

Policy Brief

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Apples-to-Oranges?

When comparisons are made between MPCP and MPS schools

Introduction

Too often, the media, politicians, and interest groups make inaccurate comparisons between private schools in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP) and schools in the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) system.¹ They fall victim to the attraction of lumping all MPCP schools together, as if they are one homogenous unit, and “compare” their average test score with that of MPS’. This also occurs with charter schools. Unfortunately, this is a flawed analysis that does not take into account the differences between MPCP schools that exist to meet a diversity of needs and preferences among Milwaukee families.

In the MPCP, there is considerable variation among the schools, e.g. curriculum, extracurricular activities, religious affiliation, years in the choice program, and number of students in poverty, to name a few. Catholic and Lutheran schools, especially, have historically served their students very effectively. Charter schools can be radically different depending on whether they are instrumentality (authorized by MPS and usually have unionized teachers), non-instrumentality (authorized by MPS and non-unionized), or independent (authorized by the Common Council, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, or Milwaukee Technical College).

Furthermore, by nature of who can qualify for a voucher, almost all MPCP students are economically disadvantaged – something that is less true of MPS test takers. A closer “apples-to-apples” comparison between schools would control for economic background in addition to any differences in MPCP schools’ religions.

This brief seeks to do just that. It examines the correlation between a school’s religious affiliation and student proficiency on the WKCE² Reading and Math exams among schools that serve predominately low-income, African American students, i.e. “80/80 schools” with at least 80% on

¹ For example, the DPI, in reporting test results for choice programs, aggregates all choice schools into one group and compares the MPCP to state and MPS students. See DPI (2014), Fourth year of choice school data, [press release], April 8, 2014, http://news.dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/eis/pdf/dpinr2014_48.pdf.

² The WKCE exams are aligned with the State standards and, therefore, may not be indicative of an independent charter school or private school’s curriculum or mission. Therefore, this instrument may not provide an accurate signal for the performance of such schools.

free or reduced lunch (FRL)³ and at least 80% African American.⁴ We rely on a list of 80/80 schools reported in the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, which does not include schools with at least 80% Hispanic students. We recognize this as a limitation of our analysis, and it certainly is not our intention to omit this group. Depending on what type of comparisons are made, public charter and private schools in the choice program, perform better than, about the same as, or slightly worse than MPS public schools.

Differences between MPS, MPCP, and public charter schools

Data limitations

Comparisons usually made between MPS and MPCP are severely limited by the measures that are typically used – namely level estimates (snapshots) of the proportion of students scoring proficient on the WKCE exams. Such comparisons are of limited value. Not all students who take the WKCE at a particular school have attended that school long enough for us to say that the school itself has had much to do with the outcome. While students may achieve at different levels when they leave one school for another, credit is given only to the school that administers the exam. Looking at snapshots will partially reflect where many students begin when they enroll rather than how a school actually educates its students. This can be particularly problematic when comparisons include schools that experience high turnover. In other words, the data are very noisy.

A more effective strategy includes estimating the gains that schools make over time (e.g. have fifth graders in year 2 improved over fourth graders in year 1). But these measures are also problematic. School-level data in the context of Milwaukee may not measure improved performance of a given cohort of children because schools experience high turnover rates (Cowen et al., 2010), i.e. the fifth graders in year 2 may be a substantially different group than the fourth graders in year 1. An improvement over this is a school value-added measure based on student-level data, which is currently not available.

But, despite these limitations, the media and politicians often rely on WKCE test scores for (flawed) measures of school performance. While we disapprove of such comparison, if they are to be made, we offer a way to improve comparisons.

