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The Comprehensive Longitudinal Evaluation of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program: Summary of Baseline Reports

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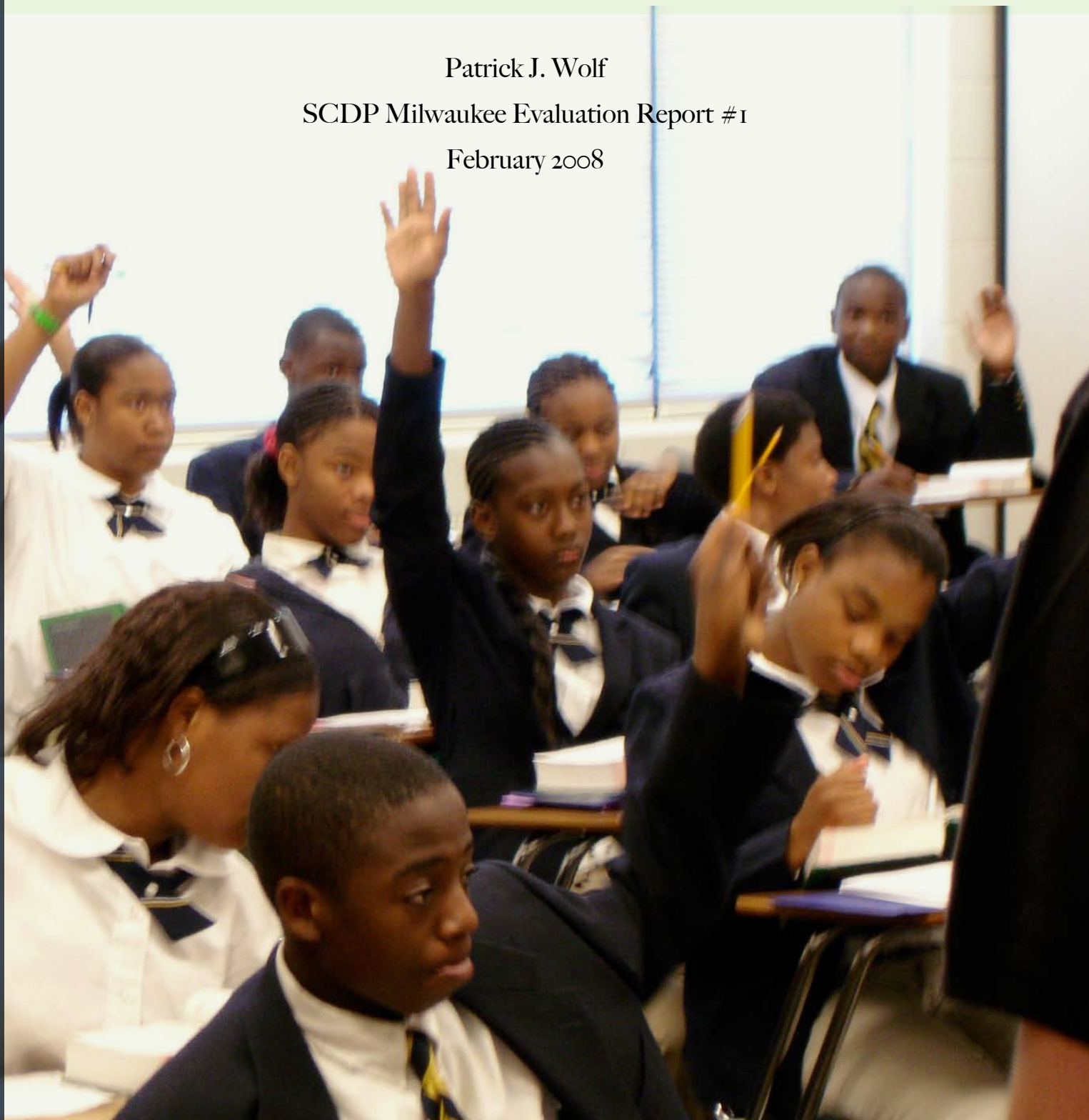
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The Comprehensive Longitudinal Evaluation of the
Milwaukee Parental Choice Program:
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Patrick J. Wolf

SCDP Milwaukee Evaluation Report #1

February 2008





The University of Arkansas

was founded in 1871 as the flagship institution of higher education for the state of Arkansas.

