



SCHOOL CHOICE Advisor

MARCH 2002

Ending Choice Program Will Increase State Costs and Cut Aid to Non-Milwaukee Districts

The State of Wisconsin's budget deficit recently prompted Sen. Russell Decker, a member of the Joint Finance Committee, to propose eliminating the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP). Senator Decker made the suggestion to a group of school officials meeting in Medford on January 28.

However, according to the non-partisan Legislative Fiscal Bureau (LFB), ending the MPCP would reduce school aids to non-Milwaukee districts and increase the state's General Purpose Revenue spending overall.

Under one likely scenario, an LFB memo estimates that ending the MPCP would cause a \$15.4 million transfer of school aid to the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) and away from non-Milwaukee school districts. Further, overall state expenditures would grow by nearly \$7 million. (See chart on page 4.)

A copy of the September 27, 2001 LFB memo is available at www.SchoolChoiceInfo.org under Hot Topics, "Financing the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program."

When the Legislature enacted the MPCP in 1990, it intended that the program have a fiscally neutral effect on non-Milwaukee districts. However, because of complexities in the school aid formula and subsequent law changes, this goal of fiscal neutrality was not subsequently achieved. Instead, some districts outside of Milwaukee received extra state aid because of the MPCP and others received less. In the 2001-03 biennial budget, the Legislature amended the choice law and eliminated these gains and losses. 🎓



Photo courtesy of School Reform News

U.S. Supreme Court Hears Cleveland Voucher Case: On Feb. 20, the Court heard oral arguments on the Cleveland Scholarship Program, while an estimated 600 parents and children rallied outside in support of school vouchers. Six Milwaukee families and several students from Sister Clara Muhammad School, which enrolls children participating in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, traveled to Washington, D.C. to support Cleveland parents fighting for school choice.

Welcome to the First Issue of the School Choice Advisor

This is the first issue of the School Choice Advisor, a periodic newsletter that brings you straight talk and accurate information about school choice in Milwaukee.

The School Choice Advisor is published by the American Education Reform Council (AERC), a Milwaukee-based nonprofit organization that provides information about the impact of parental choice programs.

AERC has found that one of the most effective ways to demonstrate the impact of parent choice on a community is to invite interested people to visit Milwaukee. AERC has helped organize tours for legislators and journalists from across the country. Visitors tour schools, hear a wide range of speakers, and ask questions. Wisconsin journalists and policy makers are welcome to visit Milwaukee and learn more about its various parental choice programs. For more information, contact Sherry Street at (414) 319-9160. 🎓



News and Views*

School Choice Improves Public Schools — The Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) has improved during a time of rapid expansion of educational options, according to a January 2002 report by Milwaukee School Board Director, John Gardner. Gardner cites improvements by MPS students on standardized tests and enrollment gains resulting from a concerted effort by public schools to recruit students.

Noted Harvard Economist Concurs — Caroline M. Hoxby says MPS schools "boosted their productivity when exposed to competition" from vouchers (Feb. 2001). Hoxby's peer-reviewed research concludes that, "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."

The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel Supports Gardner and Hoxby — The *Journal Sentinel* Editorial Board (Jan. 22, 2002) concludes that "many of the improvements in MPS came about in part *because* of [vouchers] for low-income students, not despite the policy. In fact, the link between school choice and MPS improvement seems so obvious that its denial strikes us as reflecting a stubborn unwillingness to concede that anything good can come from vouchers."

MPS Superintendent Describes Positive Impact of Choice — "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," said MPS Superintendent Spence Korte in an interview on *Weekend*, Wisconsin Public Television Channel 10, Jan. 12, 2001.

Elected School Officials Agree — "School choice fundamentally has changed Milwaukee's public education mindset...MPS realized it would have to improve," said Ken Johnson, MPS Board of School Directors and labor union member in a February 2001 *Washington Post* ad for the Black Alliance for Educational Options.

A Legislator and Choice Critic Notes MPS Improvements — "I really hate to say this because I'm not a choice supporter, but I do think that the threat of choice did

force the public school system to make those changes," State Rep. Christine Sinicki told the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* (Jan. 21, 2002). Sinicki is an opponent of Milwaukee's choice program and a former MPS School Board Director.



Parent Says Choice Program Improves Public Schools — "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," says Milwaukee parent Tony Higgins, who uses the choice program for his two daughters. He is profiled at www.SchoolChoiceInfo.org.

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* Links to full documents can be found at www.SchoolChoiceInfo.org

Support for School Choice Spans Political Spectrum

Independent public opinion polls consistently show strong public support for programs that expand educational options for parents.

In Wisconsin, **Harris Interactive**, an international firm best known for the *Harris Poll*, reported in September 2001 that a "solid 62% majority of Wisconsin residents continue to agree with the Wisconsin Supreme Court ruling that allows low-income parents in Milwaukee to choose whether their children attend public, private, or parochial schools." According to Harris Interactive, the Supreme Court "ruling receives nearly as much support from liberals (61%) and middle-of-the-road voters (60%) as it does from conservatives (68%). Support for the ruling across the political spectrum indicates that the voucher program...is now accepted as a part of the educational system by most Wisconsin residents."