Types of schools in the MPCP

Figure 1 (below), based on data from the Public Policy Forum’s annual census of schools in parental choice programs, highlights the different types of schools in the MPCP. Catholic schools

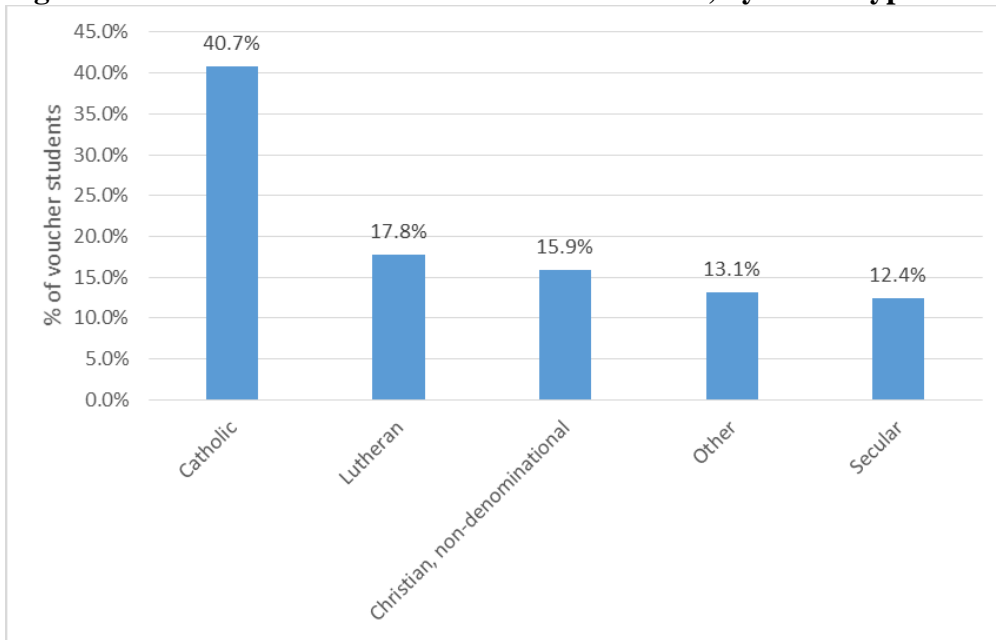
³ Students can qualify for free meals if household income is below 130% of the federal poverty limit. They may qualify for reduced meals if household income is below 185% of the federal poverty limit.

⁴ DPI does not publish demographic data for parental choice program schools, though these data are readily available for public schools. Fortunately, the *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel* compiled a list of all 80/80 schools in Milwaukee, including MPCP schools. http://www.jsonline.com/reading-proficiency-in-milwaukee-schools-284920991.html#!/readingprof_desc_1/

Please note that the Journal-Sentinel’s list of 80/80 schools does not include schools with at least 80% Hispanic students. We apply the 80/80 criteria consistently to MPS schools. Therefore, our analysis certainly omits some schools from all groups.

enroll over 40% of all voucher students in the MPCP, Lutheran schools enroll 18%, non-denominational Christian enroll 16%, schools with other religious affiliations enroll 13%, and secular schools enroll 12%. All public and MPCP schools in Milwaukee, on average, serve student populations that are largely minority and economically disadvantaged.⁵ According to the Public Policy Forum (2014), MPS schools serve a slightly higher proportion of minority students than private schools (86.3% versus 82.6%) while private schools in the choice program serve a slightly higher proportion of economically disadvantaged students (84.8% to 82.8%).⁶

Figure 1: Voucher student enrollment in the MPCP, by school type



Source: based on information from the Public Policy Forum’s annual census of schools in the parental choice programs, <http://publicpolicyforum.org/research/milwaukee-voucher-schools-2013>

Table 1 (below) reports the overall percent of students that scored Proficient or Advanced on the WKCE Reading and Math exams for MPS schools and MPCP. At first glance, MPS appears to enjoy a slight advantage over MPCP schools. Most observers stop there. They shouldn’t. This is a misleading, if not flawed, conclusion. These results mask a substantial amount of variation across different kinds of schools, and better comparisons could be made.

