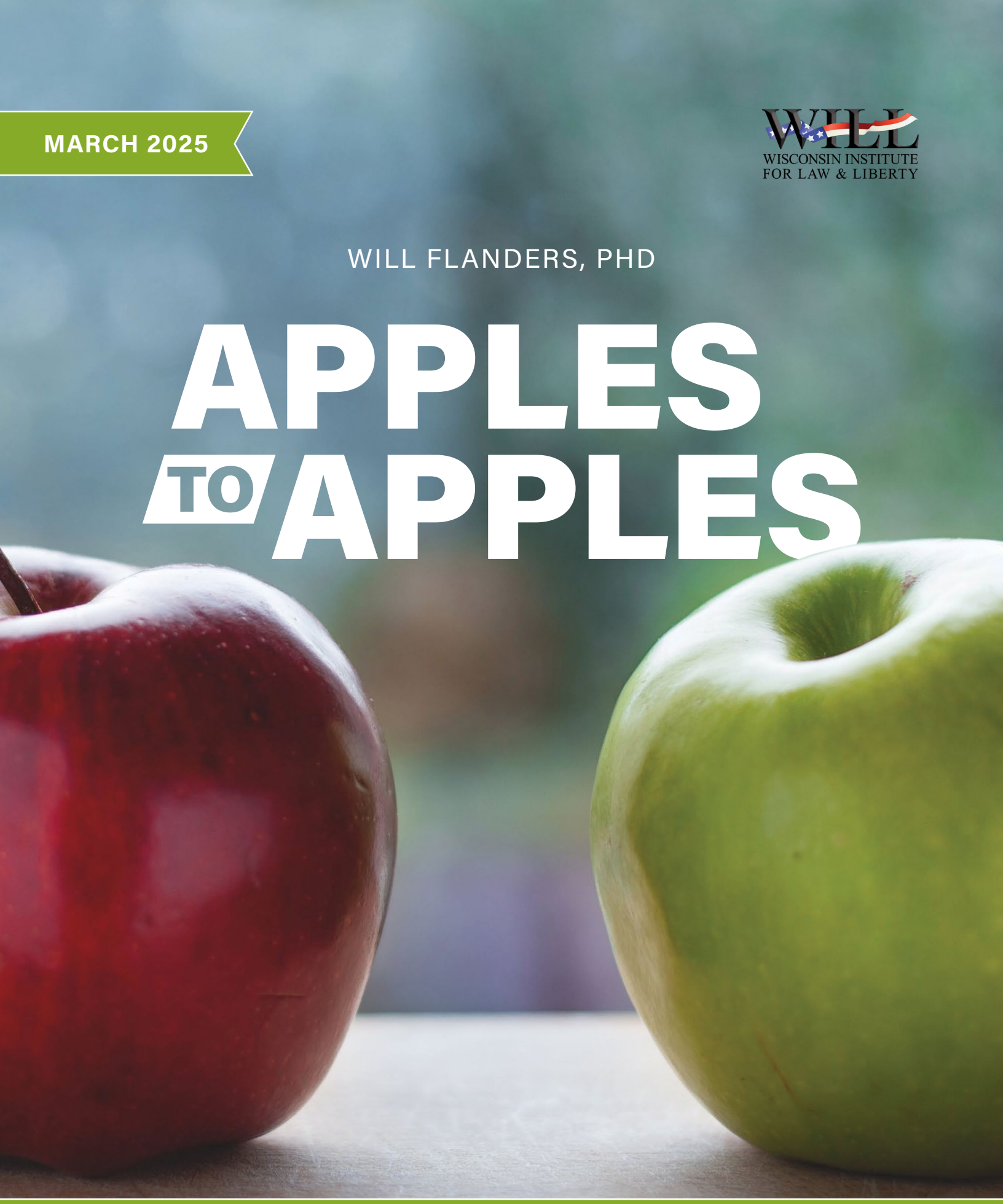
MARCH 2025

WISCONSIN INSTITUTE FOR LAW & LIBERTY

WILL FLANDERS, PHD

APPLES TO APPLES



The Definitive Look at School Test Scores in Milwaukee and Wisconsin for 2024

WISCONSIN INSTITUTE
FOR LAW & LIBERTY

WILL FLANDERS, PHD

RESEARCH DIRECTOR

Flanders@will-law.org

Table of Contents

APPLES TO APPLES

Executive Summary

WILL's annual *Apples to Apples* report puts schools on a level playing field to fairly assess education in the Badger State across public, charter, and private voucher schools.

