

The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program

Description of Program

The publicly-funded Milwaukee Parental Choice program has been in existence since 1990. Between 1990 and 1994, the number of students in the program in any year was limited to 1 percent of the Milwaukee public schools membership; this limit was expanded to 1.5 percent in 1994; and since 1998 has been expanded to 15%. Students in kindergarten through 12th grade whose family income is at or below 1.75 times the national poverty line are eligible to apply. Since 1995 both non-sectarian and religious private schools in Milwaukee can accept voucher students. The participating schools are required to accept all students who apply or randomly select students if oversubscribed (with a few exceptions). The current size of the voucher is approximately \$4,900.¹

Implementation Questions

Studies that describe the nature of the program, the requirements on the schools, the selection of students, and who uses the vouchers are possible for this program. Witte, Thorn, Pritchard, and Claibourn (1994) and Witte, Sterr, and Thorn (1995) provide background on the program through 1994; The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction also has information about the current program. Because some have raised questions about whether the private schools actually select students as required by the statute, additional research would usefully document the extent to which the private schools comply with these and other requirements of the program. It would also be possible to study how much information parents have about the program and where they get their information.

Analyzing data before 1995, Witte, Sterr, and Thorn (1995), Greene, Peterson, and Du (1997), and Rouse (1998) examine who used the program. Further research would analyze who uses the program under the current rules (i.e., since the expansion of students and schools), how the changes affected participation, and whether it appears that the students who elect to use the vouchers are a “random” sample of students eligible for it.

The Wisconsin Supreme Court found the extension of the program to religious schools constitutional in 1998, and the U.S. Supreme Court has allowed that decision to stand. Research that compared the specifics of the existing publicly-funded voucher programs and the existing legal rulings would be useful.

¹ As far as we know, except for declaring itself a private school, there are few statutory obligations for private schools that do not participate in the Choice program.

Impacts on “Voucher Students”

To date the Milwaukee voucher program has been so small that it is unlikely the Milwaukee public schools have felt seriously threatened that they would lose significant numbers of students through the program.² As a result, only effects on students who use the vouchers are credible. That is, one can credibly estimate whether the achievement of students who use a voucher improves as a result of attending a private school. Results using statistical analysis and data through 1994 to date on this issue have been mixed. (See Witte, Sterr, and Thorn (1995), Greene, et. al. (1997), and Rouse (1998).) Therefore, further research on the expanded program would be quite useful.

Unfortunately, the statute no longer calls for an evaluation so there is no longer a requirement that the public and private schools provide data for research. Future research would require changing the legislation, convincing schools to provide administrative data, or raising sufficient funds to administer tests and collecting demographic data on participants and a comparison sample independent of the school system. Similarly, more qualitative analyses (such as ethnographic analyses) would also require obtaining the cooperation of both public and private schools.

Another question of social importance is the impact of voucher programs on racial and ethnic segregation. A recent paper by Fuller and Mitchell (1999) finds that students who use the vouchers in Milwaukee attend schools that are less racially isolated than those in the Milwaukee public schools who do not. (See Minberg and Holmes (1999) for a critique of this study.) Further analysis of this question (and others regarding the characteristics of the schools attended by voucher students) would be possible, although would require matching school information with information on individual students.

Impacts on Voucher Schools

If a large number of students avail themselves of the voucher program then there may also be a perceptible impact of the program on the private schools in which the voucher students enroll, the “voucher schools.” This impact would be most pronounced in places in which there are relatively few schools from which the voucher students can choose. Questions include the effect on the cost of educating a child in the private schools, the effect on the tuition charged by the school, and the effects on other non-voucher students attending the schools. We know of no studies of such effects in Milwaukee, but such an analysis could be conducted through both statistical and qualitative methods with information or data from before the voucher program and a group of comparable private schools that do not accept voucher students. (Ideally these schools would be outside of Milwaukee so that one did not have the confounding issue of the private school not accepting the voucher students for significant reasons.)

Impacts on the Parents and Families of “Voucher Students”

Because of the size of the program, the most convincing analysis would focus on students who use

² This does not mean that the Milwaukee public schools have not responded at all. For instance, an unpublished paper by John Gardner (Gardner, 1997), an at-large member of the Milwaukee School Board, alleges that important changes have occurred in the Milwaukee public schools since the introduction of the voucher program. In addition, the public schools have opposed the program.

the vouchers. Because the existing data from the program mostly come from administrative records, they do not contain adequate information to examine the impacts on the families of the students. To conduct a statistical analysis would require administering an independent survey to the parents (and perhaps siblings) of the voucher students and to a random sample of a comparison sample. Ideally this survey would be longitudinal in nature. Similarly, a qualitative analysis would require identifying students who use a voucher and students who are eligible but do not use a voucher and interviewing their parents and siblings.