Established as a land grant university, its mandate was threefold: to teach students, conduct research, and perform service and outreach.

The College of Education and Health Professions established the Department of Education Reform in 2005. The department's mission is to advance education and economic development by focusing on the improvement of academic achievement in elementary and secondary schools. It conducts research and demonstration projects in five primary areas of reform: teacher quality, leadership, policy, accountability, and school choice.

The School Choice Demonstration Project (SCDP), based within the Department of Education Reform, is an education research center devoted to the non-partisan study of the effects of school choice policy and is staffed by leading school choice researchers and scholars. Led by Dr. Patrick J. Wolf, Professor of Education Reform and Endowed 21st Century Chair in School Choice, SCDP's national team of researchers, institutional research partners and staff are devoted to the rigorous evaluation of school choice programs and other school improvement efforts across the country. The SCDP is committed to raising and advancing the public's understanding of the strengths and limitations of school choice policies and programs by conducting comprehensive research on what happens to students, families, schools and communities when more parents are allowed to choose their child's school.

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SCDP Milwaukee Evaluation Report #1

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School Choice Demonstration Project

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The Comprehensive Longitudinal Evaluation of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program: Summary of Baseline Reports

The words “Milwaukee” and “school choice” have become nearly as synonymous as “Brewers” and “bratwurst, please.” The city of Milwaukee is home to the first urban school voucher program, which has grown over the past 17 years to be the largest of a dozen voucher initiatives across the country, enrolling 17,749 students in 2006-07.¹ A total of 56 public charter schools operate within the city’s boundaries, enrolling 16,152 students last year. Even students in the Milwaukee Public School (MPS) system have a variety of magnet, community, open enrollment, and even inter-district school choice options available to them. When one thinks of school choice, one thinks of Milwaukee.

Bratwursts, of course, can be the source of either satisfaction or heartburn. Scholars, advocates of various stripes, and policymakers have fiercely debated the question of whether the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP) has been a godsend or a scourge for the city’s children. The findings from John Witte’s original evaluation of the MPCP pilot program in 1990-95 were challenged by other researchers, as all voucher reports have been.² Freedom of Information Act requests were filed. Blood was spilled. Peer-reviewed journal articles were published. It was ugly.

In 1995 the Witte evaluation was ended and the program was expanded beyond the initial small set of secular private schools to include religious schools as well. It survived a constitutional challenge and has grown to enroll over 18,000 low-income K-12 students in any of more than 120 participating private schools this year.

But does it work? If so, how, where, when, and at what costs? Wisconsin policymakers identified the School Choice Demonstration Project (SCDP) as the organization to help provide the answers to those critical questions.³ The SCDP is a national research organization, based in the University of Arkansas’ Department of Education Reform, dedicated to the comprehensive, objective, and nonpartisan evaluation of school choice programs. Researchers of the SCDP are spearheading the ongoing evaluation of the nation’s first federally-funded

1 I consider school vouchers to be government programs that use public monies to pay part or all of the expenses for qualified students to attend private schools selected by parents. According to this definition, the “town tuitioning” programs that have operated in the rural areas of Maine and Vermont since the 1870s are the oldest school voucher programs in the U.S. The MPCP is the first voucher program established in a city and with the distinct flavor of an education reform. Various types of school voucher programs also operate in Arizona (2), the District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Ohio (3), and Utah. Tax credit programs in support of private scholarship programs, such as those operating in Arizona and Florida, do not fit this definition of a school voucher program.

