



REVIEW OF *THE COMPREHENSIVE LONGITUDINAL EVALUATION OF THE MILWAUKEE PARENTAL CHOICE PROGRAM: SUMMARY OF FOURTH YEAR REPORTS*

Reviewed By

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Summary of Review

This review is of *The Comprehensive Longitudinal Evaluation of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program: Summary of Fourth Year Reports*, published by the School Choice Demonstration Project, University of Arkansas. The report makes eight claims about the effectiveness of the program, most of them positive. On the key issue of achievement of students receiving vouchers, however, the report merely concludes that the program is not harmful. As the report's title suggests, the evidence for all its claims is almost exclusively the researchers' own work, with no reference to other academic literature. Importantly, none of their own referenced documents were peer-reviewed. Even as some of the report's claims are in accord with the broader literature, their appearance in isolation makes for an overly simple evaluation of the MPCP.

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REVIEW OF *THE COMPREHENSIVE LONGITUDINAL EVALUATION OF THE MILWAUKEE PARENTAL CHOICE PROGRAM: SUMMARY OF FOURTH YEAR REPORTS*

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I. Introduction

This report, *The Comprehensive Longitudinal Evaluation of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program: Summary of Fourth Year Reports*, is an overview of evidence from research by scholars at the School Choice Demonstration Project (SCDP), a research center in the Department of Education Reform, University of Arkansas.¹ Since 2006, the SCDP researchers have produced 27 reports on the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP), which is perhaps the most prominent education voucher program in the U.S. This report, written by Patrick Wolf, gives a brief synopsis of some of their findings from the earlier SCDP reports and suggests potential future investigations of the MPCP.

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

The report begins with the contention that Milwaukee is the poster-child for school choice in America. Accordingly, research on Milwaukee's education system—and especially the MPCP—should yield important information on the consequences of school choice in general and vouchers in particular.

The report draws almost exclusively on work performed by the SCDP's own researchers. It makes the following claims about the MPCP: it is popular; it saves Wisconsin taxpayers money; it has led to closure of poor schools; it has increased attainment of participants; it has not increased achievement, except for students in independent public charter schools; it has put competitive pressure on the public school system; and it has had no effect on racial segregation in Milwaukee's school system.

One overarching conclusion the report makes is that there are no adverse effects from the MPCP. The researchers could find no overall positive test-score outcomes for students who participated in the program; but no negative outcomes were found for these students either.

But the report also stresses that some findings are clearly positive (e.g., that the program is popular). The report proposes future research, specifically suggesting both process research and attainment research. For instance, regarding process, the report suggests research concerning

how students' educational experiences differ across the MPCP. Regarding attainment, it suggests research concerning whether students are more likely to progress on to college. The report also suggests research concerning the role of religious schools, both academic and social.

III. The Report's Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

The report is a summary of other evidence. As such its reasoning mainly depends on these other reports, which are drawn from empirical investigation of the MPCP since its inception in 1990.

The first claim is that the MPCP is popular. This is based on an existence proof: the system exists and enrollments are growing. The second claim—that the MPCP saves taxpayers money—is based on a series of financial analyses by Professor Robert Costrell of the SCDP.² The third claim—schools closures are more frequent—is based on a mapping of school openings and closings by a team at SCDP.³

The findings on academic outcomes are from several studies by the SCDP.⁴ Regarding increases in attainment associated with MPCP, the evidence is based on longitudinal survey evidence from a cohort of ninth-grade students in 2006. Attainment of MPCP students is matched with comparable students in the Milwaukee Public School system (MPS). On the neutral effects on achievement from the MPCP, the evidence is from test scores, both in cross-section and over time. MPCP students were matched with MPS students and the Wisconsin Knowledge Concepts Examination was administered across fourth through eighth grades. Finally, the gains for independent public charter schools are based on reading and math achievement scores across students in grades 3-8 in 2007-2009.

The claim of competitive pressures on achievement is based on a single study by researchers at the SCDP. Each school was assigned a “school choice threat” measure: students in public schools (MPS) with bigger threats were found to have greater achievement gains.⁵ Finally, the claim of unchanged racial segregation is from a study by a team at SCDP. The research looked at student transfers and whether the origin and destination schools were more or less racially segregated as a result.

