

Policy Brief

Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty



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Busting Six Myths About School Choice

Introduction

Too often, opponents of school choice – including scholars – often make arguments against choice without supplying any evidence to support their claims (e.g. [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)). For instance, the Madison Metropolitan School District [issued a statement](#) about the biennial budget as it made its way through the Joint Finance Committee:

“... the budget proposal also provides more taxpayer funding to private school vouchers and independent charter schools, which will drain resources from local public schools for years to come. Neither private school vouchers or [sic] independent charters have a consistent record of improving education for children.”

So do private schools drain resources? As it turns out, these claims are false. Unfortunately, such misconceptions are rampant, necessitating, from time to time, a little [mythbusting](#) in order to keep the discussion honest. We present 5 myths and misconceptions about school choice in Wisconsin – along with evidence to show why they are wrong.

Misconception #1: Private schools in the choice program are unaccountable.

When a choice school is forced to close, opponents are [quick to point](#) to it as evidence that we need “more accountability.” On its face this seems odd. If someone has called the school to account and shut it down (as almost never happens with public schools), this would seem to indicate the presence of accountability and not its absence. But let’s move beyond anecdotes. Are choice schools less accountable? What does the evidence say?

Exhibit A: We released a [report](#) based on a legal analysis showing that private schools in Wisconsin are actually held to standards that are at least as rigorous as those applied to public schools (Esenberg, Szafir, & Lueken, 2014). [Other](#) studies have debunked this myth more generally for choice schools all over the country. The reality is that private schools in Wisconsin are actually subject to public metrics and regulations from the state, and some are more punitive and burdensome than anything applicable to public schools. And of course, these schools are

accountable to parents while public schools are accountable to bureaucrats and politicians. In this sense, it is school choice that makes schools directly accountable to the public.

What Wisconsin needs is not more regulation. Rather, we should ensure that every family has the ability to make their own decisions about their children's education, by providing better information about available options. Policy should focus on moving accountability from bureaucrats to parents.

Misconception #2: Choice schools “skim” from the top because they are selective. This will have the effect of leaving kids in public schools behind and consequently create a two-tier education system.

This is a claim often trumpeted by opponents such as historian [Diane Ravitch](#):

“In speaking out, I have consistently warned about the riskiness of school choice. Its benefits are vastly overstated. It undercuts public education by enabling charter schools to skim the best students in poor communities. As our society pursues these policies, we will develop a bifurcated system, one for the haves, another for the have-nots, and politicians have the nerve to boast about such an outcome.”

Is Ravitch right? Is there validity to her claim?

Exhibit A: It is hard to argue that a policy will create a two-tier education system when such a system already exists. Before choice and charter schools were even on the radar, a bifurcated system existed where top tier schools educated predominantly white and affluent students in suburban public schools while the lower tier educated mostly impoverished minority students in urban schools. This “two-tier” public education system is related to “two-tier” residential arrangements. Students are assigned to schools based on where they live, instead of what they want or need. Choice and charter schools are an attempt to give poor families the choices that more affluent parents have always had.

Exhibit B: State laws, including Wisconsin, prohibit charter schools and voucher schools from selecting their students. They are required to admit all applicants regardless of race, disability, or gender, and if they receive more applicants than vacancies, they must base admission decisions on a randomized selection process such as a lottery (LFB, 2015a and 2015 b). The same cannot be said of all traditional public schools; some of which, have selective admissions standards.

Exhibit C: If anything, school choice is actually having the *opposite* effect by closing achievement gaps between “the haves and the have-nots.” A [recent WILL report](#) indicated that independent charter schools scored significantly higher on all State Report Card measures for closing achievement gaps than traditional public schools (WILL, 2015b). The [Harlem Children's Zone](#) in New York City has provided phenomenal effects for poor minority children – enough to *completely* close the achievement gap in math for elementary school and middle school students. It reduced the English gap by half for middle school students. Because HCZ opened up, the bifurcated system in the nation's largest city is a step closer to a single-tiered system than under the status quo.