2 John F. Witte, *The Market Approach to Education: An Analysis of America’s First Voucher Program* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Jay P. Greene, Paul E. Peterson, and Jiangtao Du, “Effectiveness of School Choice: The Milwaukee Experiment,” *Education and Urban Society*, 31, January 1999; Cecilia E. Rouse, “Private School Vouchers and Student Achievement: An Evaluation of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program,” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, May 1998.

3 Wisconsin Act 125, enacted on March 10, 2006, which primarily modified Wisconsin Laws 119.23.

school voucher initiative, the Opportunity Scholarship Program in Washington, DC. The veteran leadership of the SCDP's Milwaukee evaluation – principal investigator Patrick J. Wolf and co-investigators Jay P. Greene and John F. Witte – have led or participated in nearly every major field study of school vouchers in the U.S., from Charlotte to New York, the District of Columbia to Milwaukee. We are drawn together for this project by the opportunity to examine what effects the mature MPCP is having on the students, parents, taxpayers, schools, and communities of the city and state. Our shared commitment is to carefully and faithfully follow the evidence, wherever it may lead.

This report provides an overview of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program and our plan for evaluating it over a five year period. It also presents a brief summary of the main findings of the four distinct topical reports that we have completed for 2006-07 – the baseline year of the evaluation. Those four specialized reports are:

- Fiscal Impact of the MPCP in Milwaukee and Wisconsin, 1993-2008 (Report #2)
- Baseline Descriptive Report on Participating Schools (Report #3)
- Annual School Testing Summary Report (Report #4)
- Longitudinal Educational Growth Study Baseline Report (Report #5)⁴



This project is being funded by a diverse set of philanthropies including the Annie E. Casey, Joyce, Kern Family, Lynde and Harry Bradley, Robertson, and Walton Family foundations. We thank them for their generous support and acknowledge that the actual content of our reports are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect any official positions of the various funding organizations or research institutions involved. We also express our gratitude to officials at the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS), the private schools in the MPCP, and the state Department of Public Instruction for willing cooperation, advice, and assistance.⁵

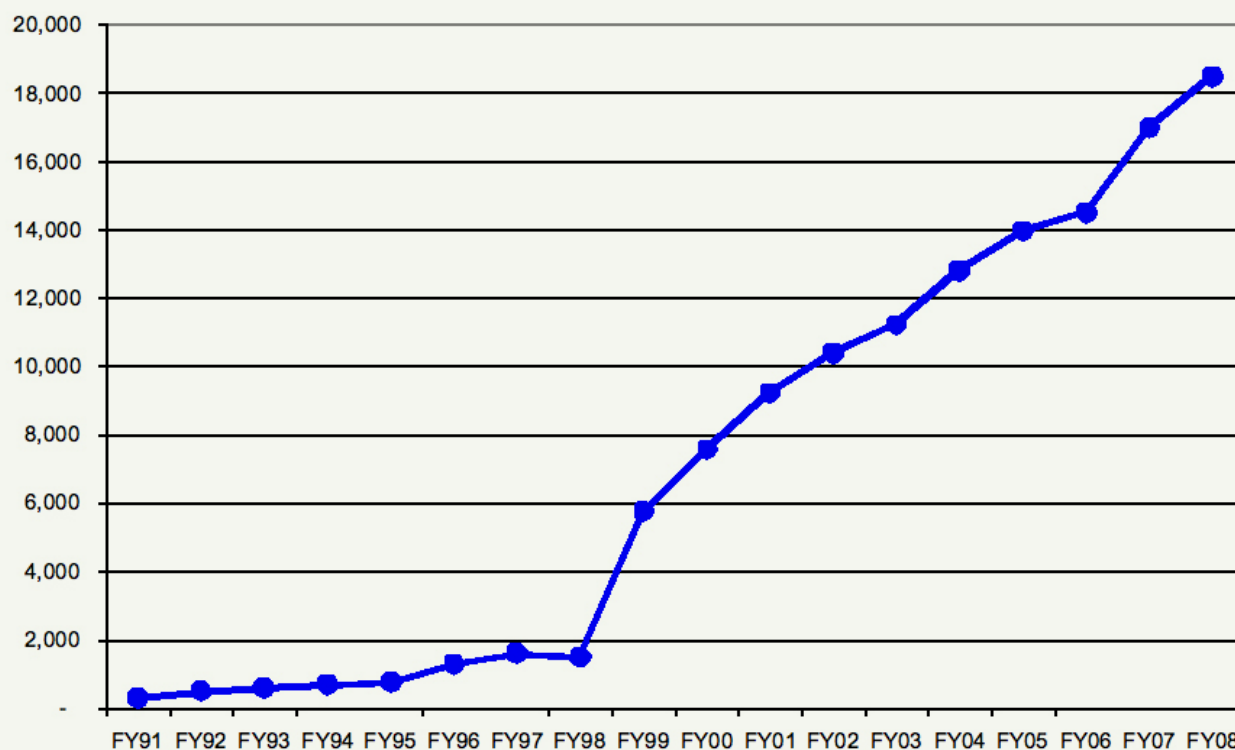
4 These additional reports on the MPCP are available in written form by requesting a copy from the SCDP. Electronic versions of the reports are available for download from <http://www.uark.edu/ua/der/SCDP/Research.html>