Demographic factors have historically played a significant role in student performance. Any honest assessment of how schools and school sectors are performing must take these factors into account. However, much of the existing reporting on school performance ignores this reality. Because Wisconsin's private parental choice programs are means tested, choice schools accept more students from a lower socioeconomic status than the average school. This annual report endeavors to incorporate these factors through rigorous statistical modeling that controls for, and assesses the impact of, several student characteristics. The 2025 *Apples to Apples* report has been updated to include the most recent student data from the 2023-24 report cards.

Among the key findings:

- **Students in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program continue to outperform their public-school peers.** Proficiency rates in private choice schools located in Milwaukee were about 14.30% higher in English/Language Arts (ELA) and 14.18% higher in math on average than proficiency rates in traditional public schools in Milwaukee after controlling for demographic characteristics. These gaps are the largest in the years this report has been conducted.
- **District & Independent charters outperform other public schools in Milwaukee.** District charters saw 9.27% and 11.61% higher proficiency in ELA and math respectively. Independent charters saw 3.92% and 5.63% higher proficiency. Statewide, the results for charters are more mixed.
- **Statewide, private choice students outperform their public-school peers in ELA and math.** Proficiency rates were about 8.57% higher in ELA and 5.42% higher in math for students participating in school choice statewide than traditional public-school students.
- **Wisconsin continues to struggle with its achievement gaps.** Statewide, a school with 100% low-income students would be expected to have proficiency rates 37.64% lower in ELA and 41.52% lower in math compared to a hypothetical school with zero low-income students. For African American students, that gap is 28.81% in ELA and 31.29% in math.
- **Choice and charter schools have higher rates of academic growth than traditional public schools.** Statewide, choice schools averaged 7.23 more growth points than traditional public schools. Charter schools averaged 1.94 more growth points.

Introduction

This is the seventh edition of WILL's *Apples to Apples report*. After a two-year pause, due to COVID and the lack of comprehensive testing due to school shutdowns, the *Apples to Apples* report is now in its fourth year since resuming. This year's report includes updated data from the 2023-24 school year, sourced from Wisconsin's state report cards and a several other DPI sources. In this report, we endeavor to paint a complete picture of Wisconsin's school performance and to make comparisons on a level playing field that takes into account student characteristics. This report is a comprehensive analysis of Wisconsin's school performance that takes into account student characteristics to ensure more accurate comparisons.

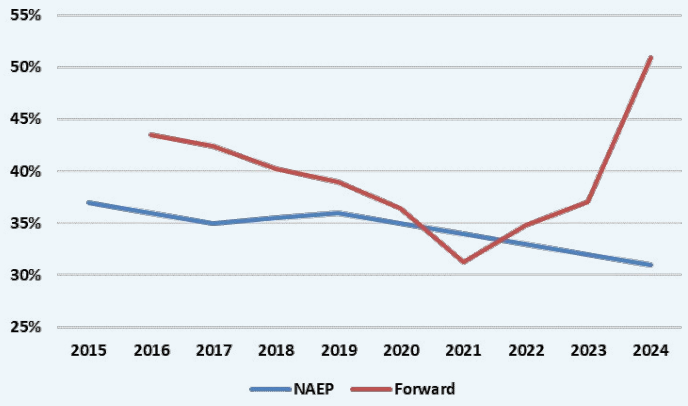
This year's report faced a new complication as a result from DPI's changes to the proficiency ratings on the report card. These adjustments have drastically inflated student performance. While the NAEP continued to show Wisconsin declining in proficiency, as depicted in Figure 1, DPI's own student data shows massive increases, leading to the highest levels recorded in the history of the Forward Exam.

