

A photograph of the Wisconsin State Capitol dome, featuring a large, ornate dome with a golden statue on top, set against a blue sky with light clouds. The dome is surrounded by a series of windows and a pediment with sculptures.

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POLICY BRIEF

Senate Education Myth Busters

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Introduction

In early March, the legislature passed a number of important education reform bills that will soon be sent to Governor Evers to sign or veto. As a longtime opponent of education reform, we're not especially hopeful that the governor will have a change of heart. But we'd like to make sure he has accurate information when making his decision. As these bills were being voted on by the Wisconsin Senate, two members of the Senate—LaTonya Johnson and Chris Larson unleashed a string of lies and half-truths that don't stand up to serious (or basic) scrutiny. Here, we debunk some of the biggest ones.

High-Performing Choice Schools Have Deeply Vetted Admissions Processes

“...When you go to those high performing charter schools, and choice schools, there is an application on DPI that anybody can download and fill out and take to the schools. But typically, the schools say no, we want you to come in. And we have our own applications. You go to the schools, it's the same application, except the name of the school may be at the top. Why do they want you to come in to get those applications? So they can assign you a number? So they are selectively choosing who they will accept into those schools? And who they will not? Oh, yes, that's true.”

-Senator Johnson

Senator Johnson's insinuation that private schools in the Choice Program are violating the law is unfounded. Schools have deeply vetted admissions processes that are clearly laid out in law and approved by DPI. Additionally, state law mandates that these procedures are audited each year by an independent CPA and reviewed again by DPI. Besides the insulting and inflammatory nature of her accusation to the dedicated staff at these schools, the senator is alleging that private schools are violating the law and DPI is covering up illegal actions.

Parents often participate in the Choice Programs because they are looking for a school with a different culture and opportunities. It is true that many schools prefer for families to come for an in-person visit. School leaders know how critical it is for families to know and understand the school's culture and mission. School leaders want parents to make an informed decision and know what services can be provided to meet the needs of their student, not merely to just fill a seat.

Prior to becoming president of School Choice Wisconsin, Nic Kelly was an administrator at Milwaukee private school that participated in the choice programs. “As a prior administrator, I find it insulting for such an accusation to be made. Choice schools have limited financial resources and the lack of equal funding hinders the school's ability to open more seats--it is not that they don't want to, as suggested. The reality is that schools are forced to make sound fiscal decisions on how many seats they can open up, without sacrificing services.”

Schools participating in the Milwaukee and Racine Parental Choice Programs must inform parents how many Choice program slots are open by grade level. Schools then perform a lottery to select Choice students if more applications are received than there are Choice slots available. This date becomes an exciting yet dreaded day. Schools know that the hopes and dreams of families can be dashed quickly in the lottery process.

If a student is placed on the waiting list, the notice of non-acceptance must indicate the student's place on the waiting list. If the school rejects a student's application, the notice of non-acceptance must include the reason why the student was not accepted. This triggers numerous phone calls and in-person discussions informing parents of their next best options. "These are not easy discussions, as often parents are angry, concerned, and scared for their child having to possibly attend a less safe or lower-performing school," according to Nic.

For the Wisconsin Parental Choice Program, the DPI conducts a random drawing and notifies parents of students chosen in the random drawing and those on the waiting list.

If there is proof of a school violating this process, organizations like WILL and School Choice Wisconsin will be the first to ensure that a school be held accountable. Furthermore, the Superintendent has the power to prevent a private school from participating in the programs if they are violating these provisions. "I have seen too many families devastated by having to endure this process and be denied. This is serious work and not taken lightly by those on the ground. Schools are trying to provide quality educational opportunities to their community where others are failing," said Nic.

All Choice Schools Provide Lunch Periods for Their Students

"With that being said the low-income children, some of them don't have cafeterias, so they can't provide for your reduced lunch. And the ones that do, they will educate our children, but they won't feed them."

-Senator Johnson

All schools in the Choice Program throughout the state provide lunch periods for their students and provide adequate space(s) and time for all kids to eat lunch. While there are no statutory requirements to provide lunch for their students, most private schools in the Choice Programs do provide lunch to their kids. Based on an impromptu survey of choice schools by School Choice Wisconsin, 78% of 160 respondents provide some program for free/reduced meals.

The private schools are very aware of the circumstances of their students. The schools, faculty, and staff take great pride in helping address these issues and are always being as discrete as possible as the situations are brought to light. Often through charitable organizations and donations, food is provided for students and families in need.

All Choice schools, of course, would love to offer hot lunches each day for all of their students, but the reality is Wisconsin's school finance system does not adequately and equitably fund all students. Until each student is funded equally regardless if they attend a public or private school in the choice program, Choice schools will continue to use what they have and successfully educate their students.

Public Schools Are Failing Our Students

“And the next time we want to tout just how great choice and charter schools are compared to our public schools, why don't you just have a conversation with me? Because I can name off the top of my head failing choice schools.”

-Senator Johnson

As education reform advocates, we don't hide from the reality that there are a number of schools within the choice program that don't “meet expectations” on the state's report card. And perhaps if the public school system in Senator Johnson's district was extremely effective, she'd have a solid point here. But the reality is that the public school system in Milwaukee is failing an entire generation of kids.

After accounting for student opt-out, proficiency rates in Milwaukee Public Schools hover at or below 20% in both math and English/Language Arts. Even with an extremely charitable [report card](#), that, in many ways, excuses poor performance, 51 of 165 schools in the district either “failed to meet expectations” or “met few expectations.” And the data shows that schools participating in the choice program do better on average, as we will see in the next fact check.

Furthermore, [WILL research](#) has found that both choice and charter schools outperform their public school peers in student proficiency across the state.

School Choice Is a Success

“They said, ‘Wow, the competition will help. Let's try it. [If we don't] try it, we won't know.’ And that was supposed to target high poverty schools. It was supposed to have a limit. It was supposed to be an experiment. It didn't work. It didn't live up to that.”

-Senator Larson

Senator Larson has been propagating misinformation about Wisconsin's choice programs for years, but this was a whopper even for him. In reality, the vast majority of academic research has found that choice schools produce better results. The best research on Milwaukee's program comes from the School Choice Demonstration Project. These researchers followed students from similar backgrounds who were in the MPCP and in public schools in an effort to approximate rigorous experimental research. This research has found that MPCP students were more likely to [attend and persist in college](#), less likely to become involved in [criminal activity](#), and achieved

higher academic results on [some state standardized tests](#). We're not sure what studies Larson is referring to, but the bottom line is the vast majority of recent studies, including [work by WILL](#), have been in the positive direction.

Milton Friedman's Concept of School Choice Is Successful

"Turns out Milton Friedman was wrong on this and many other things."

-Senator Larson

Nobel-Prize winning economist Milton Friedman is indeed the father of modern conceptions of school choice. His 1956 paper with the unassuming title of "[The Role in Government in Education](#)" suggested a radical shift in our understanding of how public education in the United States should function. Larson points to incorrect information about test results as evidence that Friedman was wrong, but the reality is that test scores are largely irrelevant to the fulfillment of Friedman's vision.

Rather, Friedman's vision was for a system in which government would not be the only provider of education available to the vast majority of families. Under such a system, families could choose the school that was right for them. This could be based on test scores, but it could also be based on safety, specific training, sports, or myriad other reasons that might make a school preferable for a particular student and their family. In this era of parental empowerment, families are demanding nothing less.