5 We are grateful to Marlo Crandall at Remedy 5 for his swift and expert graphical design of the reports. We acknowledge that Senior Research Associate Gerard Robinson made valuable contributions to the project before stepping down to become President of the Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO). We also recognize the guidance and assistance of the largest, most balanced, and most expert Research Advisory Board ever to oversee a school choice evaluation. Our thanks to John E. Brandl, University of Minnesota; David E. Campbell, University of Notre Dame; Anneliese Dickman, Milwaukee Public Policy Forum; Laura

Overview of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program

The MPCP was established in 1990 as the first urban education reform in the U.S. built around the idea of permitting parents to enroll their children in private schools of their choosing at government expense. In its first year of operation, the MPCP enrolled 341 students in the seven secular private schools participating in the program.⁶ The MPCP remained a small pilot program throughout the period of Witte's government-authorized evaluation of 1990-95 (figure 1). Although Wisconsin lawmakers created the conditions for program expansion in 1995 – raising the enrollment cap from 1.5 to 15 percent of K-12 students in the MPS and allowing religious schools to participate – those changes were not implemented until the Wisconsin State Supreme Court ruled them constitutional in 1998. Program enrollment immediately jumped more than 400 percent and the MPCP was quickly transformed from a small pilot initiative to a large and maturing parental school choice program.

Figure 1: MPCP Enrollment, FY91-08 (FTE's)



Hamilton, RAND; Jeffrey Henig, Teachers College; Tom Loveless, The Brookings Institution; Thomas Nechyba, Duke University; Paul E. Peterson, Harvard University; Margaret Raymond, The Hoover Institution; Andrew Rotherham, Education Sector; and Robert K. Yin, COSMOS Corporation. Their contributions of information and advice have been all to the good. Any remaining flaws are solely the responsibility of the researchers.

6 Witte, *The Market Approach to Education...* p. 56.

Genesis of the School Choice Demonstration Project Study

The same 1995 legislation that established the conditions for the dramatic expansion of the MPCP also ended the initial program evaluation. Although the MPCP (a.k.a. “Choice” program) has been discussed, reported upon, and studied using administrative data, no comprehensive evaluation of the participant effects of the Choice program using individual-level student data has been conducted since the pilot program expanded in 1995.⁷ The academic and policymaking communities have been eager to learn more about the effects of the full-scale Milwaukee Choice program on students, parents, taxpayers, schools, and communities.

