



February 2000

MILWAUKEE PARENTAL CHOICE PROGRAM

The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program was established in 1990 to provide publicly funded private school tuition for low-income children in Milwaukee. It is the largest such program in the United States. Enrollment increased significantly after the Wisconsin Supreme Court affirmed the constitutionality of religious schools' participation in 1998, and the United States Supreme Court allowed that decision to stand. In 1998-99, enrollment more than tripled compared to the previous school year, largely because of religious schools' participation. Approximately 8,000 pupils are enrolled in 91 private schools, which will receive an estimated \$38.9 million in publicly funded tuition payments for the 1999-2000 school year.

Participants Choose Schools Based on Perceived Quality

As intended, the Choice program appears to be serving children who meet statutory requirements related to low income and residence in the city of Milwaukee. In addition, the program serves pupils whose overall ethnic composition is similar to that of Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) pupils. In the 1998-99 school year, 62.4 percent of Choice pupils were African-American, and 61.4 percent of MPS pupils were African-American.

We surveyed participating families about how and why they chose schools. Families appear to have learned about the program and their children's schools through informal sources, such as friends or relatives. Parents reported selecting schools they believed would provide higher educational standards (71.1 percent of respondents), good teachers (70.4 percent of respondents), and safe and orderly environments (67.8 percent of respondents).

Participating Schools Offer a Variety of Educational Programs

Of the 86 participating private schools in 1998-99, 63 were religious and 23 were secular. Almost 70 percent of students attended the religious schools, which included Jewish, Christian, and Islamic schools. Geographically, participating schools are distributed throughout the city. Most enroll primarily pupils who live within three miles.

Participating schools offer a variety of educational programs, including alternative educational approaches, bilingual or multicultural emphases, programs for at-risk pupils, and college preparatory or vocational education. Seven schools reported offering special educational services in the 1998-99 school year. We found 171 Choice pupils had previously been identified by MPS as having special education needs. However, the total of special needs pupils in the program is not known because participating schools are not required to identify and report pupils in need of special services or their levels of need.

Academic Performance of Choice and MPS Pupils Cannot Be Directly Compared

Choice and MPS pupils' current academic performance cannot be compared because Choice schools are not required to administer standardized tests. While 68 Choice schools reported administering standardized tests in the 1998-99 school year, the types of tests varied. Past research on pupils' academic performance in the Choice program and other voucher programs has produced mixed results that indicate either no difference or a small but statistically significant improvement by voucher students over their public school counterparts.

Other indicators of quality include whether schools use accreditation and other methods of independent review. Of the 86 schools participating in 1998-99, 76 schools serving 93 percent of Choice pupils had obtained or were actively seeking independent accreditation or used standardized testing. However, nine schools serving 366 Choice pupils had

no accreditation, were not seeking accreditation, and administered no standardized tests. All participating schools report they are complying with statutory performance standards relating to parental participation or to pupils' attendance or academic advancement.

Admissions Procedures Could Be Improved

Recent concerns about program operations have focused on participating schools' admissions practices. Statutes require schools to accept all eligible pupils or to select randomly among them in order to ensure that all eligible pupils, including those with poor academic records or special educational needs, have an opportunity to participate. The Department of Public Instruction is currently investigating a formal complaint filed in 1999, which alleges that 17 schools violated program requirements, including those that require random admissions, prohibit fees, and require schools to allow pupils to opt out of religious activities.

We have identified alternative procedures that could increase families' awareness of program requirements during the admissions process. Currently, neither the Department of Public Instruction nor families are informed of eligibility determinations, which are made by the schools, until admissions decisions have been made. If eligibility determinations were instead made before admissions decisions, the Department could inform eligible pupils' families of program requirements in a more timely manner, instead of relying upon the schools to provide this information to applicants.

[full report, PDF file \(530KB\)](#)