While the Forward Exam can no longer be compared to past years without adjustment, it is still comparable to itself *within this year*. Thus, while the overall proficiency numbers are now all but meaningless, we can still see *how* schools are doing relative to each other.

School choice will be an important topic of discussion during this year's legislative session. After important funding gains in the previous session, focus will turn to how choice and some charter schools are funded. But there is still room for further growth in Wisconsin's school choice offerings, and the data here can provide evidence on the relative effectiveness of the state's existing choice programs, which include private school choice, charter schools, and public-school open enrollment.

Each iteration of *Apples to Apples* has found that private schools in the choice program and some forms of charter schools outperform their traditional public-school peers on a level playing field, and this year is no different. But it is important to emphasize that we report all results, whether favorable to school choice or not. For example, this report finds a negative correlation between charter schools and math proficiency statewide. Our goal is to present a clear, comprehensive look at Wisconsin student's actual academic achievement, not to advocate for any particular sector.

Figure 1. NAEP & Forward Exam 4th Grade ELA Proficiency Over Time

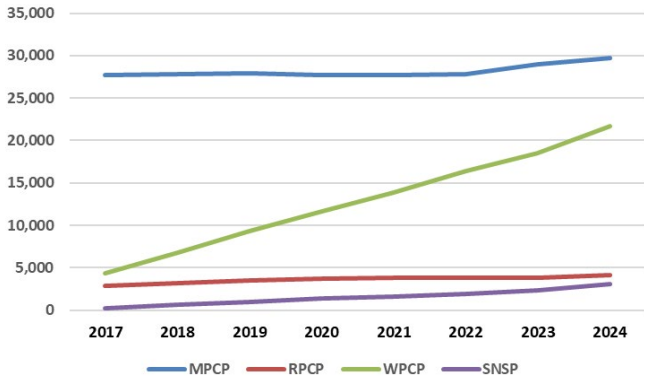


Overview of School Choice in Wisconsin

PRIVATE SCHOOL CHOICE PROGRAMS

Wisconsin has four private parental choice programs open to students in different areas of the state: the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP), Racine Parental Choice Program (RPCP), Wisconsin Parental Choice Program (WPCP), and the Special Needs Scholarship Program (SNSP). The requirements and status of each program are described in detail in the following sections. Figure 2 details enrollment in all of the state's choice programs since the 2017-18 school year.

Figure 2. Choice & Public Program Enrollment by Year



The MPCP is the oldest school voucher program in the country.[1] The program covers the geographic area of the City of Milwaukee, and only students who live in the city are eligible. Additionally, the program is only open to students in the City of Milwaukee whose families are within 300% of the federal poverty limit. For a family of four, this works out to a yearly income limit of $93,600.[2] There are (unlike the WPCP discussed below) no caps on enrollment. This program served 29,732 students during the 2024-25 school year.[3]

Racine Parental Choice Program (RPCP)

The RPCP expanded Wisconsin's access to voucher schools beyond Milwaukee. The program began in 2011 and is open only to students who are residents of the Racine Unified School District and whose families' incomes are within 300% of the federal poverty limit. During the 2024-25 school year, this program served 4,185 students. The RPCP has no caps on enrollment.

Wisconsin Parental Choice Program (WPCP)

School choice became available statewide in Wisconsin with the WPCP in 2013. The program has a lower income limit than other choice programs in Wisconsin, at only 220% of the federal poverty limit. A married family of four who wants to apply for the 2024-25 school year must have a yearly income below $75,640.[4] This program also faces strict enrollment caps that have increased over the years. For 2024-25, 9% of students in each school district were eligible for enrollment. This will increase by one percentage point next year and the caps will be removed for the 2026-27 school year. Only four districts are currently hitting the enrollment cap.[5] During the 2024-25 academic year, the program served 21,638 students.

Special Needs Scholarship Program (SNSP)

The fourth private school choice program in Wisconsin, the Special Needs Scholarship Program (SNSP), is open to students in Wisconsin with disabilities who wish to attend a private school that better meets their needs. The amount of funding per student in the SNSP varies because expenses can partially reimbursed: schools can be reimbursed for 100% of expenses up to $23,113, and then for 90% of expenses after that. Schools serving only 11 students statewide took advantage of this additional reimbursement during the 2024-25 school year.[6] There were 3,068 students utilizing the scholarship for the 2024-25 school year. The SNSP does not have an enrollment cap.