Meanwhile, the School Choice Demonstration Project (SCDP) was established in 2003 to design and implement the next generation of rigorous and comprehensive evaluations of school voucher programs.⁸ Comprised of a national network of prominent social scientists and education researchers, the SCDP is a major part of the research team selected by the U.S. Department of Education’s Institute for Education Sciences to conduct a scientifically rigorous evaluation of the nation’s first federally funded school voucher initiative, the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program.⁹ Researchers at the SCDP have been consulted by officials across the country regarding how to conduct reliable evaluations of school voucher programs.

During the 2005-06 school year, the Choice program was approaching its statutory enrollment cap of 15 percent of Milwaukee K-12 students, or about 15,000 students. To avoid the need to ration the permissible number of vouchers among the existing group of Choice students and new applicants, Governor Jim Doyle and Wisconsin legislators negotiated a set of changes to the MPCP that involved a combination of expansion and accountability provisions, namely:

- The MPCP enrollment cap was raised to 22,500 students;
- A set of accreditation requirements was established for participating schools;
- Schools were required to administer standardized tests to their Choice students in grades 4, 8, and 10;
- Schools were obligated to submit copies of their student test scores to the SCDP for analysis and subsequent submission to Wisconsin’s Legislative Audit Bureau; and,

7 For studies of the “systemic” or competitive effects of the Choice program on student achievement in Milwaukee Public Schools see Martin Carnoy, Frank Adamson, Amita Chudgar, Thomas F. Luschei, and John F. Witte, *Vouchers and Public School Performance: A Case Study of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program* (Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute, 2007); Emily Van Dunk and Anneliese M. Dickman, *School Choice and the Question of Accountability: The Milwaukee Experience* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004); Caroline M. Hoxby, “School Choice and School Productivity: Could School Choice be a Tide that Lifts All Boats?” *The Economics of School Choice*, edited by Caroline M. Hoxby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Jay P. Greene and Greg Forster, *Rising to the Challenge: The Effect of School Choice on Public Schools in Milwaukee and San Antonio*, New York: Manhattan Institute Civic Bulletin, No. 27, October 2002.

8 Initially based at Georgetown University, the SCDP moved to the University of Arkansas’ Department of Education Reform along with principal investigator Patrick J. Wolf in 2006.

9 The other institutions involved in the study are Westat (the prime contractor) and Chesapeake Research Associates. For a copy of the research team’s Year 1 impact report, see <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/20074009/>

- The Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examinations (WKCE) were to be administered to a representative panel of MPCP students in order to compare their performance to that of similar students in MPS.¹⁰

The last three new program requirements listed above created the conditions for the comprehensive longitudinal study, the initial fruits of which are described here.

The SCDP MPCP Evaluation

Our plan for evaluating the Choice program is comprehensive, multi-method, rigorous, and longitudinal. It is comprehensive in that we recognize that school choice programs could affect a wide variety of individuals and institutions in positive and negative ways. Our research will evaluate the participant effects of the MPCP on such important outcomes as student achievement, parent and student satisfaction, civic values, the religious identity of private schools, and how parents and students experience the program. We will determine the systemic effects of the Choice program on education finance, public schools, non-participating students, private school capacity, and school-level racial integration. Finally, we plan to examine the under-explored question of the possible broader “community” effects of the MPCP on the levels of economic and racial segregation and integration in Milwaukee neighborhoods. This project represents the most comprehensive evaluation of a school choice program ever attempted.



Our team is equipped to use a rich variety of research methods to gain evidence-driven answers to the many questions that surround the issue of school vouchers. We have experts in both quantitative and qualitative research approaches. We will collect test score data, administer extensive parent and student surveys, survey and visit schools, and conduct focus groups with parents and students attending MPCP, public charter, and MPS schools. Our goal is to gather and analyze a treasure trove of information, from many sources and using multiple methods, about the complete educational reality of Milwaukee and how the Choice program shapes it.

