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DO SCHOOL VOUCHERS WORK? STUDY SUGGESTS ANSWER

A Wall Street Journal analysis of the school system's 27-year-old program suggests the concept works best when private institutions limit the number of public students.

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Almost three decades ago, Milwaukee started offering the nation's first-ever school vouchers. Starting small, the program allowed poor children to **use taxpayer money to attend private schools**. Today, about a quarter of Milwaukee children educated with public funds take advantage, making the program a testing ground for a big experiment in education.

Did students in the program get a better education? That depends on how participating schools handled a critical issue: how many voucher students to let in.

A Wall Street Journal analysis of the data suggests vouchers worked best when enrollment from voucher students was kept low. As the percentage of voucher students rises, the returns diminish until the point when there is little difference between the performance of public and private institutions. The vast majority of private schools participating in the program today have high percentages of publicly funded students.

The city's nearly 29,000 voucher students, on average, have performed about the same as their peers in public schools on state exams, the analysis shows. The successful voucher students, who often performed better than their public-school peers, were mainly found at private schools that worked to balance numbers of voucher students and paying ones.

"The schools that have 20 percent to 30 percent voucher kids and 70 percent to 80 percent fee-paying kids, they look more like the private schools that we sort of put on a pedestal—that have very ambitious programs," says Patrick Wolf, a professor of education policy at the University of Arkansas who has studied private-school choice programs for about 19 years. "Ones that enroll a very high percent of voucher students tend to be low-resourced."

The Milwaukee findings offer a potential road map for the Trump administration, which is **preparing a national push for school-choice programs** to provide an alternative to traditional public schools. President Donald Trump has called for allocating \$250 million for scholarships for low-income students to attend private schools, part of a plan to eventually pump \$20 billion of federal money into school-choice measures, including vouchers.

In the city, proponents and opponents of the program argue as strenuously over the performance data as they do about the value of vouchers in general, including the role of funding and religious schools.

Some educators suggest the voucher students who score well do so precisely because they attend private schools with lower proportions of their peers. They benefit from superior resources and support services funded by wealthier families who pay hefty fees to attend and are often more connected to the institution.

Better performing private schools often restrict the number of voucher-paying students because they can afford to subsidize only a certain number.

At Marquette University High School, a popular all-boys private school where voucher students notch high state-exam scores, annual tuition was \$12,445 this past school year, not including books and fees—about \$5,000 more than the voucher program pays to the school. A school official said voucher enrollment is kept low, about 12.5 percent in the past school year, because the school can't afford to make up the difference for any more.

Jim Bender, president of School Choice Wisconsin, a voucher-advocacy group, says schools that don't raise outside money and are made up largely of voucher students, which bring in less revenue, find "it's difficult to have high-powered leadership and high-powered staff—that's just the reality."

Private schools receive less money per student under the Milwaukee voucher program—from \$7,323 to \$7,969 per student in the last school year—compared with an average of \$10,122 for public-school students. The amount, which has increased over the years, was initially set low to help pass the voucher bill in a split legislature.

Public-school officials say they have greater expenses, such as for transportation and for providing services to special-needs students, although they say they haven't done any comprehensive cost comparisons between public and voucher schools.

Mr. Bender has pushed to expand the funding for the voucher program. Like many proponents, he says the ability of parents to choose is a big benefit in itself, especially for parents seeking a religiously based school.

Mike Ruzicka, president of the 4,000-member Greater Milwaukee Association of Realtors, a group that supports Milwaukee's voucher program, says that at the outset supporters were overly optimistic about the program's potential impact.

"We've come to the realization that it's not going to be a panacea," he says. He says the voucher program helped some students and has provided families with more options, and has also pushed public schools to do better.

Local opponents call the program a failure based on its academic record. Wisconsin state Rep. Christine Sinicki (D., Milwaukee), an opponent who was on the Milwaukee school board during the program's early years, says the program's expansion beyond poor students stretched public-school financing by enabling middle-class students who had been paying for private school to attend them with vouchers.

As for arguments that the voucher program needs better funding, Ms. Sinicki says: "They've said for years money is not going to fix the problem. Now they're saying they need more money to educate kids. It's a little twisted if you ask me."

The socioeconomic makeup of the two groups doesn't appear to be a factor in test scores. The Journal analysis shows that 82 percent of Milwaukee's public-school students qualified for free or reduced-price lunches last school year, compared with 79 percent of those in the voucher program, which suggests the voucher system doesn't seem to be burdened by a larger number of disadvantaged students.

It is difficult to assess how teacher salaries and quality might contribute. Private voucher schools, unlike public schools, aren't obligated to employ certified teachers or to disclose pay, making it difficult to compare the two sectors.

Previous studies of voucher programs have produced varying results. Recent examinations of Louisiana and Indiana voucher programs, which reviewed the progress of small numbers of students, showed that voucher recipients lost academic ground in the first couple of years but caught up to public-school students afterward.

The Journal's analysis went beyond test scores to determine what effect the percentage of voucher students in each participating school had on performance.