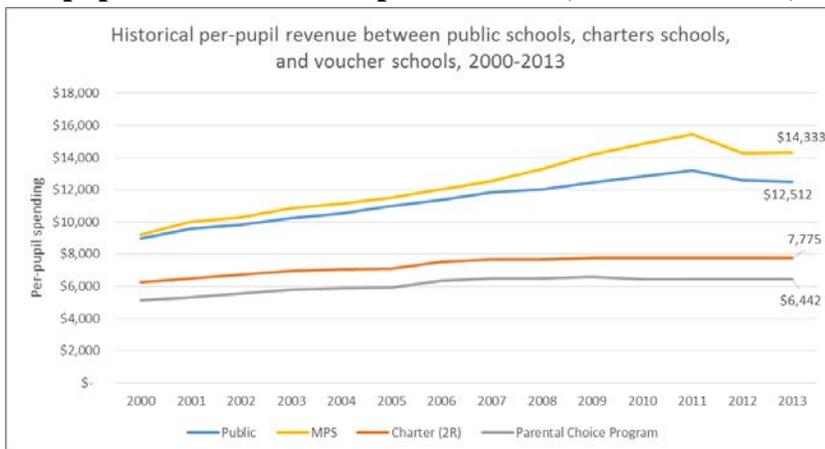
It makes sense that a one-tier system can be created by facilitating the best matches possible between students and schools. But this can only be done by enabling parents to choose the education they believe can best serve their kids. When this happens, all children and their families win (though it may be the case that some adults lose – i.e. bureaucrats, politicians, teachers, or administrators). We can create a more robust education system fueled by voluntary decisions among Wisconsin families rather than having school assignments imposed from the top onto parents.

Misconception #3: Choice schools drain resources from traditional public schools.

School choice puts school districts in a position to compete for students, but does this mean that they drain resources from public schools and taxpayers?

Exhibit A: When students leave a public school district to enroll in a private school in the choice program, Wisconsin taxpayers actually save on net because those schools receive fewer state and local dollars than traditional public schools. The net fiscal benefit from the MPCP in FY2011 was \$46.7 million (Costrell, 2010), while the cumulative savings from the MPCP since the program began is \$238.5 million (Spalding, 2014). These savings stem from substantial funding disparities among all the different kinds of schools in Wisconsin (figure below).¹ For instance, independent charter schools and private choice schools historically have received about 40% to 50% of what traditional public schools receive.

Per-pupil revenue between public schools, charter schools, and voucher schools, 2000-2013



Notes: Public school comparative revenue data obtained from DPI historical data, http://sfs.dpi.wi.gov/node/30372/sfs_emprvcst; charter and private school per-pupil revenue obtained from the Legislative Fiscal Bureau (2013a and 2013b).

¹ Figure is from WILL (2015).

Exhibit B: The new funding mechanisms for the statewide voucher program in the biennial budget gets us closer to a world where dollars follow the child because it is modeled after the open enrollment formula. But it also provides a “[school choice bonus](#)” to public school districts for children they might no longer educate (Esenberg, Lueken, & Szafir, 2015). While the departure of students from public schools to the statewide school choice program has the effect of lowering the total revenue for school districts, school districts will actually have more revenue per pupil because the district can continue to count students it no longer educates for equalization aid and revenue limit purposes.

Misconception #4: Students in traditional public schools perform better than students in charter and private schools.

This claim is frequently trumpeted by choice opponents, often [without any evidence](#) presented to back it up, or by [completely ignoring](#) the existing empirical record on school choice. But the academic record on school choice tells the opposite story – students benefit when their families are given the opportunity to make their own decisions about their children’s education.

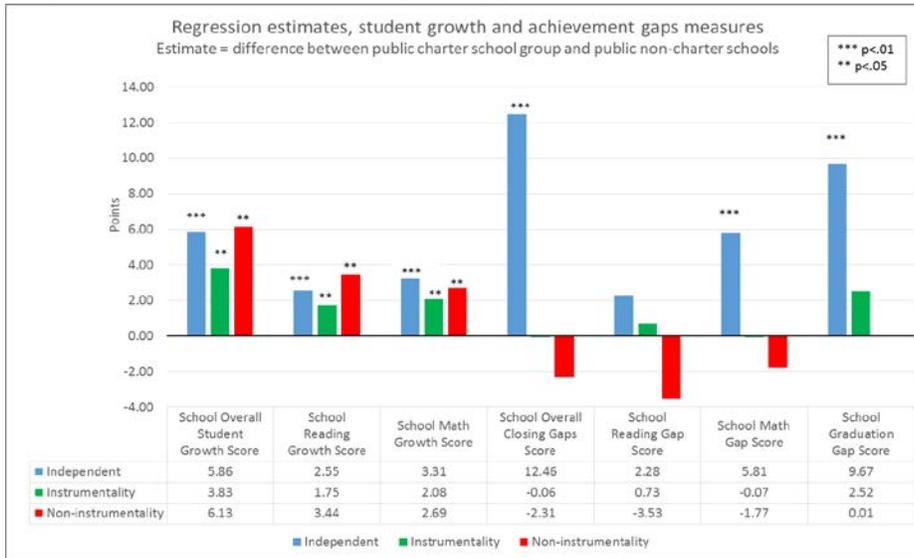
Exhibit A: *A wide body of evidence based on the “gold standard” of research methods (random assignment) tell a remarkably consistent story: students who enroll in a charter or voucher school experience significantly higher academic growth than the control group* (i.e. students who were “lotteried out” and enrolled in a traditional public school). Summaries of research can be found [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).²