Table 1: Percent proficient and advanced in reading and math among all schools in Milwaukee

	Reading	Math
Overall MPS	15.5%	20.2%
Overall MPCP	11.9%	15.7%

Source: based on performance data from Wisconsin Department of Instruction

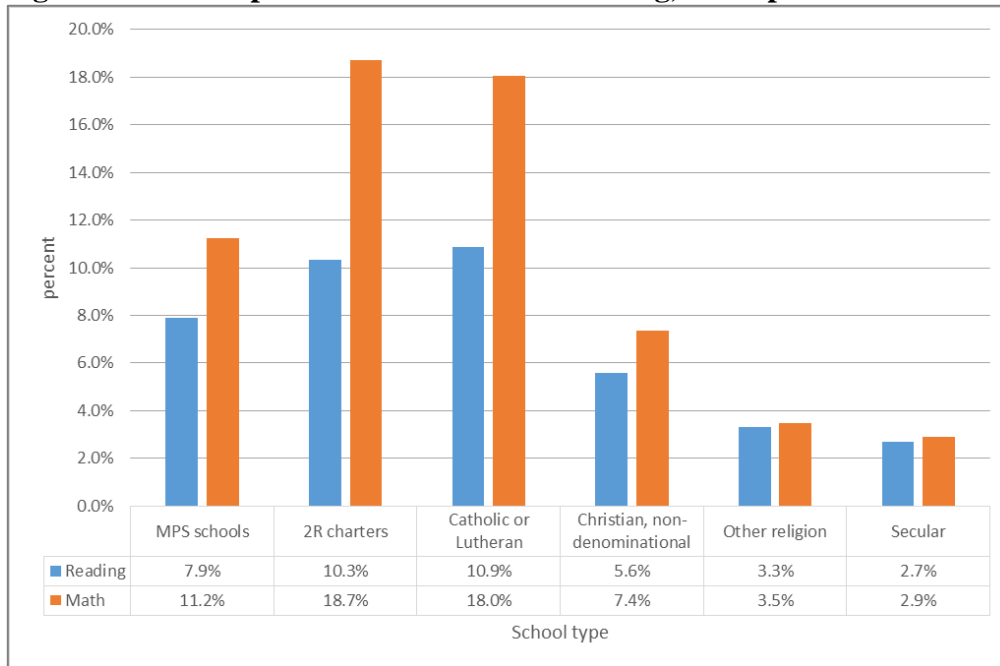
⁵ The DPI defines an economically disadvantaged student as “member of a household that meets the income eligibility guidelines for free or reduced-price meals (less than or equal to 185% of Federal Poverty Guidelines) under the National School Lunch Program(NSLP).” http://lstat.dpi.wi.gov/lstat_dataecon

⁶ The rates for private schools reflect only those that participate in the MPCP. <http://publicpolicyforum.org/sites/default/files/K-12SystemOverview.pdf>

Catholic or Lutheran schools

While the data do not allow us to account for student factors in a nuanced way, we can control for it in a “rough” manner by looking at 80/80 schools that have 80% African American students and 80% low-income students. Among the 80/80 schools, Catholic and Lutheran schools make up over half of the MPCP and one-third of the 80/80 MPCP schools. As noted before, an examination of 80/80 schools gets us closer to an “apples-to-apples” comparison (Figure 2). The percentage of proficient students in Catholic and Lutheran schools was 3.0 percentage points higher in reading and 6.8 percentage points higher in math than in MPS schools. Catholic and Lutheran schools, on average, also perform better than other kinds of schools in the MPCP. MPS schools appear to have an advantage over MPCP schools that are not Catholic or Lutheran. This pattern may suggest that Catholic and Lutheran schools do especially well in educating economically-disadvantaged students.

Figure 2: Percent proficient in math and reading, 80/80 public schools



Source: based on performance data from Wisconsin Department of Education; data on type of private schools are from the Public Policy Forum; 80/80 schools were identified from the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, http://www.jsonline.com/reading-proficiency-in-milwaukee-schools-284920991.html#!/readingprof_desc_1/

Independent (2R) charter schools

Supporters of school choice often cite autonomy from overburdening bureaucracy as an important component to having a vibrant and successful school system. Policymakers had this in mind when they allowed other organizations in Milwaukee, outside of MPS, to authorize charter schools (known as 2R charter schools). When we compare 80/80 independent charter schools to 80/80 MPS schools (including MPS charters), we see independent charter schools outperforming MPS schools and on par with Catholic and Lutheran MPCP schools). The percentage of students in independent

charter schools scoring at least Proficient in reading and math was 2.4 and 7.5 percentage points higher, respectively, than in MPS schools.