Nationally, the strongest support comes from low-income parents, especially African Americans and Hispanics.

The **Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies** conducts research on issues of special concern to black Americans and other minority groups. In its latest survey, a "majority (57 percent) of African Americans...supported school vouchers. Among blacks, those under 35 (75 percent)...and those from households with children (74 percent) are most supportive..."

A July 2001 poll of Hispanic adults, conducted for **The Latino Coalition & Hispanic Business Roundtable**, found 73% agreeing that "the government should provide taxpayer funded vouchers to help low-income families send their children to a better public, private, or church-run school." The Latino Coalition

conducts research on issues involving Latinos' overall economic, cultural and social development.

Among the general public, representative findings of overall public opinion are illustrated in several independent polls.

In the September 2000 **Washington Post/Kaiser/Harvard "2000 Election Values Survey,"** respondents were asked: "Do you favor or oppose providing parents with tax money in the form of school vouchers to help pay for their children to attend private or religious schools?" They responded yes, 49% to 47%.

In the August-September 2000 **Pew Research Center/Princeton Survey** Research Associates, respondents were asked: "I'd like your opinion on some

programs and proposals being discussed in this country today. Please tell me if you strongly favor, favor, oppose, or strongly oppose...[f]ederal funding for vouchers to help low- and middle-income parents send their children to private and parochial school?" They responded in support, 53% to 44%.

In an August 2000 **NBC News/Wall Street Journal Poll**, respondents were asked the following:

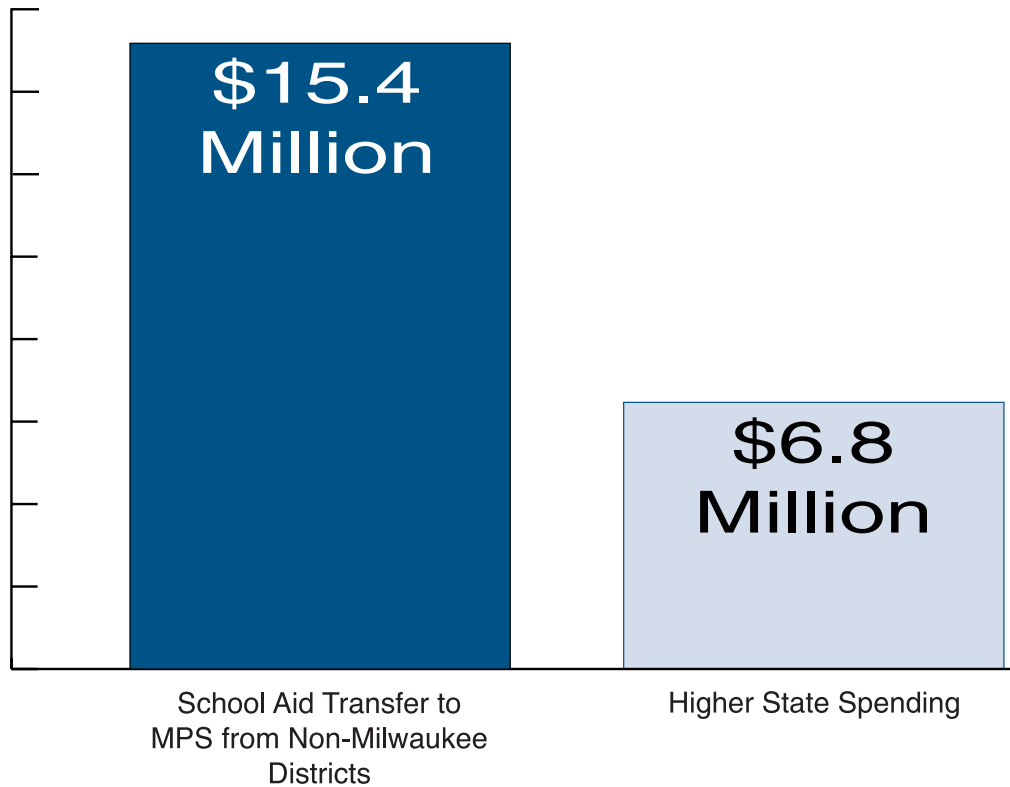
"Let me read you two positions on school vouchers. Between these positions, which do you tend to side with more? Position A: Government should give parents more educational choices by providing taxpayer-funded vouchers to help pay for private or religious schools. Position B: Government funding should be limited to... public schools." By a margin of 56% to 38%, respondents favored Position A. 📄

Wisconsin Residents Favor Milwaukee Parental Choice Program

Overall	62%
18-24 Year Olds	84%
55 and Over	53%
African Americans	75%
Whites	61%
Family Member In Education	59%
No Family Member In Education	63%

Source: *Harris Interactive, 2001 survey of 1,002 randomly selected Wisconsin adults.*

The Fiscal Impact of Ending School Choice*




Ending the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP) does not save money. In fact, ending the MPCP would increase state spending and transfer millions in school aids to the Milwaukee Public Schools from non-Milwaukee districts. **See related story on page 1.** 🎓

*Assumes 75% of choice students transfer to MPS. Source: Legislative Fiscal Bureau, 9/27/01.

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