Exhibit B: WILL recently released a [report](#) that compares student growth achievement gaps measures among different kinds of public schools. On average, independent charter schools scored higher on each of the Report Card growth and gaps measures than public non-charter schools throughout Wisconsin (figure below; WILL, 2015b).

² <http://www.edchoice.org/Research/Gold-Standard-Studies>
<http://www.edchoice.org/Research/Reports/A-Win-Win-Solution--The-Empirical-Evidence-on-School-Vouchers.aspx>
http://host.madison.com/news/opinion/column/guest/marty-lueken-school-choice-helps-more-students-achieve/article_8e83a217-04d7-556c-8abe-0b3fe6d2e2a6.html
<http://www.crpe.org/publications/effect-charter-schools-student-achievement-meta-analysis-literature>



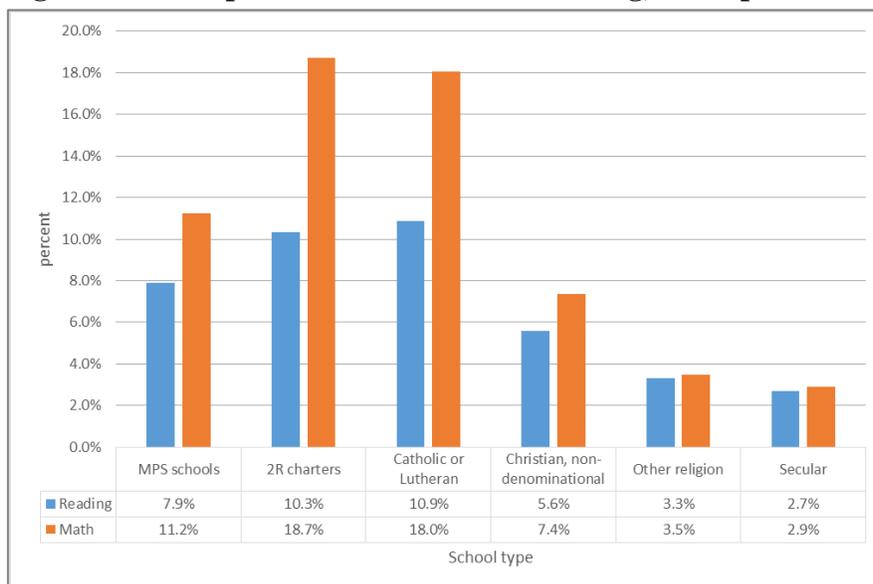
Regression estimates for comparing public charter schools and traditional public schools



Source: WILL (2015b)

Exhibit C: [Another WILL policy brief](#) (2015c) showed that comparisons between private schools in the MPCP and MPS schools typically made by the media, politicians, and interest groups is highly flawed and inaccurate. That analysis examined “80/80 schools,” i.e. those with at least 80% of students on free or reduced lunch (FRL) and with a student body that is at least 80% African American. The figure below reproduces the key figure from that report. *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.* 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.

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

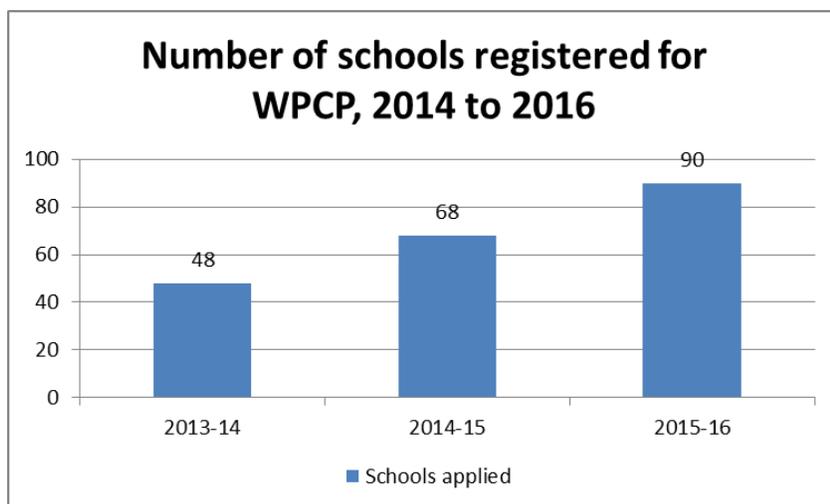


Source: WILL (2015b)