IV. The Report's Use of Research Literature

The report is avowedly a summary of other evidence by scholars at the SCDP. It is not a summary of the general research evidence. In describing itself as a “Summary of What *We* Have Learned” (emphasis added), the report is literally correct: *we* refers to the SCDP researchers, not the academic community.

Almost all other research on vouchers and school choice is omitted from the report. This includes not only research on the Milwaukee program itself, but also general topical research that might help to place the report's findings in context. Also omitted is reference to research on methodological issues related to school choice, along with appraisal of the work by the SCDP performed by other scholars. As we show below, this other research is pertinent to the claims made in this report, and the document is weakened by its failure to engage with it.

As noted, there has been considerable research on the MPCP performed by scholars other than the SCDP. These studies are not addressed. This research extends back over decades, back to when the program was only open to non-religious schools.⁶ Other, more recent research even suggests possible benefits of voucher programs. For example, Chakrabarti (2008) investigated competitive pressures and achievement gains from the MPCP and found that there were academic gains from the MPCP.⁷ But she also described how the impacts of a voucher program depend crucially on its design. The most authoritative review study to date, however, focuses on voucher programs in general and finds no achievement gains from voucher programs.⁸ This is consistent with the main finding in the new SCDP report.

There is also general topical research relevant to the report's claims. Again, some of this research is supportive of voucher programs and some of it is not. Much of it is drawn from a wider evidence base than the report relies on. For example, at least 40 studies have looked at the

The report's method is simple: it uncritically restates findings from studies performed by persons affiliated with the SCDP and does so in isolation from any other research.

benefits of competition in education.⁹ The issue is not so much whether competitive pressures exist—under the right conditions they certainly do. But there is an issue as to whether those pressures make much of a difference substantively and whether the voucher system exerts more pressure than other forms of choice. More generally, this research highlights the challenges in drawing bold conclusions from a complex environment. In the case of Milwaukee and the state of Wisconsin, there are a lot of different, interlocking policy changes (charter schooling, open enrollment, vouchers, etc.). A recent study looked at students who transferred as part of the state's open enrollment policy.¹⁰ These researchers did find segregation: students were transferring to districts with lower percentages of minorities.

Methodological research is also salient. Two areas in particular stand out. One is the issue of parental choice—both how to measure it and how to value it. Studies should not look solely at the families who take up a voucher and conclude that, effectively, as long as enough families use a voucher, then the program is valuable. Studies should also consider those who are unable to do so, who choose not to do so, or who vacillate. Many of these families are constrained, and these constraints need to be examined thoroughly, as was done recently for the lottery-based program in Charlotte, North Carolina.¹¹ Vouchers are unlikely to have big impacts if few parents use them, and we know from many studies that usage rates are much lower than eligibility rates, and that families drop out of the voucher program at reasonably high rates.¹² The second issue where methodological research is valuable is in the study of racial segregation. There are many ways to conceptualize segregation (beyond racial groupings), and there are multiple ways to measure segregation (e.g., dissimilarity indices).¹³ This literature may be informative on what type of segregation is most important and how best to interpret the evidence. The single study SCDP researchers conducted was hardly definitive, focusing only on basic racial patterns.

Finally, there is no reference to any literature that has raised issues about the earlier studies. For example, the report claiming that the MPCP saves taxpayers' money was reviewed by this author two years ago.¹⁴ The existence of any savings depends heavily on two assumptions: how many students would have attended public school if the voucher option was not available, and how much is saved as each student transfers out of the public school system. Any savings that might arise are very sensitive to the first assumption about take-up. Plus, the savings are assumed as if the voucher students would have cost the same as other students; this assumption is not tested and is most likely not valid. Students who leave for voucher schools are likely to cost less to educate than the students who remain. Neither of these issues is addressed in this report. Similarly, the 2009 SCDP report about competition effects on MPS students was reviewed by Greg Camilli.¹⁵ The review pointed to methodological issues but also noted that even the report's purported finding of a benefit is "small, if not negligible." The statement in the new SCDP report that MPS students are performing at "somewhat higher levels" thus seemingly overreaches in terms of the level of evidentiary support as well as the findings from that support.