We are committed to using the most rigorous methods possible in conducting all aspects of this important research. That commitment to scientific evaluation has led us to develop the Longitudinal Educational Growth Study (LEGS) as the primary mechanism for generating causal claims about the affect of the MPCP on participants. The quest for apples-to-apples comparisons drives the design of the LEGS -- from the carefully-matched representative panels of MPCP and MPS students, to the administration of the same test to those students under similar testing conditions, to the focus on evaluating student gains over time.¹¹ Whenever or

¹⁰ Wisconsin 2005 Act 125 .

¹¹ We are especially grateful to Deborah Lindsey, Director of the Division of Research and Assessment at MPS, for advice and feedback regarding how to make this evaluation as rigorous and fair as possible.

wherever our data fall short of what is necessary to make reliable claims about what the MPCP has and has not “caused,” we carefully qualify our results as merely descriptive. Description is an important aid to analysis; however, it should be the starting point and not the ending point of an evaluation.

To enhance the scientific rigor of our evaluation, it is designed to be longitudinal. Over the planned five-year life of the study, we expect to issue a total of 36 reports evaluating at least 10 distinct areas of possible MPCP effects (table 1). Many of these reports will be informed by evidence collected at multiple points in time, so that clear trends can be identified. Through the course of our study, scholars, policymakers, and the public in general will learn a great deal about America’s oldest and largest urban school voucher program.

Table 1. SCDP Evaluation of the MPCP: Planned Components, Deliverables, and Schedule

Question	Deliverable	06-07	07-08	08-09	09-10	10-11
What are we finding?	Summary of Reports	X	X	X	X	X
How well are MPCP students performing?	School Testing Summary Report	X	X	X	X	X
What is the Program’s average effect on achievement growth, attainment, civic values, safety, and satisfaction?	Longitudinal Educational Growth Study	X	X	X	X	X
What are the characteristics of MPCP and MPS schools? Which factors impact achievement gains?	Schools and Best Practices Report	X	X	X	X	X
What is the effect of the Program on achievement in public schools?	Competitive Effects Report		X		X	
Is the supply of private schools and slots responding to demand?	Supply-Side Report		X			X
Have religious schools changed due to the Program?	Religious Identity Report			X		X
How has the Program influenced the financing of education?	Education Finance Report	X		X		X
Have real estate values or demography changed in response?	Community Effects Report		X			X
What is the Program’s impact on school-level integration by race?	Integration Report			X		X
How are parents choosing schools, addressing challenges, and how might the Program be improved?	Parent & Student Voices Report		X	X		X
Total Reports (36 over 5 years)		5	8	8	5	10

The SCDP MPCP Evaluation Team

Completing this ambitious project will require the sustained effort of a large, experienced, and skilled research team. Three major research institutions – the University of Arkansas, the University of Wisconsin, and Westat – are providing the bulk of the personnel for the evaluation:

Principal Investigator:	Dr. Patrick J. Wolf, University of Arkansas
Co-Principal Investigator:	Dr. Jay P. Greene, University of Arkansas
Co-Principal Investigator:	Dr. John F. Witte, University of Wisconsin-Madison
Director of Field Research:	Juanita Lucas-McLean, Westat
Senior Research Associate:	Dr. Robert Costrell, University of Arkansas
Senior Research Associate:	James C. Rahn, University of Wisconsin-Madison
Senior Research Associate:	Dr. Thomas Stewart, Symphonic Strategies
Senior Research Associate:	Dr. Marcus Winters, Manhattan Institute
Doctoral Fellow:	Joshua Cowen, University of Wisconsin-Madison
Doctoral Fellow:	David Fleming, University of Wisconsin-Madison
Doctoral Fellow:	Nathan Gray, University of Arkansas
Research Associate:	Yu Cao, Westat
Research Associate:	Laura Collins, Westat
Research Associate:	Laura Jensen, University of Arkansas
Research Associate:	Brian Kisida, University of Arkansas
Research Associate:	Ryan Marsh, University of Arkansas
Research Associate:	Sylvia Segovia, Westat

Collectively, the eight senior researchers on the project have over 100 years of experience evaluating education policies and programs.

