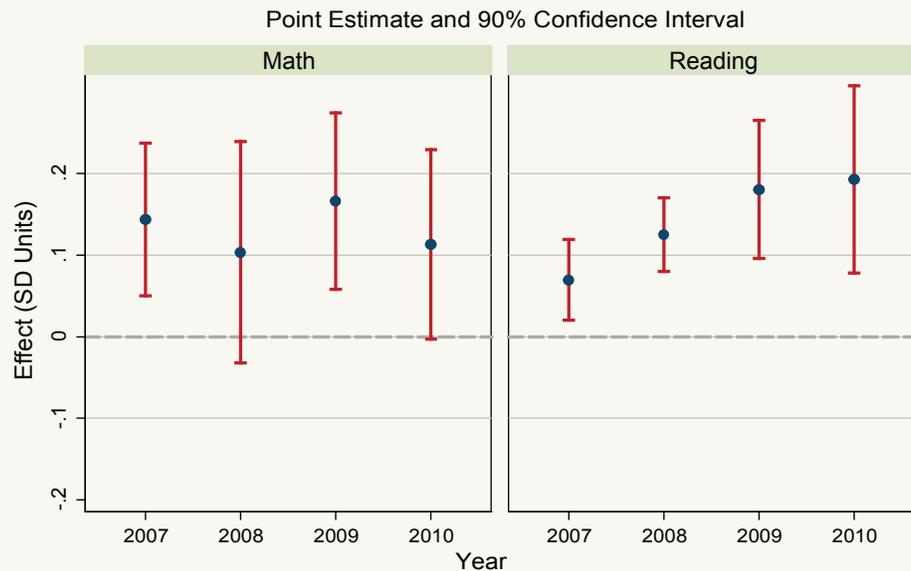


Figure 6. Effect of Conversion Charter Attendance on Student Achievement, by Year

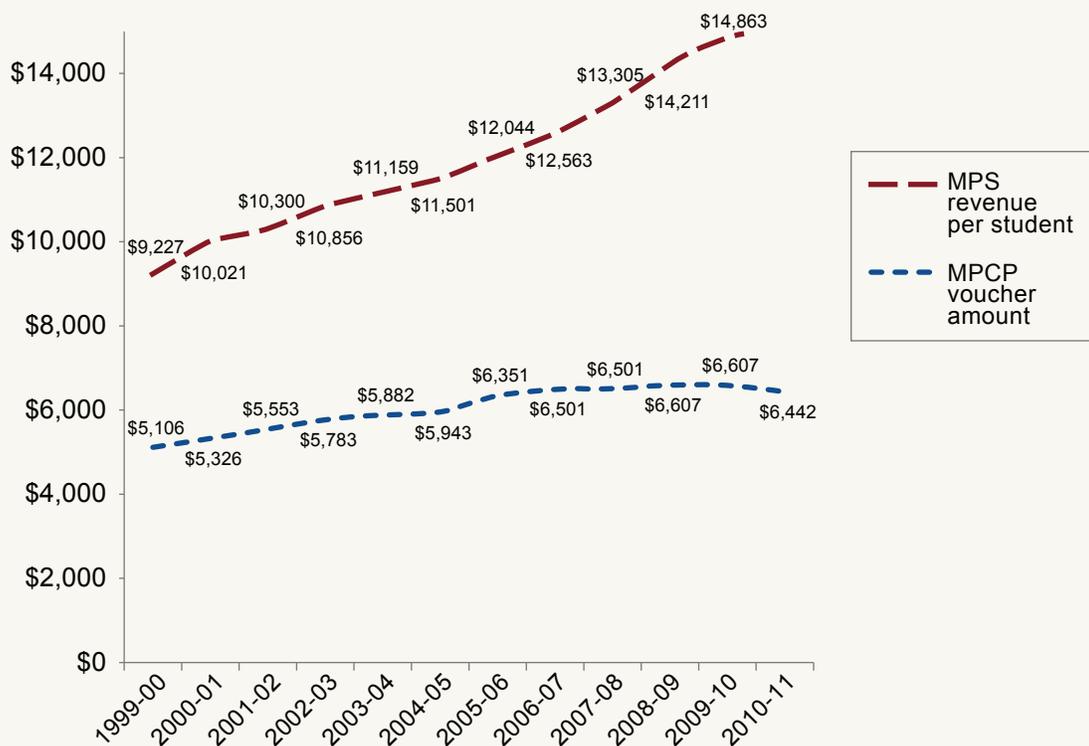


Previously Reported Findings Regarding the Systemic and Community Effects of MPCP

