



“I think the improvement has been due to a combination of choice, charter schools and [private scholarships]. I think all of these programs together made the Milwaukee Public Schools realize they would lose a large number of their students if they didn’t improve their education and decrease the minority drop out rate.”

Tony Higgins, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Impact on Public Schools

School choice can be an impetus for positive change within a public school district. Research and media reports illustrate how public schools have responded favorably to school choice programs.

Research

Milwaukee — A report from Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) Director John Gardner demonstrates that the academic achievement of Milwaukee public school students has improved during a time of rapidly expanding educational options. The report shows that the percent of students scoring proficient on state tests grew in all 15 grade and subject categories between 1998 and 2001. The gains came even as MPS educated more students who live in poverty or come from racial and ethnic minority groups.

During the period of these gains, Milwaukee experienced rapid growth in tax-supported school voucher and charter school programs. Gardner explains: “The expansion of choice has prompted a positive response from many MPS Schools, which in turn generated internal pressure for the comprehensive, systemic changes that have proven impossible in major urban districts.”

“How School Choice Helps the Milwaukee Public Schools,” American Education Reform Council, January 2002.

In other Milwaukee research, a noted Harvard economist, Caroline M. Hoxby, investigated the impact on public school productivity of vouchers in Milwaukee (and of charter schools in Michigan and Arizona). In Milwaukee, she analyzed:

- MPS schools most likely to have been affected by competition;
- Those less likely to have been affected by competition; and
- A control group of Wisconsin public schools not exposed to vouchers.

She concluded: “Overall, an evaluation of Milwaukee suggests that public schools have a strong, positive response to competition from vouchers.... [S]chools that faced the most potential competition from vouchers had the best productivity response.”

“School Choice and School Productivity (Or, Could School Choice be a Tide that Lifts All Boats?),” *Education Next*, Winter 2001.

The positive impacts of school choice in Milwaukee prompted a majority of the elected MPS school board to urge legislators, in April 2002, to support the program's continuation.

Florida — An evaluation sponsored by the Florida Department of Education identified positive effects of the A+ scholarship program on the state's public schools.

The report declared: "The Florida A-Plus Program is a school accountability system with teeth... [T]he A-Plus Program has been successful at motivating failing schools to improve their academic performance.... [S]chools receiving a failing grade from the state in 1999 and whose students would have been offered tuition vouchers if they failed a second time achieved test score gains more than twice as large as those achieved by other schools ... [T]he performance of students on academic tests improves when public schools are faced with the prospect that their students will receive vouchers."

"An Evaluation of the Florida A-Plus Accountability and School Choice Program," Florida State University, the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, and Harvard University Program on Education Policy and Governance, February 15, 2001.

Maine & Vermont — A Friedman Foundation study in early 2002 concluded that competition for students because of choice programs in Maine and Vermont increases standardized test scores at public high schools.

"The Effects of Town Tuitioning in Maine and Vermont," 2002, available at www.friedmanfoundation.org.

News Media

Milwaukee — Several reports link positive developments in the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) to school choice.

- Wisconsin's largest newspaper, *The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, reported that several public schools in Milwaukee have received "more freedom to shape their programs than traditional [public] schools ... The schools clearly were aiming to reshape themselves to be more appealing in a more competitive school market." (November 15, 2000)
- The *Journal Sentinel* later reported on changes in "the fundamental realities of how many [public] schools operate in Milwaukee." It described "decisions to make schools more independent, more innovative, more attuned to their communities - and, most of all, more popular with parents in an era where Milwaukee parents have more choices for publicly funded education than perhaps anyone in American history." (November 28, 2000)
- Early last year, the paper reported that "the spirit of choice is permeating the [MPS] ... [S]chools are trying with once-unthinkable earnestness to win over parents." (January 7, 2001) A January 23, 2001, editorial said, "Milwaukee's choice program [has] put pressure on Milwaukee Public Schools to improve."

Within this new environment, MPS campaigned to encourage parents to choose public schools. The campaign included print and broadcast ads, billboards, and open houses. MPS Superintendent Spence Korte stressed that MPS wants to be competitive. Appearing statewide on Wisconsin Public Television, Korte said:

"Like many other monopolistic operations, you get a little bit complacent when you're the only game in town ... We needed to be able to compete, to really get

better, and to be more sensitive to what parents are telling us they need.”
(January 12, 2001)

- Interviewed earlier on Milwaukee’s WTMJ TV (NBC), Korte had said, “We are dedicating ourselves to make sure that public schools know how to reach out and know how to serve families, and we’re the logical place for people to start for their educational programs. We hope they’ll give us a good look.” (January 10, 2001)

The district’s appeal to parents paid off. The *Journal Sentinel* recently reported, “Enrollment in [MPS] unexpectedly climbed this fall, reversing a three-year slump, as an intense marketing campaign began to bear fruit.” The article said “MPS has been losing students since the 1997-98 school year because fewer children are being born in Milwaukee and because the district must compete for that shrinking pie with the private school choice and charter school programs.” (October 5, 2001)

The *Journal Sentinel* reported that according to citywide school board member John Gardner, “MPS was winning families over by aggressively promoting its schools and by paying more attention to parents’ requests for child care, smaller class sizes, specialized education programs and other improvements. Budget rules that give each school in the district a set amount of money per student gave school administrators and teachers an incentive to seek more students.”

The October 5 article continued:

“‘Where schools go out and knock on doors, it has a huge impact on parents,’ board member Joe Dannecker said. ‘They actually get interested and are willing to go down and visit the school.’

“‘Janie Hatton, a longtime MPS administrator who became principal of North Division High School this year, described a full-court press by teachers, parents, students and even local ministers to pull in children.

“‘Many of the students were the best salespersons for our school,’ Hatton said. ‘They went out and told people, ‘We’re doing something different in school this year.’”

Florida — While it involves a much smaller group of students than in Milwaukee, the structure of Florida’s Opportunity Scholarship Program, with its target of chronically failing schools statewide, has had a positive statewide impact.

A series of articles reported on incentives for improvement provided by the state’s A to F ranking of schools (students at a school with two F’s in a four-year period get vouchers).

- “They [vouchers] are not damaging public schools. In Florida ... the threat that children would receive vouchers to attend private schools spurred the worst-performing schools to make big academic strides. And, even if you get stuck in the many squabbles about such studies, there is the most powerful evidence of all: word of mouth. Blacks are telling each other that vouchers work.”
“Blacks v. teachers,” *The Economist*, March 10, 2001.
- “The number of F schools has plummeted since the state started awarding A-to-F grades in 1999. The first year, 78 schools were labeled failures. Just four shared that

distinction last year.... [T]he number of grade-A [elementary] schools soared from 73 to 155, and the number of A high schools jumped from 10 to 50. Fourteen schools leapt from D to A.”

“No F’s this time,” *The St. Petersburg Times*, May 31, 2001.

- “No Florida school earned an F in the 2000-2001 academic year, meaning no additional failing-school vouchers will be offered for the second straight year, Education Commissioner Charlie Crist said Wednesday.”

“Report card shows marked improvement in Florida school grades,” Associated Press, May 30, 2001.