FUNDING

Schools participating in all these programs are funded at a significantly lower level than Wisconsin's public schools—even if, as mentioned in the previous section, important funding gains were made for private school choice this year. For the 2024-25 school year, schools accepting the voucher for high school receive $12,731 per student. Schools serving students in grades K-8 receive $10,237 per student.[7] Despite increases, these figures remain lower than their equivalents for most traditional public schools in Wisconsin: on average, traditional public schools receive $15,569 in state and local funding per student.[8] The K-8 voucher represents 65.7% percent of the average public school funding, while the 9-12 voucher represents 81.7% of that number.

CHARTER SCHOOLS

Charter schools are public schools which have been given freedom from some district mandates. 61 (26.29%) charter schools operate as virtual schools—a sector that came to greater prominence during the pandemic, fueling a surge in charter enrollment. Enrollment had held relatively steady around 44,000 until a big jump in 2020. Previous WILL research has shown that families were increasingly interested in established virtual options during the pandemic in lieu of the cobbled-together models that many previously in-person public schools resorted to using. Since 2020, total enrollment in charter schools has declined slightly, but remains well above pre-pandemic levels.

Wisconsin has three types of charter schools: instrumentality, non-instrumentality, and independent. These schools vary in the amount of freedom they have from school district policies. While non-instrumentality and instrumentality funding varies based on the individual schools' contracts with the district, the funding amount received by the school is often tied to the independent charter funding amount set by the state, which stands at $11,729 per pupil.

The defining differences between the three types of charter schools in Wisconsin are explained below.

Instrumentality Charters

These schools are authorized by local school boards, and their employees are employees of the district. Instrumentality charters also have far less freedom than other charters regarding their curricula. Without looking at individual school contracts, it is difficult to differentiate instrumentalities from those in the following category, non-instrumentalities. Consequently, throughout most of this paper we will refer to both types as "District Charters."

Non-Instrumentality Charters

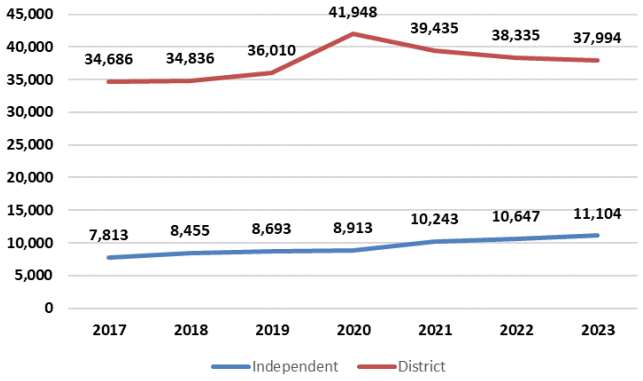
These charter schools are authorized by school districts but maintain a level of independence not seen in traditional public schools. The teachers are employees of the school rather than the district and are not unionized. These schools form the other part of "District Charters" discussed in the paper.

Independent Charters

Independent charter schools are public schools outside of the purview of local school boards. They are chartered by a number of entities throughout the state, including the Universities of Wisconsin Office of Education Opportunity (OEO) and the City of Milwaukee, among others. These schools are freed from many of the regulatory burdens found in traditional public schools. The Figure at the top of the next page shows the enrollment growth in charter schools over the past seven years. In this time frame, district charter school

enrollment has grown by 9.53% while independent charter enrollment has grown by 42.12%.