About 13 states and Washington, D.C., use voucher programs, which served about 175,000 students last school year. The Journal reviewed standardized test scores of statewide voucher programs in Wisconsin, Louisiana and Ohio and voucher programs serving the cities of Racine, Wis., Cleveland and Washington, D.C., that had available data for comparison. All serve low-income students or struggling schools, or both. The review didn't include about a dozen voucher programs that only serve special-needs students because testing requirements vary greatly.

The Journal's analysis of test results showed the majority of the voucher programs, when compared with public schools, had outcomes similar to those for Milwaukee.

No other voucher program in the U.S. targeting poor children and underperforming schools has penetrated as deeply or been around as long as the Milwaukee program.

Former Wisconsin state Rep. Annette "Polly" Williams—an African-American Democrat who once referred to children in Milwaukee Public Schools as "hostages" in a struggling system—pushed through the city's voucher program, formally called the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program. She worked with Republicans, drawing opposition from some members of her own party.

In its 1990 inaugural year, the program drew 341 students, with the poorest children targeted through household-income data. About a half-dozen or so private schools participated, with no religious schools allowed.

The program was capped at 1 percent of the public-school enrollment, or about 1,000 students, to prevent a financial hit on Milwaukee Public Schools. Individual schools couldn't enroll more than 49 percent voucher students.

In 1995, the cap was lifted for individual schools, which current Wisconsin education Superintendent Tony Evers calls a "defining moment" that brought campuses with large majorities of voucher students. Last school year, the majority of private schools participating in the program—81 of 120—had at least 75 percent voucher students.

Dr. Evers, a longtime critic of vouchers, says the program hasn't lived up to its original intent to provide students an option to achieve at a higher level. "I don't think they perform any better or worse" than Milwaukee public schools, says Dr. Evers, who was elected about nine years ago and has heavy support from Democrats and teachers unions.

Some schools with lots of voucher students perform well. Nativity Jesuit Academy and Yeshiva Elementary School had good state test scores last school year and voucher enrollments of 93 percent and 91 percent, respectively.

But the bulk of those with the highest voucher enrollments fall in the bottom quartiles of private schools for results on state exams, which voucher students are required to take.

A review of available state proficiency rates for 108 of the 120 private schools in the Milwaukee voucher program last school year found those ranking in the top quartile in English language arts had an average voucher enrollment of 54 percent, and in math, 53 percent.

In schools in the lowest two quartiles on the exams, average voucher enrollment ranged from 91 percent to 94 percent. (Some schools didn't have test results because they are new to the program, serve students too young to test or have small numbers of test-takers.)

The University of Arkansas' Dr. Wolf says some schools with high voucher enrollments aren't equipped to educate large numbers of economically disadvantaged students who can require more resources, while those with lower voucher enrollments tend to have more financial resources and paying families.

At Word of Life Lutheran School in Milwaukee, test scores in 2011 were much higher than those in the public-school system in English language arts and a few points higher in math. In 2017, after voucher enrollment grew from 69 percent to 93 percent, scores were lower than public schools' in English language arts and the same in math.

Officials at the school didn't respond to requests for comment.

Milwaukee's private schools with high voucher percentages have demographics similar to the city's public schools: mostly poor and minority. Research by the U.S. Education Department shows public schools with high numbers of poor children are more likely to be low performing and have fewer advanced students around to help their struggling peers. The research also shows the schools usually have more discipline problems, less parental involvement and poorer-quality teachers.

In 1998, following a Wisconsin Supreme Court decision that allowed religious schools to participate, enrollment in Milwaukee's voucher program grew by 294 percent. Thirty religious schools that have been in the program since the ruling have gone from a combined paying-student population of 72 percent in the 1998-99 school year to 19 percent in 2016-17. Religious-based schools last school year accounted for about 90 percent of participating campuses in Milwaukee.

The Greater Holy Temple Christian Academy was formed in 2003 to serve voucher students. All of its students, about 630, use vouchers this school year. Their scores on state exams are lower than the average for their peers in the public-school system.

A cap on voucher participation that had helped limit overall growth ended in 2011, and income limits expanded to allow middle-class families. Voucher students make up 77 percent of the overall student population at private schools participating in the Milwaukee program this school year, according to the state.

Milwaukee's program is estimated to cost \$213.3 million this school year. Most of the funding is expected to come from state revenue. Milwaukee Public Schools also funds a portion, which this school year is estimated at \$47.8 million, according to state education officials. And although fewer students are now educated in Milwaukee public schools—a drop

of about 12 percent in the past decade—Dr. Evers, the superintendent, says costs don't balance out because of fixed overhead for things such as heating and electricity.

Wisconsin Lutheran High School has a near-even split of private and voucher students. Rev. Kenneth Fisher, the school's president, says that mix provides a desirable socioeconomic balance. "It's best for kids," he says.

On state exams, the school's voucher students scored at least nine percentage points higher in math and English language arts than Milwaukee public high-school students.

Rev. Fisher says some paying parents voiced concern at first that they would be subsidizing the voucher students' education, which cost \$11,100 in tuition and fees this past school year. He says the school's marketing efforts, including fundraisers, helped bridge a gap of about \$3,000 for voucher students.

"If I didn't get the voucher, I wouldn't be able to go here," Ebenezer Ikhumhen, a then-senior from Nigeria, said in April. He has since graduated and now attends Central Michigan University.