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Study Finds Milwaukee Voucher Students Have Higher Graduation Rates than Public School Students

A new study conducted by a leading national authority on high school graduation rates finds that Milwaukee students using vouchers to attend private schools graduate high school at higher rates than students attending the city's public schools. The study, by Manhattan Institute researcher Jay P. Greene, also finds that students using school choice in Milwaukee have higher graduation rates than students in selective Milwaukee public high schools whose students are likely to be more advantaged in their background characteristics.

While early high-quality research on the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program suggested that participating students had higher educational outcomes, it has been almost a decade since those early evaluations, and critics have continued to question whether the program provides students with better educational opportunities. The Greene study, sponsored by School Choice Wisconsin, calculates graduation rates for choice students and students remaining in public schools in order to provide new evidence on whether Milwaukee's voucher program benefits students academically.

The findings of the study include:

- In the graduating class of 2003, Milwaukee students using vouchers to attend private high schools had a graduation rate of 64%.
- That same year, the 37 Milwaukee public high schools for which data are available had a combined graduation rate of 36%.
- Milwaukee's six academically selective public high schools, whose students are likely to be more advantaged than choice students, had a combined graduation rate of 41% in 2003.
- Using an alternative method to calculate these graduation rates produces similar results, confirming the accuracy of the study's results. Both the study's main method and its alternative method are widely accepted by education researchers.

Greene has pioneered the development of a method for independently estimating graduation rates. His method has been used by Education Week's annual Quality Counts report in lieu of less reliable official graduation rates. Respected education advocates, from the Gates Foundation to the Education Trust, also have relied upon Greene's method as a reliable independent estimate of high school graduation rates.

The study is embargoed until its release on Wednesday, September 29, meaning that stories about the study may appear as early as that day's news. To receive an embargoed copy of the study please contact Marcus Winters at mwinters@manhattan-institute.org or by phone at 954-680-8083. If you have any questions about the study and its impact on the debate over school choice, please contact Susan Mitchell of School Choice Wisconsin at 414-765-0443.

Jay P. Greene, Ph.D., is a Senior Fellow at the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research where he conducts research and writes about education policy. Dr. Greene obtained his doctorate in political science from Harvard University and was a professor of government at the University of Texas at Austin before joining the Manhattan Institute in 2000. His education research has been cited in U.S. Supreme Court opinions and has appeared in scholarly and popular publications.

School Choice Wisconsin is a nonprofit organization that seeks to ensure an honest debate about school choice by providing accurate information on the impact of school choice on families, communities, and schools.