

MILWAUKEE'S PUBLIC SCHOOLS

In an Era of Choice



Milwaukee parents have more tax-supported educational choices than parents in other U.S. cities. Their options include private schools, charter schools, contract schools serving at-risk students, state and district-wide open enrollment, district specialty schools, and traditional neighborhood schools. Most of these programs were enacted or expanded during the 1990s.

Some observers said the advent of more options for Milwaukee parents would cause enrollment declines, less financial support, and lower academic achievement in the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS).

This is the third report issued since 2002 that uses MPS data to describe actual trends during the time that MPS has operated in the nation's most wide-open K-12 education market. As in prior years, these MPS data demonstrate that the pessimistic predictions have been wrong. Specifically:

- MPS enrollment *increased* 8.8% between 1990 and 2004.
- The annual high school dropout rate *declined* from 16.2% to 10.2% between 1991 and 2003.
- The share of third grade students scoring proficient or advanced on state reading tests *increased* from 50% to 66% between 1998 and 2004.
- In twelve of fifteen categories, MPS scores on state standardized tests *increased* between 1997 and 2004.
- The number of MPS schools on the list of Wisconsin Schools Identified for Improvement *decreased* from 55 to 43 between 2003 and 2004.
- Real spending per pupil *increased* (\$8,660 to \$11,708), as did state support for MPS (\$402 million to \$668 million), between 1990 and 2004.
- Budget reforms have made MPS *more* accountable. Dollars follow students, with 95% of the MPS operating budget now controlled at the school level.

"...we've got to make the school building so attractive and the programs inside the school so attractive that parents will want to send their children to our school."

– Bob Meyer, Principal,
Engleburg Elementary

MPS remains a district where overall academic achievement is too low. While test scores have improved, as noted elsewhere in this report, more progress is necessary. Further, as a recent study demonstrates, MPS graduation rates remain unacceptably low.¹ Still, it is noteworthy and beyond dispute that dire predictions of a district in decline have not come to pass. To the contrary, MPS enrollment has increased by 8,060 students (see Figure 1). Real spending per pupil has grown 35.2% (see Figure 2) and state support for MPS – adjusted for inflation – has risen 66% (see Figure 3).

“I think the improvement has been due to a combination of choice, charter schools and private scholarships. All of these programs made the Milwaukee Public Schools realize they would lose a large number of their students if they didn’t improve their education and decrease the minority dropout rate.”

– Tony Higgins, former Milwaukee Parental Choice Program parent

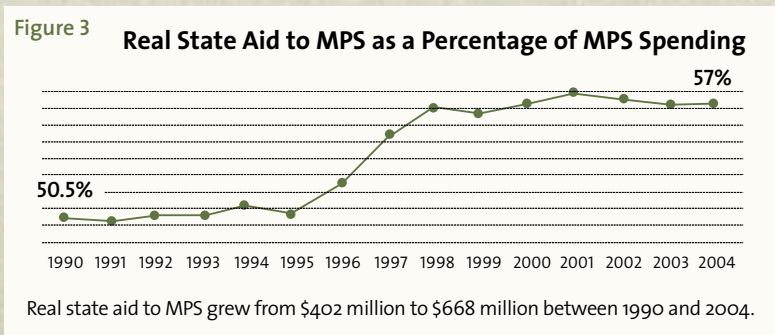
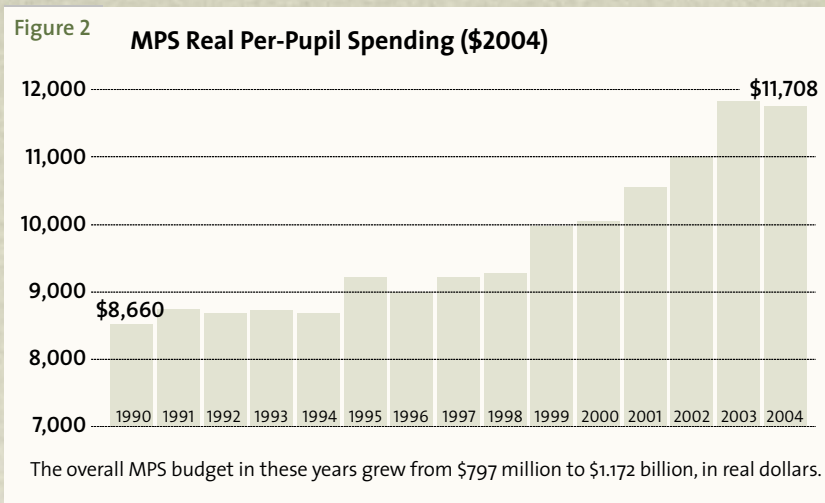
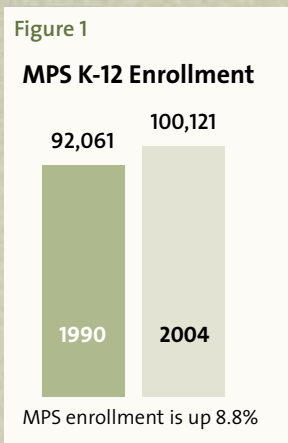


Table 1 **Change in MPS Student Mean Scale Scores on WKCE Between 1996-97 and 2003-04**

