

Vouchers Linked to Graduation In Milwaukee

By Caroline Hendrie

Students using state-financed vouchers to attend private schools in Milwaukee graduate from high school at a far higher rate than young people in the city's public schools, according to a study released last week by a group that supports the high-profile choice program.

Researcher Jay P. Greene found that an estimated 64 percent of the 9th graders who used the tuition vouchers at private high schools graduated four years later. Using the same "cohort method" for the class of 2003, the latest data available, he found a 36 percent graduation rate in the city's public high schools.

"I think this helps confirm earlier, high-quality research that suggests that the program offers significant academic benefits to students in Milwaukee," said Mr. Greene, a senior research fellow at the New York City-based Manhattan Institute for Policy Research.

His study was sponsored by School Choice Wisconsin, a Milwaukee-based group that supports the 14-year-old voucher program, which provides funding for some 14,000 students from low-income families to attend secular and religious private schools in the city.

Underscoring the continuing disagreement on how to calculate graduation rates among researchers nationally, Milwaukee public school leaders last week took issue with Mr. Greene's approach. State officials peg the district's graduation rate at 61 percent using a different method, said district Superintendent William G. Andrekopoulos, and that's the percentage that the district considers most reliable.

"We stick with the state's definition of the graduation rates as the official one we endorse and the one we benchmark against as we are reforming our high schools," he said.

Still, Mr. Andrekopoulos said the 103,000-student district is intent on reducing its high number of dropouts. A push to restructure district high schools is being underwritten, in part, by the Seattle-based Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Mr. Greene acknowledged that his figures are estimates, but he argued that they present a far more accurate picture than the data relied upon by the district. A study that carefully tracked selected individual students over time could produce more precise results, and it would be helpful if the state would sponsor such research, he said.

"But this is trying to fill the vacuum in information we have about the program right now," he said. "We cannot let the best be the enemy of the good."

Gaps Hold Up

The study found that the wide gap in graduation rates held up even when the comparison group for the voucher recipients was students at six Milwaukee public high schools with academic entrance requirements. Among those selective public schools, the study found a graduation rate of just 41 percent.

Schools accepting voucher students are not allowed to impose academic admissions criteria, and must hold lotteries if they do not have space for all applicants from the voucher program.

EARNING A DIPLOMA The private high schools that accept students participating in Milwaukee's voucher program graduate more students in four years than the city's public schools, a new study finds. Source: Manhattan Institute

	Choice	Public
Graduation rate	64%	36%
9th graders in 1999-2000	262	9,226
Graduates in 2002-03	167	3,329
Number of Schools	10	37

Comparing voucher recipients with their peers in selective public schools addresses the question of whether the higher graduation rate among the private school students "can be explained in part or in full by differences in the advantages and disadvantages that choice and public school students bring to their education," Mr. Greene argues in the study.

Another expert on graduation rates, Chicago researcher John Q. Easton, said drawing comparisons with selective public schools was a reasonable response to the possibility that students using vouchers "are more highly motivated and have parents who are particularly involved and concerned with their education," as Mr. Greene puts it in the study.

Still, Mr. Easton, the director of the Consortium on Chicago School Research, said the 41 percent graduation rate for students in selective public schools struck him as so surprisingly low that "it almost called out for a school-by-school listing."

Mr. Greene's study included 37 Milwaukee public high schools for which data were available, including some that received charters to operate quasi-independently of the district and "partnership schools" that operate under contracts with the district to serve children deemed at risk of school failure. The data on voucher recipients came from 10 private high schools.