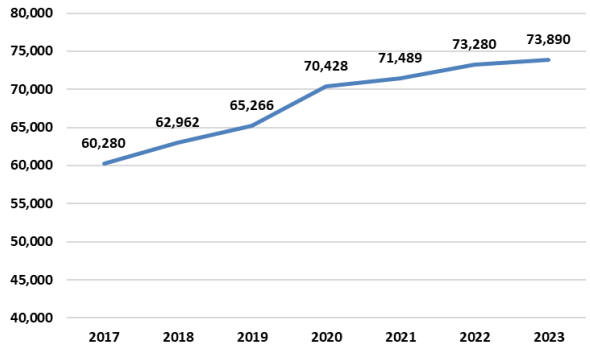
Figure 3. Charter School Enrollment by Year



OPEN ENROLLMENT

Wisconsin's largest school choice program is the public-school open enrollment program. This program allows students from one school district to transfer to another district that has open seats for the next school year. At their January meeting, school boards are required to determine and publicize the number of seats that they have available for open enrollment within each grade. Before a student can enroll in another district, the receiving district has discretion to consider a student's disciplinary record and whether they can meet the needs of a student with a disability before accepting them.[9] Figure 4 shows the number of students who have utilized the open enrollment program over the past six years. In the most recent school year, 73,890 students utilized open enrollment.

Figure 4. Open Enrollment by Year



METHODS

Wisconsin is relatively unique in providing extensive data on the demographic and economic characteristics of schools in choice programs and across all sectors—public, charter, and private. The dataset shows a school's racial makeup, socioeconomic status, enrollment counts, and English language learner counts. The data used in our *Apples to Apples* studies enable a more fine-grained analysis than has been conducted previously (outside of the work by the School Choice Demonstration Project, for which individual-level student data was made available as required by state legislative mandate.)

The factors considered for the *Apples to Apples* analysis include:

- the percentage of minority students,
- the percentage of students in the school who are economically disadvantaged,
- the school enrollment,
- the percentage of students in the school who are English language learners, and
- the grade levels served by the school.

Our dependent variables are primarily measures of achievement gathered from DPI's WISEdash system for the 2023-24 school year. As we have done in the past, we gathered data on two of the most important subjects for success later in life: reading and mathematics. This data is aggregated at the school level. Students who took the alternative exam offered to students with severe disabilities are not included in the analysis.

In most Wisconsin school districts, economic disadvantage is defined as whether the student uses free or reduced lunch. However, some school districts in the state have universal free lunch (known as "Community Eligibility"). In these districts, alternative measures of economic

status are utilized. These include reporting the count of students in the school whose families are eligible for various forms of public assistance and having families report their income status directly on another form.[10] These alternative metrics are less accurate and have led to problems for researchers who rely on this data in evaluating American education.

Particularly for some private schools in the choice program, the data tends to severely underestimate the number of low-income students. Consequently, our results on the performance of choice students relative to other sectors should be seen as conservative.

In the formal analysis, we attempt to determine the effect of types of schools by modeling test scores. We include test scores only for choice students in each private school, as state law requires only these students to be tested. This allows us to assess the impact of school choice rather than private schooling overall. In the primary analysis, this is done through the inclusion of fixed effects for each Wisconsin school district. Fixed effects are a statistical technique used to control for differences across school districts that don't change over time (e.g., local policies, funding levels, district-wide demographics). Thus, we run the following model:

$$\text{Test Score} = \beta1(\text{Private}) + \beta2(\text{Dist. Charter}) + \beta3(\text{Ind. Charter}) + \beta4(\text{Controls}) + \mu$$

By far, the biggest obstacle to fair comparison between private-choice schools and traditional public schools is measuring disability. Schools participating in the state's school choice programs have rates of disability reported to DPI that are far lower, on average, than their public-school counterparts. In this year's DPI data, choice schools report disability rates of 3.5% on average compared with 15.8% on average in public, non-charter schools.

While on the surface it appears that private choice schools simply do not serve students with disabilities, we know from previous research that this is simply not the case. To be counted as having a disability in the DPI data, a student must have been evaluated for a disability by the public school district and be receiving services under an Individualized Services Plan (ISP).There are several reasons why students diagnosed with a disability in a public school might not be diagnosed with it in a private school—stigmatization and the difficulty of getting public schools to conduct evaluations chief among them. In an analysis of school survey data by School Choice Wisconsin and WILL, we found disability rates in choice schools were far closer to those in public schools than what is generally reported—about 14.7% compared to 15.3% in public schools.[11]

To address the undercounting of students with disabilities, we use a method called imputation. This technique estimates missing data by analyzing related information in the dataset. In this case, we treat disability data as missing and estimate its likely values based on factors such as income, race, English language learner status, and grade levels served at each school. These estimates then replace the missing data in our analysis.

