

Editorial: Hopeful numbers on choice

FROM THE JOURNAL SENTINEL

Yes, the sponsor of a new study comparing voucher schools and public schools has, as they say, a pony in that race. But the study has convincingly marshaled data showing that voucher students graduate from high school at a much higher rate than do public school students in Milwaukee.

That conclusion has drawn fire. And the study does have its limits, as even its author, Jay Greene of the Manhattan Institute, readily concedes. Those limits point to the need for action on a long-stalled proposal to authorize a dispassionate, authoritative, comprehensive look at how voucher students fare in comparison with their public school peers.

In the present study - commissioned by School Choice Wisconsin, an advocacy organization - Greene found that the high school graduating class of the Milwaukee Public Schools was 36% the size of the freshman class four years earlier. In contrast, the graduation rate was 64% among voucher students.

MPS Superintendent William Andrekopoulos questions whether the numbers are comparable, saying that the MPS data was culled from a public source, whereas the voucher data came from a private survey. It's a valid criticism applicable even to a second method Greene used for calculating graduation rates in which the results are similar.

Keep in mind that voucher students are poorer than are the city's public school students as a whole. After all, to qualify for a voucher, which is redeemable for tuition at a participating private school, a family's income has to be low.

Voucher students even bested students at selective public high schools in graduation rates. Presumably, parents of students in these elite public schools are about as motivated

about their children's education as are parents of voucher students. The law, by the way, bars private schools from being selective in accepting voucher students.

In an internal memorandum, Andrekopoulos points out ways the study could have been improved - for instance, by tracing the fate of specific students over the four years or by factoring in the eighth-grade achievement levels of the students. We agree. Which is why we back the proposal for a study that would compare the fate of specific voucher students with that of specific public school students over 12 years.

Oddly, the Wisconsin Education Association Council has thwarted the study, and with reasoning so lame and tortured as to suggest the teachers' union may really fear what a comparison would reveal. For instance, WEAC has declared the methodology flawed even before the respected Legislative Audit Bureau had a chance to design the research project.

Gov. Jim Doyle, a WEAC ally who has twice vetoed the proposal for a longitudinal study of the voucher program, should support it. The public needs to know the yield on its investment. Doyle did belatedly suggest a compromise near the end of the last legislative session - an initiative he should renew.

Meanwhile, though not definitive, Greene's findings go on the plus side of the ledger in assessing the private school choice program. The findings do strengthen the argument for lifting the cap on the program's enrollment - a cap pegged at 15% of the enrollment of the Milwaukee Public Schools. Why block entry to a program that boosts the chances of high school graduation for needy students?