Impacts on Non-Voucher Students, Families, and Schools

One of the hypothesized effects of vouchers is to increase the competition faced by public schools in order to encourage them to improve student achievement. In this case, one should find that the achievement of students who remain in the public schools improves and one should observe changes in the organization, staffing, and/or teaching methods in the schools. Originally the program was too small to credibly generate such “indirect” (or “systemic”) effects. Under the current regulations, however, a number of students equal to 15% of the public school enrollment can potentially use a voucher (although this year only about 8,000 have actually done so; or 8% of enrollment). As a result, eventually one may be able to analyze the indirect effects of vouchers in Milwaukee. To conduct a statistical analysis would require either putting together administrative data (on schools, principals, teachers, and students in Milwaukee and in a comparison district (or districts)) or conducting independent surveys of principals, teachers, and students in public schools in Milwaukee and in a comparison district (or districts). Qualitative analyses would also require interviewing principals, teachers, and students in Milwaukee schools as well as those in a comparison district (or districts).

In theory, one could analyze the effects of the program on the schools by conducting a survey of school policies and practices or by using qualitative research techniques (such as participant-observation or focus groups). One would need to study schools in Milwaukee and schools in a comparison district (or districts). In practice, however, the program has been in effect for several years so that it would be difficult to collect quality baseline data on schooling practices from the time before the program existed. While administrative data could likely provide some information (such as on pupil-teacher ratios and characteristics of the teaching staff), other policies, such as hiring practices may be more difficult to obtain. In addition, since only students in the Milwaukee school district are eligible for the vouchers, it may be difficult to disentangle the effects of the vouchers with other changes in the Milwaukee public schools. (Although the precise determination of the timing of changes may help to disentangle effects.)

Similarly, to study the effects on non-voucher families would require collecting data (statistical and qualitative) on the families of students who remain in the Milwaukee public schools and those in a comparison district (or districts).

Costs

In theory, an analysis of the effect of the program on the marginal and average costs of educating students in the Milwaukee public schools could be possible. This analysis could either be a theoretical analysis in which the parameters of the program are used to model the likely impact of the program on the costs (operating and otherwise) of the public schools which the voucher students leave. An empirical analysis of the effect of the program on school costs could rely on administrative data from the state and districts (if available) or on independently collected survey data.

One could also conduct a more descriptive analysis of the cost of the program for participants through survey data. In October 1998 the Institute for Wisconsin's Future released "Tax Funding for Private School Alternatives: The Financial Impact on Milwaukee Public Schools and Taxpayers" by Thomas Moore. Moore estimated that in the 1998-99 academic year the Milwaukee Public Schools experienced a net loss of \$22.2 million in state aid as a result of the voucher and charter school programs.

Supply Response of "Other" Schools

Because the program in Milwaukee has been in place for several years and is steadily growing, one can expect that new schools have opened to accept voucher students and existing private schools have expanded. An analysis of the characteristics (such as tuition, mission, admissions policies, hiring practices, etc.) of the schools that have opened since the beginning of the program and an understanding of the changes undergone by existing private schools would be useful and feasible through surveys and other ways of obtaining information from the private sector.

Effects on Support for Public Education

It would be possible to study the effects of the Milwaukee voucher program on the support for public education through an analysis of voting behavior and attitudes towards public schooling beginning before the program was instituted and continuing to the present. One could also compare changes in funding levels and public support for Milwaukee public schools relative to those of a comparison district (or districts). This analysis, however, would be more convincing if combined with an analysis of other publicly-funded voucher programs since in Wisconsin only students in the district of Milwaukee are eligible for vouchers which would make it difficult to disentangle the effects of the voucher program with other changes that may be occurring in the Milwaukee public school district. One potential avenue would be to attempt to add questions specific to Milwaukee to an existing (and on-going) survey of public attitudes.

Effects on Public Policy Making

A study of the changes in public policy making in Milwaukee (or even the state of Wisconsin) as a result of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program would be feasible through analysis of records on meetings and the policy process of entities such as the local school board and policy-makers from other levels within the state.

Plan of Action

In general it would be possible to learn much more from the Milwaukee experience with vouchers through the collection of original data (both statistical and qualitative). Therefore, the plan of action should be centered around devising strategies for obtaining such data (by working with the public and private schools in Milwaukee or changing the legislation to require an independent evaluation) and obtaining funding from outside sources to ensure that any information collected is of high quality.

References

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