Results

In this year's report, we utilize a new, easier to understand format to display our statistical results. The full table of results including control variables is found in the appendix. Table 1 reports statewide proficiency in both math and ELA by sector. Private schools saw a statistically significant performance advantage in both subjects. In ELA, controlling for all other factors, students in private schools had approximately 8.28% higher proficiency in ELA and 5.10% higher proficiency in math relative to traditional public-school students.

For district charters schools statewide, we see a statistically significant 4.65% higher proficiency in ELA, but no statistically significant difference in Math. Independent charters saw significantly negative outcomes relative to traditional public schools in math, and no statistically significant difference in ELA. This curious result is similar to what we have found in the last two years. One likely explanation is that independent charter schools are primarily located in Wisconsin's largest cities, where achievement, in general, is lower. Despite our control variables, they may not be able to fully account for those differences. Wisconsin's staggering achievement gaps are highlighted by the other two variables included in Table 1.

Black students perform well below their peers in both subjects, as do low-income students. A hypothetical school with 100% black students would be expected to have proficiency rates 28.81% lower in ELA, and 31.29% lower in math than a school composed of 100% non-black, non-Hispanic students. Similarly, a school with all low-income students would be expected to have proficiency rates 37.64% lower in ELA and 41.52% lower in math than a school with no low-income students.

In Milwaukee, the story is similar but even more dramatic, with private schools showing a statistically significant performance advantage in both subjects. In ELA, controlling for all other factors, choice students in private schools had approximately 14.30% higher proficiency in ELA and 14.17% higher proficiency in math relative to traditional public-school students.

We see positive relationships to student performance for both district and independent charters in the city. District charters saw about 9.27% higher proficiency in ELA and 11.61% higher proficiency in Math. Independent charters saw 3.92% and 5.63% higher proficiency in those subjects respectively.

The racial and economic achievement gap also exists strongly within the city, though the poverty relationship is lessened for the simple reality that a very high percentage of residents are low-income, leading to less variation. A school with all black students in the city would be expected to have a proficiency rate a staggering 48.67% lower than a school of all non-black, non-Hispanic students.

In Table 3, we look at student growth. Given that students often enter school choice programs because they are not having their needs met in traditional public schools, growth is an important metric. Such students are often behind academically, and growth is a measure of the extent to which schools help students "catch up." When it comes to growth, we see choice and charter advantages statewide. Growth is scored on a 0 to 100 scale, with higher scores being indicative of more growth.[12]

Choice schools in Milwaukee have about 11.41 points more growth than traditional public-school students, while district charter schools have about 9.13 points more growth on average. Independent charter schools had about 7.24 more growth points. Statewide, district charters saw about 2.53 points more growth, and private choice schools see about 7.23 points more growth. Independent charters had 5.02 more growth points.

Table 1. Regression Analysis: Proficiency

Factor	Relationship to ELA Proficiency	Relationship to Math Proficiency	Statistically Significant?
Private School	+8.28%	+5.10%	Both
District Charters	+4.65%	-1.87%	ELA Only
Independent Charters	-0.47%	-3.80%	Math Only
Virtual Charters	-2.88%	-14.2%	Math Only
% Black	-27.87%	-31.59%	Both
% Low Income	-37.87%	-41.67%	Both

Table 2. Regression Analysis: Proficiency-Milwaukee

Factor	Relationship to ELA Proficiency	Relationship to Math Proficiency	Statistically Significant?
Private School	+14.30%	+14.17%	Both
District Charter	+9.27%	+11.61%	Both
Independent Charter	+3.92%	+5.63%	Both
% Black	-48.28%	-43.49%	Yes-both
% Low Income	-28.66%	-22.03%	Yes-both

Table 3. Regression Analysis: Growth

Factor	Relationship to ELA Proficiency	Relationship to Math Proficiency	Statistically Significant?
Private School	+7.23	+11.41	Both
District Charter	+2.53	+9.13	Both
Independent Charter	+5.02	+7.24	Both
Virtual	-2.69	—	No