V. Review of the Report's Methods

The report's method is simple: it uncritically restates findings from studies performed by persons affiliated with the SCDP and does so in isolation from any other research. The author is of course free to summarize the SCDP's own research, but it is worth noting that none of it has been published in peer-reviewed journals, and it is far from a comprehensive explanation of the MPCP.

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

The report's findings should be viewed with caution but interest. Certainly, many commentators have pointed out that giving people options cannot be a bad thing. But choice does not take place in a vacuum and may have unforeseen consequences for persons who do not choose—or who must respond to the choices others have made. Indeed, one of the cited reports makes this clear; the financing of the MPCP is such that school choices have made Milwaukee taxpayers worse off. Similarly, that earlier report somewhat undermines the general claim that there are no adverse effects from the MPCP. Although the MPCP may save Wisconsin taxpayers, it has done so at the expense of Milwaukee taxpayers.¹⁶

The most interesting research cited in this report refers to attainment, focusing on the research claim that students in the MPCP are more likely to progress on to college than comparable peers in the MPS. That would be an important finding because an increase in attainment might be viewed as a more valuable outcome (of any educational intervention) than an increase in achievement. Test scores only measure cognitive skills concerning specifically designed competencies; attainment captures not only cognitive skills but also non-cognitive skills such as diligence, perseverance, and motivation. These latter skills are almost certainly important for adult economic success. That said, the earlier SCDP report cited in the new report does not find much of an effect of MPCP on attainment; when family characteristics are included, the possible attainment effect loses statistical significance.¹⁷ Plus, as only 28% of voucher participants are

high school students, it is not clear how much of an increase in attainment is possible under MPCP.¹⁸ Given these rather serious research limitations, the new SCDP report should probably not trumpet the finding as follows: “Attending a private high school through the MPCP increases the likelihood of a student graduating from high school and enrolling in college.”

The report re-affirms a general conclusion that competitive pressures should lead all schools to improve. Although this is plausible and in line with most other evidence, it is still difficult to accurately identify where the competitive threat is coming from. Indeed, given the report’s assertion—not attributable to an earlier SCDP study—that there is high performance from the independent public charter schools, it might be *those* schools that are spurring on any competition benefit for schools in the MPS (but again, note the questions and concerns raised in the review by Greg Camilli mentioned earlier).

Finally, there appear to be zero or very small gains in achievement associated with the MPCP. This, too, is in line with the general literature on voucher programs. It also fits in broadly with the literature on the difficulty of raising achievement levels, not least because of their sensitivity to family circumstances. On this point, it is interesting to note the new report’s finding that the independent public charter schools in Milwaukee have higher achievement gains.¹⁹ As well, some of these charter schools were formerly voucher schools, making any policy inference even more complex.

VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

This report, *The Comprehensive Longitudinal Evaluation of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program: Summary of Fourth Year Reports*, is an overview. In itself, it simply summarizes other SCDP studies. The summary is faithful to those other studies, but readers would do better to read the other studies directly, and they would certainly be better off reading those other studies *along with* the extensive research and reviews that this new study neglects to engage with.

