Building the Argument Against Vouchers

Claim: *Voucher students outperform public schools and have significantly higher graduation rates and post-secondary education success.*

Reality: No study has proven that using a voucher gives an academic advantage over a student who remains in the public school system. The most commonly cited study by voucher advocates, performed by the Arkansas School Choice Demonstration project on behalf of the Wisconsin legislature, makes the claim that students who remained in the voucher program for the entirety of the study had a 94% graduation rate and higher placement in post-secondary educational programming. This claim is incredibly misleading for two main reasons: first, the 94% rate is derived from only 44% of the study's total students – information for the remaining 56% is unknown. Second, voucher schools are not required to establish a uniform and rigorous graduation standard like that required of their public school peers. What constitutes graduation from one voucher school might not permit graduation from the public school system or even a different voucher school. With respect to performance on state mandated tests, public school students have done better or equal to their voucher peers (matched for demographics) during the entire period of evaluation.

Claim: *Voucher schools educate students for $6,442 and provide an equal or better education than the $12,000 public school equivalent.*

Reality: The $6,442 figure refers to the amount of maximum aid that is guaranteed per voucher student from the state. On top of any aid voucher students directly receive, voucher students are eligible for a substantial amount of aid from state categorical and federal sources along with services public schools are required to provide to all students – including those enrolled in private schools. For example, state law requires the local school district to provide transportation to voucher pupils falling within their bus routes. Federal law requires public school districts to provide equitable services for students with disabilities in private and voucher schools, forcing the public school system to take on these responsibilities and to share the aid that is given through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Voucher students are also eligible for Title I (low income) federal aid as well. While it is difficult to quantify the exact amount of benefit voucher students receive from these additional sources, rest assured that it is much greater than $6,442.

Claim: *The voucher program provides students with a choice they otherwise wouldn't have through the public schools and that competition not only helps the individual student, but improves public schools as well.*

Reality: If this was the case, the Milwaukee Public Schools would have seen a drastic improvement in performance since 1990, which has not happened. But more importantly, this type of misinformation downplays the significant offerings public schools provide to help students who are otherwise not successful in the standard classroom structure. Wisconsin has a very healthy and robust charter school climate and many districts use charter schools and alternative schools to provide diverse opportunities. In addition, Wisconsin offers families the option of open enrolling to other school districts and, despite claims to the contrary, open enrollment is a healthy program that accepts the vast majority of applicants. If producing more academic choice for students is the end game, there are higher performing and more accountable options than growing the private school voucher program.

Public School and Voucher School Accountability Comparison

	Public Schools	Voucher Schools
Require all teachers to be licensed?	✓	X
Required to conduct background checks of all school staff?	✓	X
Comply with open meeting and records laws?	✓	X
Have public financial reporting?	✓	X
Required to employ special education teachers or therapists?	✓	X
Require Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for special needs students?	✓	X
Comply with student seclusion and restraint laws?	✓	X
Required to have rigorous graduation and curriculum standards?	✓	X
Able to reject special-needs students or those who do not meet their academic criteria?	X	✓
Teach religious-based curriculum?	X	✓