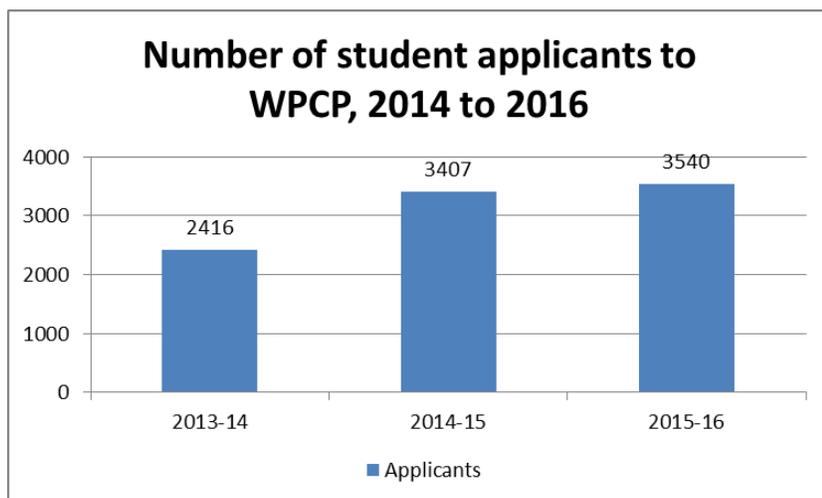
Misconception #5: There is no supply or demand for school choice vouchers outside of Wisconsin's large school districts.

Exhibit A: The statewide voucher program, which provides vouchers to students outside of Milwaukee and Racine for a limited number of students, has experienced increased demand in each year. The number of schools that have registered to participate increased by 42% (from 48 to 68) after the first year and 33% (from 68 to 90) after the second year.



Sources: http://sms.dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/sms/pdf/wpcp_numbers_2013_09.pdf; http://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/news-release/dpinr2015_53_enrollment_data.pdf; http://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/news-release/dpinr2015_53_enrollment_data.pdf

Exhibit B: There is also growing demand among Wisconsin families for exercising their right to choose their own schools. Between 2013-14 and 2014-15, demand increased 41%. There were 3,540 applicants for 2015-16, a 4% increase over the previous year. These increases are likely due to expansion in participation of private schools in the program.



Sources: http://sms.dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/sms/pdf/wpcp_numbers_2013_09.pdf; http://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/news-release/dpinr2015_53_enrollment_data.pdf; http://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/news-release/dpinr2015_53_enrollment_data.pdf

Exhibit C: A common misconception is that school choice won't work in rural American because there are few private schools or charter schools. But that is an unlikely case given that nearly half (47%) of all private schools in Wisconsin are actually located in rural and small town districts. Moreover, nearly one-third of all children in those areas live in poverty and, consequently, are unlikely to be able to afford an education outside of their district schools (WILL, 2015).

Misconception #6: Voucher schools in Wisconsin educate only a very small proportion of children with special needs.

Exhibit A: The School Choice Demonstration Project's longitudinal evaluation examined the extent that private schools in the MPCP service students with special needs (Wolf, Witte, & Fleming, 2012). While MPCP schools do not report the number of children with disabilities, the SCDP was able to estimate the rate for students with disabilities in MPCP schools by examining students that were observed in both MPCP and MPS schools during the sample period and seeing how they were classified in MPS. *The researchers found that 14.6% of students in MPCP schools were classified as special education students.*

There is also evidence from special needs voucher programs in other states that they benefit families of children with disabilities. One study reported evidence that "competition from a voucher program for disabled students decreased the likelihood that a student was diagnosed as having a mild disability and was positively related to academic achievement in the public schools" (Greene & Winters, 2011). Another study presents evidence that special needs vouchers can offer an effective way to prevent mislabeling students as disabled (Winters & Greene, 2009).

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