

SCHOOL CHOICE

ISSUES

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School Choice for Wisconsin's Families: Many agree with the concept. Some disagree. And some simply want more information. As the public debate continues to grow louder about how best to provide a quality education to all children, it is critical to know all the facts about school choice proposals and to have an understanding of how school choice programs have impacted communities, parents and students around the country. All of this analysis is done with one goal in mind: The best possible education for all children.

WPRI'S JUNK SCIENCE

A recent report from the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute (WPRI) claims to examine whether public school choice improves public schools in Milwaukee. Amazingly, the report not only fails to include data on educational outcomes, it even fails to include any data from the city of Milwaukee. So in addition to being unable to tell us whether Milwaukee students are better off as a result of public school choice, the report can't tell us anything about Milwaukee at all.

The WPRI report is junk science. Its statistical method is not merely "flawed" or "inadequate." It is an insult to the reader's intelligence.

Moreover, the report is being erroneously represented by its authors and some others as having repercussions for the debate over school vouchers. Even if the report were not junk, it would still only be examining public school choice. Its results would have nothing to do with vouchers. The report doesn't even examine the particular types of public school choice that are available in Milwaukee.

By comparison, a large body of scientifically sound research shows that vouchers improve educational outcomes, not only for the students who use them, but also for students who remain in their assigned public schools. This includes at least four studies conducted on outcomes from school vouchers in Milwaukee—which have generated nothing like the uncritical media attention that has been accorded to WPRI's scientifically bankrupt report.

Milwaukee produces the same amount of beer as Dallas

The report relies on national survey data of parental behavior. In order to create the illusion that these data can tell us something about Milwaukee, the report "weights" these data so that they match up to Milwaukee on four demographic factors: whether one parent graduated from college, whether both parents live at home, whether the student is white, and whether the mother is in the labor force.

In other words, the nationwide data are modified so that instead of seeing how parents nationwide actually behave, we see how we might expect parents nationwide to behave if their demographic characteristics matched those of Milwaukee on these four variables. The report characterizes this as an "estimate" of the way Milwaukee parents actually behave.

This is like "estimating" the amount of beer produced in Milwaukee by measuring the amount of beer produced nationwide and then adjusting the national data to match Milwaukee's demographics. The underlying assumption is that Milwaukee produces the same amount of beer as Dallas, or any other city, once you make a handful of extremely crude demographic adjustments.

Obviously you cannot find out anything about beer production in Milwaukee from national data merely by changing the demographic weights around. And just as Milwaukee is not exactly identical to other cities in terms of beer production, it is not exactly identical to other cities in terms of the choices available in the public system.

That's precisely why the U.S. Department of Education clearly warns researchers not to use the data from this national survey to conduct local analysis. It's too bad WPRI disregarded that warning.

Who cares if it works or not?

The report measures three behaviors among parents who have the opportunity to choose public schools other than their neighborhood schools. Parents are classified as “ideal consumers” only if they meet all three of WPRI’s criteria: they must actually send their children to a school other than their neighborhood school—parents who choose their neighborhood schools are not considered to have “actively” made a choice; they must tell the survey taker that they considered more than one school; and they must tell the survey taker that they considered academics in their decision. Using the method described above, the report “estimates” that few parents did all three.

All three of these criteria are inappropriate as measurements of whether parents make good choices for their children. There is no reason to think that parents who send their children to their neighborhood schools have failed to make an “active” choice. Perhaps they examined the (often very limited) available alternatives and concluded that their neighborhood schools were the best option. Or perhaps they decided that there were no important differences.

After all, these parents were only being offered a choice among public schools. And unlike Milwaukee parents, most of the parents in WPRI’s data are not even allowed to choose a school outside their home school districts. In most places outside Milwaukee, the available “public school choice” alternatives tend to be very similar.

Imagine if you were only allowed to eat at McDonald’s from now on, but you could eat at any McDonald’s you wanted. Which one would you go to? You would go to the closest one—because other than location, they’re all the same.

On the other hand, it may sound reasonable to expect that parents consider more than one school, or consider academics in their decisions. But it isn’t. What if there was only one good school available? Parents in that situation would probably say that they didn’t “consider” more than one school—because they already knew that only one of the schools was worth considering. Similarly, if parents determine that the available schools are academically similar, but think one school is better than another for other reasons (such as safety), those parents are likely to say that they didn’t “consider” academics in their decisions—because they already knew that academics wasn’t going to be the deciding factor.

The only real test of whether parents make good choices for their children is to look at results. Does it work? Do children get a better education when parents choose schools? As we will see below, a large body of top-quality empirical research addresses this question.

Any school you want, as long as it’s ours

Suppose the WPRI report were not junk. Would its conclusion have any bearing on the debate over school vouchers?

The authors strain to argue that it would: “Though ‘school choice’ is often used as short-hand for ‘vouchers’—that is, programs that provide public funding for students to attend private schools – the logic of the educational marketplace applies just as well (in theory) to choice among public schools.”

But even if public school choice fails to inspire “ideal” choicemaking behavior in parents, this tells us nothing about how parents with school vouchers make choices. The two types of programs are radically different.

Most public school choice programs outside Milwaukee fail to offer parents a real choice, because all the available options are owned and controlled by the same service provider. Parents do not have the option of choosing schools that pursue curricula, classroom methods or educational philosophies that differ from those favored by their school district.

Again, it’s like having a choice of eating at any McDonald’s you want. How much time and effort would you put into figuring out which one to eat at, knowing that they’re really all the same?

On the other hand, parents with school vouchers have a real choice. They can be expected to engage in much more active deliberation over what schools their children attend.

Even within the realm of public school choice, the WPRI report is not applicable to Milwaukee. Almost all public school choice programs nationwide fail to provide choice across multiple school districts, greatly restricting the variety of available options. Wisconsin, by contrast, has statewide open enrollment. The Milwaukee school district itself also operates public schools of choice, and has charter schools – two more parental options that aren’t properly represented in WPRI’s data.

Check the facts

If WPRI really wants to know how “the logic of the educational marketplace” is working out in Milwaukee, there are plenty of studies available that look at actual outcomes. Some of them were even conducted in Milwaukee.

A large body of studies using the “random assignment” method, the gold standard of social science, compares students who received school vouchers with similar students who applied for vouchers but lost a random lottery and were not offered them. These top-quality studies, including two in Milwaukee, consistently find that school vouchers provide a better education. Clearly, parents who are offered a real choice are making good choices for their children.

But does the educational marketplace improve public schools? As it happens, a large body of good empirical research consistently finds that it does. Four studies in Milwaukee confirm that the voucher program has improved the city’s educational outcomes. No empirical studies, in Milwaukee or elsewhere, find public schools getting worse.

Two of the Milwaukee studies, conducted by Federal Reserve economist Rajashri Chakrabarti, are very recent but have received no media attention. This makes a stark contrast with the uncritical attention being heaped on WPRI’s study.

Research also confirms that “the logic of the educational marketplace” operates within the public school system. Most parents of middle-class and higher incomes have already exercised “public school choice” when they bought their homes. An especially large body of empirical studies consistently finds that public school outcomes are improved by the competition to attract residents among school districts.

In short, whenever we look at real-world educational outcomes, in Milwaukee and everywhere else, the evidence consistently shows that letting parents choose improves education—both for the students who use choice and for other students who benefit from the healthy competition choice creates.