Findings from the Baseline Reports

What have we found so far? The four specialized reports from the baseline year (2006-07) of the evaluation analyze the fiscal impact of the Choice program on Wisconsin taxpayers and provide descriptive information about MPCP schools, the average performance of the 4th, 8th, and 10th graders attending them, and the carefully matched panels of MPCP and MPS students that comprise the LEGS initiative.

The Fiscal Impact of the MPCP in Milwaukee and Wisconsin, 1993-2008 (Report #2)

Dr. Robert M. Costrell has carefully examined the policy history and fiscal formulas involved in the funding of the Choice program from 1990 until the present day.¹² Costrell, one of the nation's foremost experts on education

12 Robert M. Costrell, *The Fiscal Impact of the MPCP in Milwaukee and Wisconsin, 1993-2008*, School Choice Demonstration Project, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AR, SCDP Milwaukee Evaluation Report #2, February 2008, available at <http://www.uark.edu/ua/der/SCDP/Research.html>

finance, determines the fiscal impact of the MPCP by estimating what would have happened to the taxpayers of Wisconsin if the Choice program had never existed. His report includes four key findings, many of which reinforce and confirm the results of previous reports from the Wisconsin Legislative Fiscal Bureau:

1. The State of Wisconsin has a transparent and efficient system for attaching funding to students as they move among public schools in the state;
2. In place of that system, a much more complicated method has been used to fund students in the Choice program;
3. Based on reasonable assumptions, informed by evidence, about likely private school enrollments in the absence of the MPCP, the Choice program saves Wisconsin taxpayers money (e.g. \$25 million in 2006-07);
4. The allocation of the tax savings generated by the MPCP is not even, with those who pay statewide taxes (e.g. income and sales) and property taxpayers outside of Milwaukee receiving sizable fiscal benefits from the operation of the program while Milwaukee property owners pay higher property taxes as a result.

Costrell concludes that the MPCP is a good example of two things: how the funding of school voucher programs can be designed to generate efficiencies that redound to the benefit of taxpayers but also how those designs can have differential effects on the pocketbooks of citizens.

Baseline Descriptive Report on Participating Schools (Report #3)

Brian Kisida and his colleagues have assembled a wealth of information about the population of private schools that participated in the MPCP 2006-07.¹³ The important findings from this report include that:

1. More than 60 percent of the private schools participating in the MPCP enroll Choice students that comprise more than 80 percent of their total student population;
2. Nearly 80 percent of the Choice schools self-identify as religious;
3. Compared to MPS schools, MPCP schools tend to be much smaller and have lower student-teacher ratios;
4. A higher percentage of teachers in MPS schools have graduate degrees than do teachers in MPCP schools, but the teachers in MPCP schools average longer teaching experience.

13 Brian Kisida, Laura Jensen, James C. Rahn, and Patrick J. Wolf, *The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program: Baseline Descriptive Report on Participating Schools*, School Choice Demonstration Project, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AR, February 2008, SCDP Milwaukee Evaluation Report #3, available at <http://www.uark.edu/ua/der/SCDP/Research.html>

Annual School Testing Summary Report (Report #4)

Nathan Gray and his colleagues received and processed test scores from 106 MPCP schools that administered various nationally-normed standardized tests or the WKCE to 6,425 of their Choice students.¹⁴ Their report focuses on the achievement levels of the MPCP students in the grades of 4, 8, and 10 for which testing was mandatory. This snapshot of the performance of these low-income inner-city students indicates that:

1. The MPCP students in grades 4, 8, and 10 that were administered norm-referenced standardized tests demonstrated average performance in reading, math, and science between the 28th and 39th percentile compared with the average student in the U.S.;
2. The performance of the MPCP students relative to national norms is lowest in grade 4, slightly higher in grade 8, and higher still in grade 10;
3. The subset of MPCP students that took the WKCE scored somewhat lower than income-disadvantaged MPS students in 4th grade but somewhat higher than their MPS peers in 8th grade;
4. The distribution of school-level test scores reflects a positive skew. This means that the school-level average performance in most MPCP schools clusters around and just below the mean level of performance, while Choice students at a handful of MPCP schools are performing at high levels that are well above the average.