	FOURTH GRADE	EIGHTH GRADE	TENTH GRADE
READING	+6	-7	+6
LANGUAGE ARTS	+11	+9	+16
MATH	+21	0	+16
SCIENCE	+17	+6	+13
SOCIAL STUDIES	+12	-1	+6

Figure 4 **MPS 3rd Grade Reading Comprehension Test Scores**

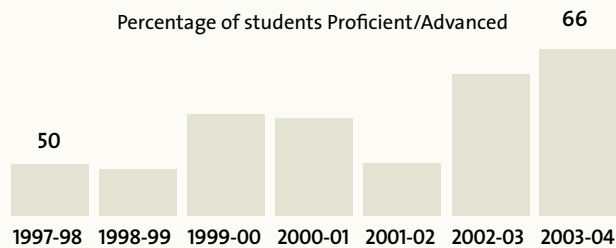
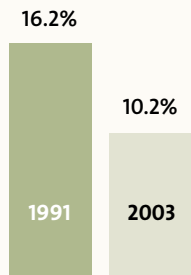


Figure 5 **MPS Dropout Rate**



“With the parent choice program, we have many different models by which parents can choose. When you have that, no longer is MPS a monopoly. That competitive nature has raised the bar for educators in Milwaukee to provide a good product or they know that parents will simply walk...”

– William Andreopoulos,
MPS Superintendent

Indeed, when school choice options have expanded most rapidly, the academic achievement of MPS students improved.² Between 1997 and 2004, MPS student performance on statewide exams increased on twelve of fifteen tests (see Table 1). In comparison, student performance statewide during the same period improved in fourteen of fifteen categories. The share of MPS third graders achieving proficient or advanced scores in reading improved from 50% to 66% between 1998 and 2004 (see Figure 4). In comparison, the share of third graders statewide achieving proficient or advanced scores during the same period improved from 65% to 85%. The MPS dropout rate declined (see Figure 5).

All these developments occurred as the number of MPS students from low-income families rose, a trend some observers associate with the likelihood of lower achievement (see Figure 6).

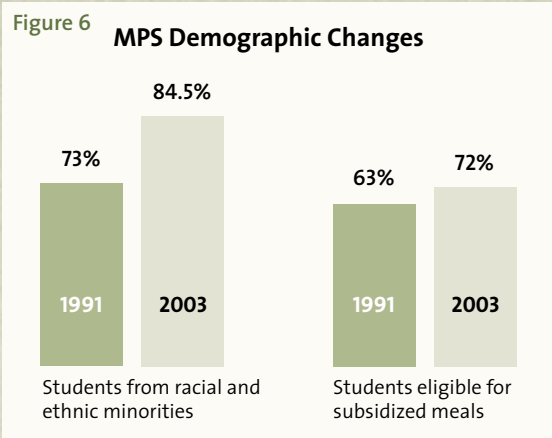
Scholarly research finds that gains experienced by MPS are in part a consequence of more school choice. Noted Harvard University economist Caroline M. Hoxby found that Milwaukee public schools that were most subjected to competition from vouchers showed rapid improvement in their students' results. Hoxby said:

“Overall, the improvements in the Milwaukee public schools, following the 1998 voucher [expansion], are very impressive and have been maintained.”³

The learning gains coincide with important, system-wide changes within MPS:

- School budgets have been decentralized and are driven by enrollment. Dollars follow students to schools, which control 95% of district operating funds. The result is increased accountability and schools that must recruit to strengthen their budgets.
- Teachers — once assigned almost strictly by seniority — are now typically hired by school-based selection committees (see Table 2).
- The district’s teacher contract now contains eased provisions for releasing unsatisfactory probationary or non-tenured teachers.
- MPS has expanded dramatically the full-day four-year-old kindergarten programs, the development of small high schools, and popular specialty programs in high demand by parents.
- Often working with private and independent charter schools, MPS has expanded facilities in central city neighborhoods, once neglected in favor of school construction at the city’s periphery.

The impact of these changes is particularly strong on low-income children in racial and ethnic minority groups. These are children who were often left behind in earlier reform efforts.



FOOTNOTES

¹ Greene, Jay P., “Graduation Rates for Choice and Public Schools Students in Milwaukee,” School Choice Wisconsin, September 28, 2004.

² Since 1996-97, the State of Wisconsin has tested Wisconsin public school students on what is called the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examination (WKCE), given annually at grades four, eight, and ten. These tests measure student achievement in math, science, reading, language arts, and social studies. A mean scale score is the average of students’ scores on a specific subject test. Longitudinal comparisons of yearly mean scale scores reveal an overall increase or decrease in test performance.

³ Hoxby, Caroline M., “School Choice and School Competition: Evidence from the United States,” The Swedish Economic Policy Review, Volume 10, 2003.

Data Sources for all Tables and Figures: MPS Comprehensive Annual Financial Reports, MPS Accountability Reports, MPS Human Resources Department, and MPS Office of Research and Assessment.

Table 2 MPS Schools Using School-Based Hiring

	1989-90	1995-96	2003-04
MPS Schools Using School-Based Hiring	0	8	167
All Schools in MPS	150	153	167

School Choice Wisconsin (SCW) is a non profit organization that provides information on the impact of school choice on families, communities, and public schools. This report is the third in a series of yearly updates. For more information about school choice, go to www.SchoolChoiceWI.org.