

Study's Results Are Flawed and Inconsequential

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To the evaluators of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, vouchers are like a vaccine. Once students are "exposed" to the voucher program - even if they subsequently leave - that "exposure" somehow accounts for any good things that happen later on.

And leave they did - a whopping 75% of them.

Here are the details: The evaluators began by following 801 ninth-grade voucher recipients. By 12th grade, only about 200 of these students were still using vouchers to attend private school. Three of every four students had left the program.

Given this attrition, the researchers had to estimate graduation rates (as well as college attendance rates and persistence in college) by comparing Milwaukee Public Schools students to students who had been "exposed" to the voucher program - even though most of those students appear to have actually graduated from an MPS school.

Yet the summary report from the evaluators has no mention of the 75% attrition rate. What readers were told was, "Enrolling in (read as "being exposed to") 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."

That sounds positive, and voucher advocates have trumpeted this statement. But a more defensible statement is that there are no findings of benefits that are statistically distinguishable from zero.

Here's why: After controlling both for students' prior measured achievement and for differences in the level of parents' formal education, to ensure that comparable students were being compared, none of the benefits showcased by the evaluators are statistically significant using conventional significance criteria.

But that's not the only problem. The Journal Sentinel's Feb. 27 article about the evaluation results carried the headline, "[Voucher students improve on reading, study finds](#)" - accurately reporting another misleading finding. It turns out that in the evaluation's final year, a high-stakes testing policy was implemented in voucher schools.

Here's why this matters: In Chicago, where there was no voucher policy, researchers reported an even larger jump in scores attributable entirely to the addition of high stakes to the testing program. Researchers understand that by doing things like focusing on the material tested and teaching students how to take these tests, schools can boost scores during the first year of a high-stakes regime. They also understand such gains are extremely unlikely to be repeated.

Nevertheless, here's how the evaluators summarize their finding: "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." This statement doesn't acknowledge that, since these gains did not show up in the previous four years, it is the implementation of test-based accountability in voucher schools during the final year of the evaluation that is most likely responsible for the entire bump in reading test scores.

So what are we left with?

Over the past two decades, the injustices done to MPS students have multiplied. The student body has become more desperately poor and the number of students with costly special educational needs has increased. Art, music and physical education have been drastically cut, and the teacher mentoring program scaled back.

Over that same period, the Milwaukee voucher program has not delivered. As this evaluation confirms, students who receive vouchers probably don't do any worse or any better when they move to private schools.

But evidence doesn't seem to matter. The "choice" system has become the broken status quo - choice as an end in itself - vigilantly guarded and professionally promoted by a well-funded, well-compensated and well-placed phalanx of advocates while the real needs of Milwaukee's schoolchildren remain largely unaddressed.

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