The authors repeatedly caution that their data are merely descriptive. Snapshot test score reports such as this one cannot establish whether the levels of student performance in the data are the result of student characteristics or their educational experience. Such conclusions will not be possible until later years of the study.

Longitudinal Educational Growth Study (LEGS) Baseline Report (Report #5)

Dr. John F. Witte, the nation's foremost academic authority on the MPCP, and his colleagues report on their sophisticated method of generating comparable MPCP and MPS student panels in grades 3-9 for the rigorous evaluation of the participant effects of the Choice program.¹⁵ They demonstrate statistically that their carefully matched MPS sample is more similar to their representative panel of Choice students on important student characteristics than would have been the case for other possible comparison groups. The researchers also present

14 Nathan L. Gray, Patrick J. Wolf, and Laura I. Jensen, *Milwaukee Parental Choice Program: Annual School Testing Summary Report*, School Choice Demonstration Project, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AR, SCDP Milwaukee Evaluation Report #4, February 2008, available at <http://www.uark.edu/ua/der/SCDP/Research.html>

15 John F. Witte, Patrick J. Wolf, Joshua M. Cowen, David J. Fleming, and Juanita Lucas-McLean, *The MPCP Longitudinal Educational Growth Study Baseline Report*, School Choice Demonstration Project, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AR, SCDP Milwaukee Evaluation Report #4, February 2008, available at <http://www.uark.edu/ua/der/SCDP/Research.html>

a wealth of descriptive information about the conditions at baseline for the matched student panels, most importantly that:

1. MPCP parents have lower incomes but higher levels of education than MPS parents;
2. About 70 percent of both MPCP and MPS parents say that their child is attending their first choice of school;
3. Both MPCP and MPS parents express relatively high levels of satisfaction with their child's school, but satisfaction with MPCP schools is somewhat higher than satisfaction with MPS schools;
4. Both MPCP and MPS elementary students (but not 9th grade students!) express relatively high levels of satisfaction with their school, but student satisfaction with MPCP schools is somewhat higher than satisfaction with MPS schools.

As with the Annual School Testing Summary Report, the authors of the LEGS Baseline Report caution that the comparisons being made between MPCP and MPS parents and students at this early point are merely descriptive. We cannot yet say that the MPCP program caused any observed differences. However, because we will be able to follow these same students over time, future LEGS reports will include reliable information about the participant effects of America's oldest and largest urban school voucher program.

Conclusion

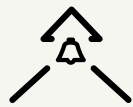
The baseline year of the comprehensive longitudinal evaluation of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program by the School Choice Demonstration Project has produced a small set of important initial findings as well as the conditions for more far-reaching results in the future. We have established that the Choice program likely benefits Wisconsin taxpayers, but not necessarily all of them. We have painted a picture of a large and diverse set of MPCP schools that are primarily but not exclusively religious and a majority of which enroll predominantly Choice students. We have displayed a rough and limited snapshot of the average performance of Choice students in certain grades that suggests they tend to perform below national averages but at levels roughly comparable to similarly income-disadvantaged students in MPS. Finally, we have presented a highly sophisticated plan for generating reliable estimates of the participant effects of the MPCP in the future. These reports represent an important new beginning. Stay tuned.

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About the Author



Patrick J. Wolf is Professor of Education Reform and 21st Century Endowed Chair in School Choice at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville. He also is principal investigator of the School Choice Demonstration Project. Wolf has authored, co-authored, or co-edited three books and nearly 30 articles and book chapters on school choice, special education, and public management. A 1987 *summa cum laude* graduate of the University of St. Thomas (St. Paul, MN), he received his Ph.D. in Political Science from Harvard University in 1995.



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