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Study Bolsters Case For Tuition Vouchers

Milwaukee Graduation Rates Cited

By Sewell Chan • Wednesday, September 29, 2004; Page A12

Students using vouchers to attend private schools in Milwaukee graduate at a higher rate than students enrolled in Milwaukee public schools, according to a study released yesterday by supporters of that city's voucher program.

The report was funded by School Choice Wisconsin, a group formed in April to advocate for Milwaukee's program, which has used public funds to pay private school tuition since 1990. The Milwaukee initiative has been followed by voucher programs in Cleveland, the state of Florida and the District.

About 64 percent of Milwaukee students who used vouchers to enter ninth grade at 10 private schools in 1999 graduated from high school four years later, compared with 36 percent of students in public schools, the study found. The study's author, Jay P. Greene, said it adds to a growing body of research demonstrating that school vouchers have led to improved academic outcomes for students, particularly low-income and minority students in failing school systems.

"Nationwide, roughly half of students in urban high schools fail to receive a regular high school diploma," said Greene, a political scientist and senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, a conservative organization based in New York. "In Milwaukee and Cleveland, it's well under half. Any program that offers a big improvement in the probability of urban students graduating is something that we should be very interested in."

However, two researchers who have studied voucher programs questioned aspects of Greene's study after reviewing it at the request of The Washington Post.

Terry M. Moe, a political scientist at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University and a leading proponent of vouchers, said he found Greene's study important. But he noted that it relies on data from 10 of about 100 private schools accepting vouchers in Milwaukee. Moe said random samples of public school and voucher students would be necessary to determine the effects of vouchers.

Richard D. Kahlenberg, a senior fellow at the Century Foundation, a policy group based in the District, said the report "leaves unanswered the most important question: What is the effect of the voucher program on the large number of students left behind in the regular public schools?"

"It's hardly surprising that a very small number of students from families motivated enough to apply to a voucher program do well when placed in a private school environment -- one where students are surrounded by a community of highly motivated peers and their tuition-paying parents," he said.

Kahlenberg said he supports making public schools compete by allowing students to transfer within and between districts but generally opposes publicly funded scholarships for private schools.

Greene, in an interview, acknowledged that students receiving vouchers may come from more highly motivated families, which could account in part for their higher graduation rates. But he said two studies in the 1990s found that voucher recipients in Milwaukee were more likely to be poor and to come from single-parent families than their peers in the regular public schools and that they were likely to start high school with lower test scores.

Greene's study also found that the graduation rate of 64 percent for voucher recipients was higher than the graduation rate of 41 percent among students at six Milwaukee public high schools with selective admission requirements.

The Washington Scholarship Fund, the group that runs the District's new voucher program, applauded the study as evidence that vouchers will improve student performance. The District's program "also will celebrate impressive graduation rates as our scholars advance through school," said Sally J. Sachar, president of the scholarship fund.