Who is head of the class? It depends on the class

When we examine the top-20 schools in Milwaukee, *per* the imperfect WKCE test score measures, we see that there is variation in the types of schools. Notably, no 80/80 schools make the top-20 when we examine the full pool of public and MPCP schools in Milwaukee. This is not surprising given that these schools serve a less disadvantaged student body. In terms of both math and reading achievement, the distribution is fairly level between MPS schools and non-MPS schools (see Table A.1 and Table A.2 in the appendix).

But, when we examine the top-20 “80/80” schools, a familiar pattern emerges. Three of the top four schools in math are Lutheran (Table 2). Ten of the top-20 schools are MPS schools, six are private schools in the MPCP, and four are independent charters. In terms of reading proficiency, nine of the top 80/80 schools are MPS, while six are MPCP schools and five are independent charter schools (Table 3).

Table 2: Top-20 "80/80" schools in Milwaukee for math

school's name	type of school	% prof/adv
Garden Homes Lutheran School	private	38.5%
Sherman Park Lutheran School	private	35.8%
Central City CyberSchool	2R	34.4%
St. Marcus Lutheran School	private	31.1%
Milwaukee college preparatory School -- 38th street	MPS	28.8%
Hartford Avenue Elementary	MPS	26.6%
Franklin Elementary	MPS	26.5%
Siloah Lutheran School	private	26.1%
Bryant Elementary	MPS	24.7%
Northwest Lutheran School	private	23.8%
Milwaukee Academy of Science	2R	23.4%
Cass Street Elementary	MPS	22.5%
Concordia University School: Milwaukee	private	22.1%
Milwaukee College Preparatory School -- Lloyd Street	MPS	21.8%
Milwaukee Scholars Charter School	2R	21.5%
Siefert Elementary	MPS	20.3%
King's Academy	2R	19.7%
Holmes Elementary	MPS	19.7%
Jackson Elementary	MPS	18.8%
Silver Spring Elementary	MPS	17.3%

Source: based on WSAS Current Data from the DPI; 80/80 schools were identified from the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, http://www.jsonline.com/reading-proficiency-in-milwaukee-schools-284920991.html#!/readingprof_desc_1/

Note: Numbers may slightly differ slightly from those that are based on Certified Data (for details, see http://wise.dpi.wi.gov/wisedash_dataviews)

It is no secret that schools in Milwaukee struggle. Urban education is incredibly hard – *but not impossible*. Both very successful schools and schools that are not performing well exist in Milwaukee. It’s certainly not the case, however, that the successful ones are all from one sector, while lower-performing schools are from another sector.

Table 3: Top-20 "80/80" schools in Milwaukee for reading

school's name	type of school	% prof/adv
Franklin Elementary	MPS	20.5%
Hartford Avenue Elementary	MPS	20.4%
St. Marcus Lutheran School	private	18.9%
Holmes Elementary	MPS	16.5%
Jackson Elementary	MPS	16.3%
Cass Street Elementary	MPS	15.9%
Siloah Lutheran School	private	14.9%
Northwest Lutheran School	private	14.9%
Garden Homes Lutheran School	private	14.8%
Bryant Elementary	MPS	13.7%
King's Academy	2R	13.2%
Capitol West Academy	2R	12.3%
DLH Academy	2R	12.1%
Fifty-Third Street Elementary	MPS	11.9%
Milwaukee College Preparatory School -- 38th street	MPS	11.8%
Grantosa Drive Elementary	MPS	11.7%
Hope Christian School: Fortis	private	11.3%
Mount Calvary Lutheran School	private	11.2%
Milwaukee Academy of Science	2R	11.1%
Milwaukee Scholars Charter School	2R	11.0%