Figure 5.
Proficiency by Sector Relative to Traditional Public Schools

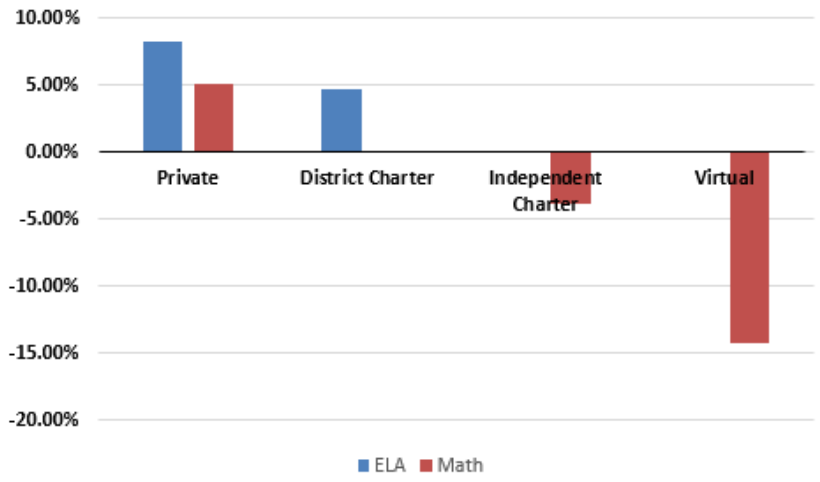


Figure 6.
Proficiency by Sector Relative to Traditional Public Schools (MKE)

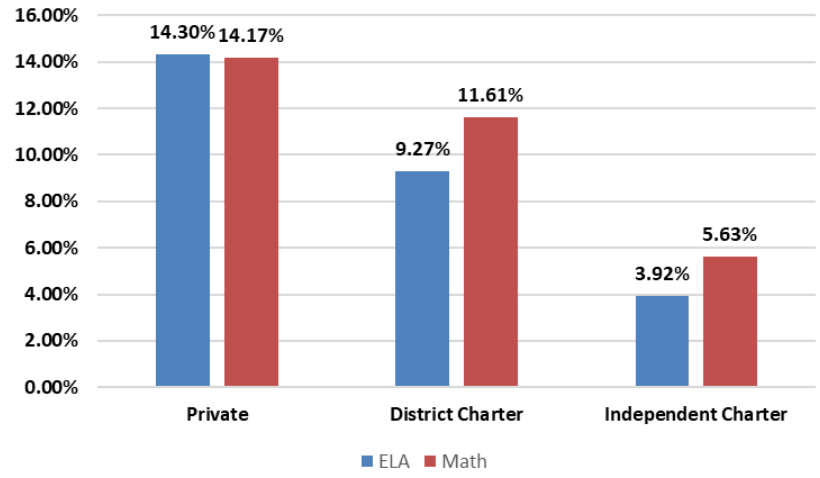
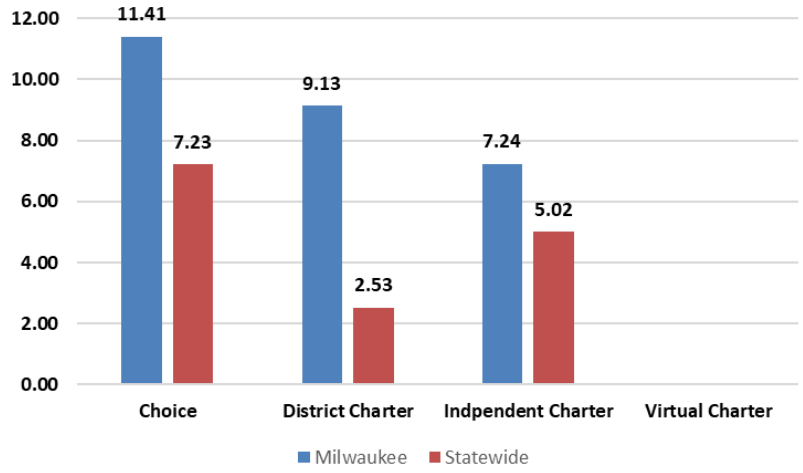


Figure 7.
Growth Scores by Sector



Conclusion

Of course, access to student-level data could provide an even more definitive look at student outcomes. With such data, we could compare outcomes among students who are similar across many demographic dimensions rather than comparing entire schools. Unfortunately, WILL has been denied access to this data by DPI multiple times over the years. That said, the strength of the correlationary relationships here should not be ignored.