Notes and References

- ¹ Wolf, P.J. (2011). *The Comprehensive Longitudinal Evaluation of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program: Summary of Fourth Year Reports*. University of Arkansas, Department for Education Reform. Retrieved May 15, 2011, from http://www.uaedreform.org/SCDP/Milwaukee_Eval/Report_28.pdf.
- ² The three analyses are essentially annual updates of each other. The most recent is Costrell, R. M. (2010). *The Fiscal Impact of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, 2010-11 Update*. University of Arkansas, Department for Education Reform, Retrieved May 15, 2011, from http://www.uaedreform.org/SCDP/Milwaukee_Eval/Report_22.pdf.
- ³ Kisida, B., Jensen, L.I., & Wolf, P.J. (2011). *Milwaukee Parental Choice Program: Descriptive Report on Participating Schools, 2009-10*. University of Arkansas, Department for Education Reform, Retrieved May 15, 2011, from http://www.uaedreform.org/SCDP/Milwaukee_Eval/Report_27.pdf.
- ⁴ In total, there are four of these studies by the SCDP. For an index of all the studies, see http://www.uaedreform.org/SCDP/Milwaukee_Eval/.
- ⁵ Greene, J. P. & Marsh, R. H. (2009). *The Effect of Milwaukee's Parental Choice Program on Student Achievement in Milwaukee Public Schools*, SCDP Milwaukee Evaluation Report #11, University of Arkansas. Retrieved May 23, 2011, from http://www.uark.edu/ua/der/SCDP/Milwaukee_Eval/Report_11.pdf.
- ⁶ Witte, J. (2000). 2000. *The Market Approach to Education: An Analysis of America's First Voucher Program*. Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ.
- ⁷ Chakrabarti, R. (2008). Can increasing private school participation and monetary loss in a voucher program affect public school performance? Evidence from Milwaukee. *Journal of Public Economics*, 92, 1371-1393.
- ⁸ Rouse, C.E. & Barrow, L. (2009). School vouchers and student achievement: recent evidence and remaining questions. *Annual Review of Economics*, 1, 17-42.
- ⁹ Belfield, C.R. & Levin, H.M. (2002). The Effects of Competition on Educational Outcomes: A Review of U.S. Evidence. *Review of Educational Research*, 72, 279-341.
- ¹⁰ Welsch, D.M. (2010). An examination of inter-district public school transfers in Wisconsin. *Economics of Education Review*, 29, 126-137.
- ¹¹ Cowen, J. (2010). Who Chooses, Who Refuses? Learning More from Students who Decline Private School Vouchers. *American Journal of Education*, 117, 1-24.

12 See for example, the attrition rates reported by Howell, W.G. & Peterson, P. E. (2002). *The Education Gap: Vouchers and Urban Public Schools*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.

13 Reardon, S.F. & Firebaugh, G. (2002). Measures of multigroup segregation. *Sociological Methodology*, 32, 33-67.

14 Belfield, C. R. (2009). *Review of "The Fiscal Impact of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program: 2009 Update"* Boulder and Tempe: Education and the Public Interest Center & Education Policy Research Unit. Retrieved May 15, 2011, from <http://nepc.colorado.edu/thinktank/review-fiscal-impact-Milwaukee>

15 Camilli, G. (2009). *Review of "The Effect of Milwaukee's Parental Choice Program on Student Achievement in Milwaukee Public Schools."* Boulder and Tempe: Education and the Public Interest Center & Education Policy Research Unit. Retrieved May 23, 2011 from <http://nepc.colorado.edu/thinktank/review-Effect-Milwaukee-Parental-Choice>

16 Moreover, report #27 does find that MPCP schools have fewer minority students than the MPS schools and that the difference is statistically significant (Table 10). That said, this test is not a substitute for a detailed investigation of segregation Kisida, B., Jensen, L.I., & Wolf, P.J. (2011). *Milwaukee Parental Choice Program: Descriptive Report on Participating Schools, 2009-10*. University of Arkansas, Department for Education Reform, Retrieved May 15, 2011, from http://www.uaedreform.org/SCDP/Milwaukee_Eval/Report_27.pdf.

17 The study also uses an ordered probit estimation, which is not standard in the literature on attainment. Cowen, J.M., Fleming, D.J., Witte, J.F., & Wolf, P.J. (2011). *Student attainment and the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program*. University of Arkansas, Department for Education Reform, Retrieved May 15, 2011, from http://www.uaedreform.org/SCDP/Milwaukee_Eval/Report_24.pdf.

18 See Table 3 of Cowen, J.M., Fleming, D.J., Witte, J.F., & Wolf, P.J. (2011). *Student attainment and the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program*. University of Arkansas, Department for Education Reform, Retrieved May 15, 2011, from http://www.uaedreform.org/SCDP/Milwaukee_Eval/Report_24.pdf.

19 For somewhat less enthusiastic findings about the Milwaukee charter schools, see Lavertu, S. & Witte, J. (2009, March). *The Impact of Milwaukee Charter Schools on Student Achievement*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, as well as the review of that report:

Bifulco, R. (2009). *Review of "The Impact of Milwaukee Charter Schools on Student Achievement."* Boulder and Tempe: Education and the Public Interest Center & Education Policy Research Unit. Retrieved May 23, 2011, from <http://nepc.colorado.edu/thinktank/review-impact-Milwaukee-charter>.

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