Source: based on Current WSAS Data from the DPI; 80/80 schools were identified from the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, http://www.jsonline.com/reading-proficiency-in-milwaukee-schools-284920991.html#!/readingprof_desc_1/
 Note: Numbers may slightly differ slightly from those that are based on Certified Data (for details, see http://wise.dpi.wi.gov/wisedash_dataviews)

Conclusion

In order to make comparisons between schools in Milwaukee, ideally, policymakers would look at improvements over time made by students. But, this data is not currently available, and a large percentage of students will frequently change schools during the year. As a result, a true “apples-to-apples” comparison of student achievement between MPS and MPCP schools is not possible unless data collection improves.

Accepting that fact, this brief shows how to obtain better comparisons with the data – even if it is flawed – that is currently available. We are able to control for a schools’ religious affiliations and student body demographics. In doing so, we observe greater portions of students proficient in math and reading in Catholic and Lutheran schools in the MPCP – the schools that educate the majority of students in the parental choice program – and independent charter schools when compared to MPS schools. MPS schools, on the other hand, appear to have a slight advantage over MPCP schools that are not Catholic or Lutheran.

It would serve public policy better to improve the information provided to parents, identify high performing schools and figure out how to expand their seats, and identify chronically low-performing schools and figure out how to turn them around. In light of this, one should question the reason for making comparisons across sectors when clearly both high-performing and low-performing schools operate in each sector. Nonetheless, comparisons will likely continue to be made, and this report offers a better (though still not ideal) alternative to the usual ones.

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Appendix
Table A.1: Top-20 schools in Milwaukee in reading

school's name	type of school	% prof/adv	80/80
Divine Savior Holy Angels High School	private	81.0%	no
Marquette University High School	private	76.2%	no
Downtown Montessori	2R	60.8%	no
Milwaukee German Immersion	MPS	56.5%	no
Maryland Montessori	MPS	56.2%	no
Fernwood Montessori	MPS	55.0%	no
Meir Elementary	MPS	54.5%	no
Torah Academy of Milwaukee	private	50.0%	no
Whittier Elementary	MPS	49.2%	no
King International	MPS	49.1%	no
Reagan College Preparatory High	MPS	48.6%	no
Woodlands School	2R	44.5%	no
Milwaukee Parkside School	MPS	42.7%	no
Alcott Elementary	MPS	41.1%	no
Immanuel Lutheran School	private	40.0%	no
Eastbrook Academy	private	37.8%	no
Milwaukee French Immersion	MPS	37.4%	no
St. Sebastian School	private	37.1%	no
St. John's Lutheran School	private	36.6%	no
Fairview Elementary	MPS	36.3%	no

Source: based on WSAS Current Data from the DPI

Table A.2: Top-20 schools in Milwaukee in math

school's name	type of school	% prof/adv	80/80
Milwaukee German Immersion	MPS	75.8%	no
Torah Academy of Milwaukee	private	75.0%	no
Marquette University High School	private	71.4%	no
St. John's Lutheran School	private	70.7%	no
Meir Elementary	MPS	63.9%	no
Divine Savior Holy Angels High School	private	61.9%	no
Maryland Montessori	MPS	60.0%	no
Honey Creek Elementary	MPS	58.9%	no
Fernwood Montessori	MPS	57.5%	no
Whittier Elementary	MPS	56.9%	no
Milwaukee College Preparatory School -- 36th Street	2R	54.7%	no
Milwaukee Spanish Immersion	MPS	53.7%	no
Bruce Guadalupe	2R	53.1%	no
Downtown Montessori	2R	50.6%	no
Dominican High School	private	50.0%	no
Woodlands School	2R	49.0%	no
Whitman Elementary	MPS	48.5%	no
Fairview Elementary	MPS	47.3%	no
Immanuel Lutheran School	private	46.7%	no
Eastbrook Academy	private	46.7%	no

Source: based on WSAS Current Data from the DPI