

School voucher use increased college attendance, research findings show

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A school voucher program in Milwaukee increased the chances of students graduating from high school and going on to college, according to the School Choice Demonstration Project based at the University of Arkansas.

Researchers will wrap up five years of evaluations of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program on Monday, Feb. 27, with two panel presentations and discussion of the demonstration project's findings in Milwaukee.

The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program was the first school voucher program of its kind when it started in 1990. In 2006, Wisconsin policymakers mandated that the [School Choice](#) Demonstration Project lead a five-year evaluation of the Milwaukee program.

"Our clearest positive finding is that the Choice Program boosts the rates at which [students](#) graduate from high school, enroll in a four-year college, and persist in college," said John Witte, professor of [political science](#) and [public affairs](#) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. "Since educational attainment is linked to positive life outcomes such as higher lifetime earnings and lower rates of incarceration, this is a very encouraging result of the program."

Witte worked on the evaluations with Patrick Wolf, holder of the Twenty-First Century Chair in School Choice at the University of Arkansas and director of the School Choice Demonstration Project, and

a team of researchers. The evaluations covered numerous aspects of the program, including academic achievement, parental satisfaction and cost-savings.

"Our final set of reports on the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program represent the last word on the first private school choice program targeted to low-income inner-city students in the U.S. – a pioneering program that operated for 22 years and paved the way for 25 voucher and tax-credit scholarship programs that have come in its wake," Wolf stated in the summary of final reports. "Our findings include several 'no significant difference' results but also some evidence that participation in MPCP or enrollment in an independent public charter school has produced better student outcomes than those experienced by similar students in Milwaukee Public schools."

Release of the demonstration project's final report and accompanying discussion will take place between 8 and 11:30 a.m. Monday, Feb. 27, at the Italian Community Center, 631 E. Chicago St., Milwaukee. The reports may also be accessed online at the School Choice [Demonstration Project](#) website. In addition to researchers' reports, today's event will include comments from several leading figures in Wisconsin education, including Bob Peterson of the Milwaukee Teachers Education Association, Brother Bob Smith of Messmer Schools, Jim Bender of School Choice Wisconsin, and Mark Blitz of the University of Wisconsin -Madison.

The evaluation concluded that, when similar students in the voucher program and in Milwaukee Public Schools were compared, the achievement growth of students in the voucher program was higher in reading but similar in math. When a snapshot of students in the voucher program who took the state accountability test was compared to a snapshot of the performance of Milwaukee Public School students with similar income disadvantages, the students in the voucher program

performed at higher levels in the upper grades in reading and science but at lower levels in math at all grade levels examined and in reading and science in fourth grade.

The researchers also were able to estimate that 7.5 to 14.6 percent of students in the voucher program have a disability. Even the low end of that range is more than four times higher than the disability rate previously reported by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction based merely on the number of voucher students who received special accommodations while testing.

More information: www.uark.edu/ua/der/SCDP.html

Provided by University of Arkansas

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