The benefits of school choice cannot be dismissed as a product of "creaming" the best students or failing to accept students with disabilities. Even after controlling these factors, a choice and charter advantage remains. When accounting for funding increases during the last legislative session, private choice and charter schools still remain the lower-cost option for Wisconsin taxpayers. Once again, our *Apples to Apples* report shows that these schools also continue to provide a better "bang for the buck" to taxpayers by achieving better academic results at these lower costs. At a time when the state's choice programs have faced legal challenges, this is an important datapoint for school choice proponents to have in their arsenal.

Appendix

Table A1. Proficiency by Sector

	ELA-Statewide		Math-Statewide		ELA-Milwaukee		Math-Milwaukee	
	Coef.	Std. Err.	Coef.	Std. Err.	Coef.	Std. Err.	Coef.	Std. Err.
Private	0.082831	0.008505	0.051008	0.009418	0.143012	0.015979	0.141686	0.017574
District Charter	0.046522	0.010552	-0.01869	0.01166	0.092717	0.02711	0.116071	0.029619
Independent Charter	-0.00468	0.020161	-0.0381	0.022292	0.03917	0.028037	0.056342	0.030358
Virtual Charter	-0.02881	0.019684	-0.14255	0.021779	0	(omitted)	0	(omitted)
African American	-0.27871	0.013834	-0.31587	0.015373	-0.48287	0.041912	-0.43492	0.046667
Hispanic	-0.05211	0.023544	-0.11161	0.02604	-0.22542	0.047808	-0.20137	0.052513
English Learner	-0.1807	0.035894	-0.12372	0.039695	-0.26649	0.061326	-0.19813	0.067099
Low Income	-0.37875	0.015336	-0.41671	0.016655	-0.28659	0.052689	-0.22033	0.057686
Disability (Imputed)	-0.27231	0.06225	-0.26779	0.063531	-0.22579	0.156705	-0.19043	0.154135
Elementary/Secondary	-0.05403	0.011234	-0.10498	0.012429	-0.07048	0.022706	-0.08209	0.024901
High School	-0.10215	0.005799	-0.12086	0.006396	-0.05492	0.018654	-0.05959	0.020523
Middle School	-0.03333	0.006358	-0.03206	0.007029	0.000849	0.03388	0.000843	0.037293
Constant	0.81758	0.022998	0.980783	0.02511	0.855447	0.037492	0.710056	0.040497

Endnotes

1 https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2017/05/16/523612949/lessons-on-race-and-vouchers-from-milwaukee

2 https://schoolchoicewi.org/income-eligibility-charts/

3 https://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/parental-education-options/Choice/Data_and_Reports/2024-25/2024-25_mpcp_facts_and_figures.pdf

4 https://schoolchoicewi.org/income-eligibility-charts/

5 https://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/parental-education-options/Choice/Data_and_Reports/2024-25/2024-25_WPCP_9_Limits.pdf

6 https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/misc/lfb/informational_papers/january_2025/0031_private_school_choice_and_special_needs_scholarship_programs_informational_paper_31.pdf

7 https://schoolchoicewi.org/programs/wisconsin-parental-choice-program/

8 https://sfs.dpi.wi.gov/SFSdw/CompRevReport.aspx

9 https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/misc/lfb/informational_papers/january_2021/0029_open_enrollment_program_informational_paper_29.pdf

10 https://dpi.wi.gov/wise/data-elements/econ-status

11 https://will-law.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Disabilities_Report_Final.pdf

12 https://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/accountability/pdf/Report_Card_Guide_2023-24_Final.pdf

330 East Kilbourn Ave. | Suite 725
Milwaukee, WI 53202

will-law.org
414-727-9455

@WILawLiberty