

A Long-Term Choice Vouchers keep kids in school.

By Jay P. Greene

Nobody needs to be told that urban education is in lousy shape. Only half of America's black and Hispanic students graduate from high school. Gigantic increases in per-pupil spending over many decades haven't raised the graduation rate. Schools have pursued fad after fad – ability tracking, ability detracking, less vocational ed, more vocational ed, multiple-intelligence curricula, etc. – without noticeable success.

On the other hand, some types of larger structural reform have been shown to raise student outcomes. And when it comes to getting more kids all the way through school, one reform in particular shows real promise: choice. There's already a consensus among high-quality studies that school choice boosts test scores. Now, in a new study sponsored by School Choice Wisconsin, I find that it also keeps kids in school.

The nation's oldest and largest urban voucher program is in Milwaukee, a city that's no stranger to education problems. I estimate that the graduation rate in Milwaukee's public schools is a dismal 36 percent. And you don't have to take my word for it: If you use an alternative estimation method developed by the Harvard Civil Rights Project and the Urban Institute, you get an equally dismal graduation rate of 39 percent.

It's precisely because things are so bad in Milwaukee that the city was open to experimenting with vouchers. And the research shows that the experiment is working. Previous studies have established that the program raises test scores both for participants and for students in nearby public schools, which have to shape up in response to competition from vouchers.

Now we have our first look at how vouchers are doing at preventing dropouts. My study finds that Milwaukee students going to private schools on a voucher have a graduation rate of 64 percent. That's a rate any big city would love to have. Using the Harvard Civil Rights/Urban

Institute alternative method puts the choice graduation rate at 67 percent.

Of course, skeptics might object that choice students could have special advantages over regular public-school students that explain their better graduation rates. But that's a hard pill to swallow. To get into the Milwaukee program you have to be from a low-income background, and research suggests that participants are also more likely to be minorities and to come from broken homes – and that they have below-average test scores when they enter the program.

But it's true that voucher students might be advantaged in other ways we can't measure directly. Maybe they have parents who care more about their children's education. So let's put the data to a hard test.

Milwaukee has six public high schools that are academically selective. You can't go to these schools unless you meet certain criteria for achievement. Meanwhile, schools accepting vouchers must take all comers, and have to choose by random lottery if they have more applicants than open seats. If any available public-school comparison group is likely to be more advantaged than the city's choice students, it's the kids in these six schools.

The graduation rate at Milwaukee's selective public schools is 41 percent. These advantaged kids are a whopping 23 percentage points below the kids using vouchers to escape the public-school system. So it looks like student demographics can't explain choice students' higher graduation rates.

Vouchers in Milwaukee are keeping a lot more kids in school. This helps confirm all the earlier studies finding that vouchers result in higher test scores for both the kids who use them and the kids who remain in public schools. Other cities would do well to learn from Milwaukee's example.

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