Although our final set of school choice reports all focus on the participant effects of the Milwaukee voucher or charter programs and the schools that participate in them, several previous reports of ours have examined the possible broader, system-wide and community effects of parental choice. We determined that Milwaukee students with more schooling options exhibited greater gains in achievement in the public schools, all else equal, though the size of these positive systemic effects of choice was modest (Report #11). We found that, on average, the MPCP has a neutral effect on racial segregation in schools because most student transfers under the program involve minority students leaving heavily minority public schools, thus reducing the public school’s level of segregation, for similarly heavily minority private schools, thus increasing the private school’s level of segregation (Report #20). Even though Milwaukee’s voucher and charter school programs decouple a child’s school assignment from their residential address, we discovered that real estate values in the city continue to vary based on the quality of local public schools (Report #12).

Finally, by applying Wisconsin education funding formulas to student enrollment counts, Robert Costrell of our research team determined that the operation of the MPCP saves the state of Wisconsin money, for example almost \$52 million in FY11 (Report #2; Report #7; Report #22). It is easy to see why this is the case when the maximum voucher amount paid by the state is compared with average per-pupil spending in MPS over the past decade (Figure 7). Because of a “funding flaw” in the voucher law, the fiscal benefits of the greater efficiency of the MPCP accrue only to the payers of state income tax and property tax outside of Milwaukee, while Milwaukee property taxpayers actually suffer a fiscal loss as a result of the program.

Figure 7. Maximum Voucher Amount Compared to MPS Average Per-Pupil Expenditures



Conclusion

In 2006 the state of Wisconsin gave us a job: to conduct a rigorous comprehensive evaluation of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP) and inform policy makers and the public about our findings. In the five years since, we have produced 36 reports about many aspects of school choice in Milwaukee. After the completion of our final data collection, in 2011, the state altered the MPCP in significant ways, most notably by expanding eligibility to families with incomes up to 300 percent of the poverty level (\$67,050 for a family of four), launching a sister program in Racine, and permitting private schools outside of the city of Milwaukee to take in Milwaukee or Racine voucher students. The voucher program that we carefully studied from 2006 through 2011 no longer exists, at least not as a parental school choice program targeted only to low-income families in Milwaukee and the private schools there that serve them.

Our final set of reports on the MPCP represent the last word on the first private school choice program targeted to low-income inner-city students in the U.S.—a pioneering program that operated for 22 years and paved the way for 25 voucher and tax-credit scholarship programs that have come in its wake.

Our findings include several “no significant difference” results but also some evidence that participation in MPCP or enrollment in an independent public charter school has produced better student outcomes than those experienced by similar students in MPS. The 8th and 9th grade cohorts of students in our longitudinal study graduated from high school, enrolled in college, and persisted in college at higher rates if they participated in the MPCP. Choice students appeared to have received a boost from the test-based accountability policy implemented in 2010-11 that propelled them to significantly higher levels of reading achievement than matched MPS students, though the two groups ended our study with similar achievement in math. Independent public charter schools that previously operated as private schools delivered clear achievement gains to students in reading, though the gains in math and the average gains for all charter schools in both math and reading were statistically similar to those for matched MPS students. The MPCP enrolls students with disabilities at a rate of 7.5 to 14.6 percent which is 23 to 61 percent lower than the rate reported for MPS but more than four times greater than the rate of 1.6 percent that DPI reported for MPCP based merely on the percentage of students given testing accommodations. We, and the world, know much more about school choice in general and the MPCP in particular now than we did five years ago, or even five months ago.

Our work here is finished. We are grateful to the people of Wisconsin for entrusting us with the responsibility to uncover and report the truth about school choice in the great city of Milwaukee.



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