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Welcome to the American Federation for Children’s Myth Busters, a weekly brief setting the educational choice record straight.

MYTH:

“Milwaukee private choice schools aren’t accountable.”

AMERICAN FEDERATION FOR CHILDREN MYTH BUSTERS:

It is amazing how many private school choice opponents regurgitate this myth in their talking points. Some, for instance, actually claim that choice students do not have to take the same tests that public school students take…and then moments later compare snapshot test results between choice and public school students without realizing the obvious contradiction.

The American Federation for Children has always supported smart accountability provisions. In fact, our affiliate organization (Alliance for School Choice) maintains an [accountability checklist](http://s3.amazonaws.com/assets.allianceforschoolchoice.com/admin_assets/uploads/139/Accountability%20Check.pdf) on the 32 private school choice programs that are educating over 245,000 students across the country.

So, this week, we set the record straight by citing just some of the accountability requirements imposed on Wisconsin’s two private school choice programs taken verbatim from an objective source: the Legislative Fiscal Bureau’s latest Informational Paper on the topic (for a complete list, please refer to [*Informational Paper 26 – Milwaukee and Racine Parental Choice Programs*](http://legis.wisconsin.gov/lfb/publications/Informational-Papers/Documents/2013/26_Milwaukee%20and%20Racine%20Parental%20Choice%20Programs.pdf)):

Testing

“Choice schools must administer the 4th, 8th, and 10th grade knowledge and concepts examination (WKCE) adopted or approved by the State Superintendent to all pupils in those grades attending the school through the choice program” (p. 8).

“Choice schools are also required to administer the 3rd grade standardized reading test developed by DPI to all choice pupils in that grade” (p. 8).

“Choice schools must also administer all tests in reading, mathematics, and science that are required for public school pupils under the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) to all choice pupils in the relevant grades. NCLB currently requires that all students be tested in reading and math each year in 3rd through 8th grades and once in high school, and in science once each in elementary, middle, and high school” (p. 8).

Admissions

“A choice school may reject an applicant only if it has reached its maximum general capacity or seating capacity” (p. 3).

Regulations

“The participating schools must meet all state health and safety laws or codes applicable to public schools and a number of federal laws and regulations which apply to both public and private schools” (p. 4).

“…schools participating in the choice program are required to develop and implement a plan for maintaining environmental quality in the school” (p. 13).

Teacher Requirements

“With certain exceptions, all teachers and administrators in a school participating in the choice program are required to have a bachelor’s degree from an accredited institution of higher education” (p. 6).

Achievement Requirements

“Each private school is required to meet at least one of the following standards in order to continue to be eligible to participate in the program in the following school year:

1. At least 70% of the pupils in the program advance one grade level each year.
2. The school's average attendance rate for pupils in the program is at least 90%.
3. At least 80% of the pupils in the program demonstrate significant academic progress.
4. At least 70% of the families of pupils in the program meet parent involvement criteria established by the school” (p. 5).

Financial Reporting

“Each private school is subject to uniform accounting standards established by DPI.”

* Certificate of occupancy
* Evidence of financial viability
* Annual independent financial audit
* Evidence of sound fiscal and internal control practices (p. 5-6)

Accreditation

“A choice school must achieve accreditation by December 31 of the third school year following the first school year in which it participates in the choice program” (p. 7).

“A private school that is a first-time participant in the choice program and that is not accredited must obtain preaccreditation by August 1 before the first school term of participation in the program, or by May 1 if the school begins participating in the program during summer school” (p. 7).

“By law, the fact that a school has obtained preaccreditation does not require an accreditation organization to accredit the private school” (p. 8).

Removal

There are too many infractions that a private choice school could commit leading to their removal from the program to list (p. 11-12). Indeed, we join our friends at School Choice Wisconsin in [hailing two key accountability laws](http://www.schoolchoicewi.org/index.php/research/issues/accountability/) that have prevented schools from entering the program or leading to their removal:

*“*The first, [2003 Act 155](http://www.schoolchoicewi.org/files/3013/6026/8078/155.pdf)created significant barriers to entry that have kept over 100 schools from joining the MPCP. The legislation also empowered the [Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction](http://www.dpi.state.wi.us/) to remove schools from the program that lack fiscal viability and/or present a threat to the health or safety of pupils. Act 155 has been used to shut down thirty low-performing schools since 2004.  
  
The second, [2005 Act 125](http://www.schoolchoicewi.org/files/5613/6026/8078/125.pdf) mandated that all schools in the MPCP obtain accreditation from an agency named in the statutes. Act 125 also introduced a standardized testing requirement, and began a five-year longitudinal study of the program by the [School Choice Demonstration Project](http://www.uark.edu/ua/der/SCDP.html). In addition to compelling schools to improve their academic programs via accreditation, Act 125 has removed eleven low-performing schools from the MPCP.”

Standards

“Choice schools must adopt pupil academic standards in mathematics, science, reading and writing, geography, and history” (p. 8).

Required Meetings

“Choice schools are required to annually schedule two meetings at which members of the governing body of the school will be present and at which pupils and the parents or guardians of pupils applying to attend the school or attending the school may meet and communicate with the members of the governing body” (p. 9).

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