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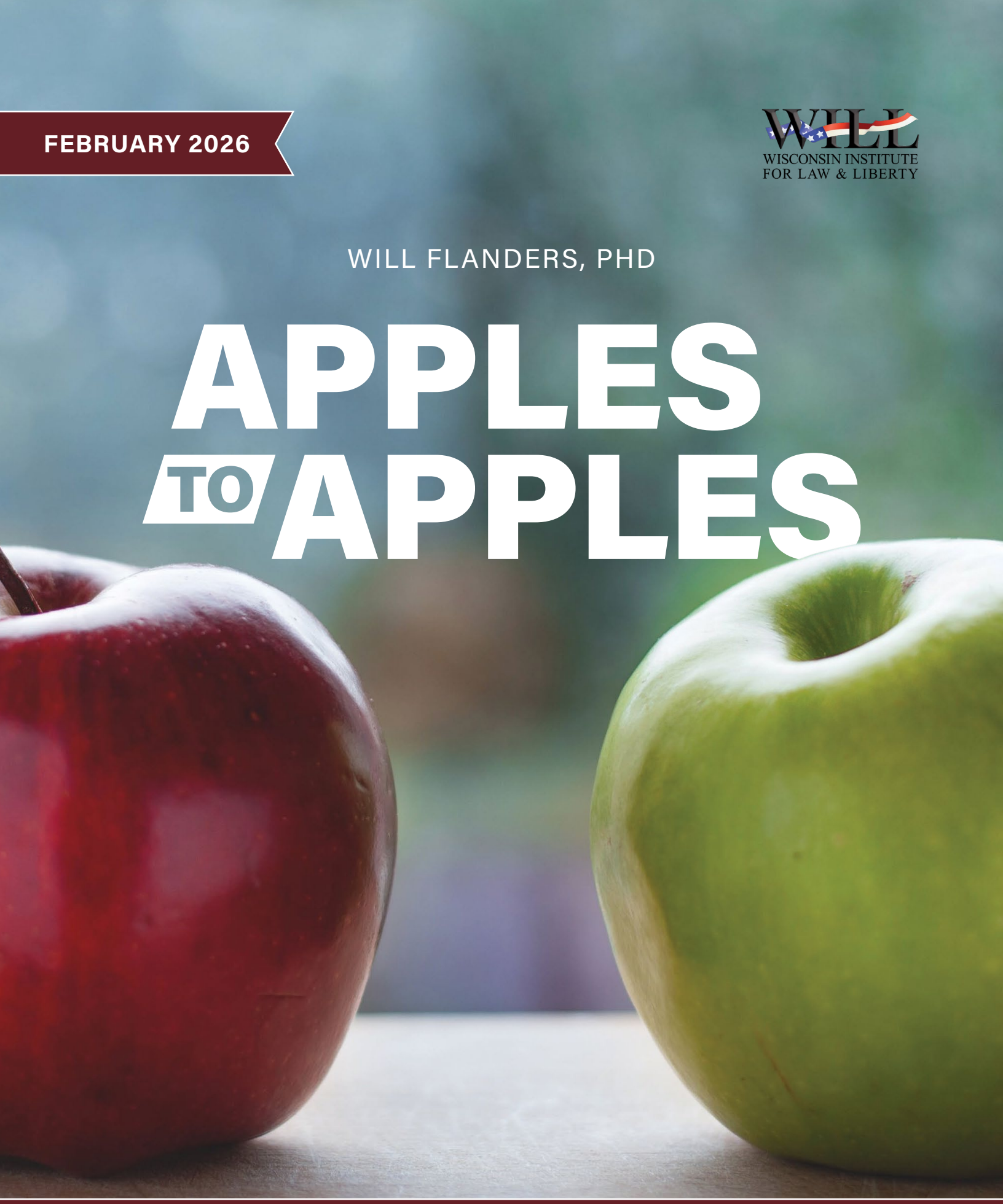
WISCONSIN INSTITUTE FOR LAW & LIBERTY

WILL FLANDERS, PHD

APPLES TO APPLES



A Look at School Sector Performance in Wisconsin for 2025

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APPLES TO APPLES

Executive Summary

WILL's *Apples to Apples* report provides a rigorous, side-by-side comparison of academic performance across Wisconsin's public, charter, and private choice schools. Because student achievement is strongly shaped by factors such as income, disability status, and English learner status, simple comparisons of raw test scores can be misleading. This report addresses that problem by applying a consistent analytical framework that adjusts for key student and school characteristics, allowing for fairer comparisons across sectors. The 2026 edition uses the most recent data from Wisconsin DPI's 2024–25 report cards and reflects important methodological updates, including the addition of disability rates as a control variable directly for the first time.

After accounting for demographic differences, the results show that private choice schools and many charter schools continue to outperform traditional public schools—both statewide and in Milwaukee. These advantages persist even under more conservative assumptions that raise the bar for choice schools by correcting for historically underreported disability rates. At the same time, the report highlights the magnitude of Wisconsin's achievement gaps and documents growing family demand for alternatives through open enrollment. Together, the findings suggest that school sector matters for student outcomes, that families respond to performance when given options, and that meaningful progress will require both expanding effective models and confronting the deep inequities that continue to shape educational achievement across the state.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Private choice schools outperform traditional public schools after adjustment.** Once demographic factors are controlled for, private choice schools show significantly higher proficiency rates in both English Language Arts and math statewide, with especially large advantages in Milwaukee.
  - Proficiency was 4.1% higher in ELA statewide, 7.7% higher in math, and 5.8% higher in ELA in Milwaukee.
  - The proficiency advantage is found despite choice schools receiving at most 82% of the funding of the average traditional public school.
- **Charter school performance varies by type and location.** District-authorized and independent charters consistently outperform traditional public schools, particularly in Milwaukee.
- **Achievement gaps remain the dominant challenge in Wisconsin education.** Income, race, disability status, and English learner status are all strongly associated with lower proficiency, producing gaps that far exceed differences between school sectors.
- **Choice and charter schools demonstrate stronger academic growth.** Beyond proficiency levels, both private choice schools and charter schools post higher growth scores on average, suggesting greater year-to-year academic progress for students.
- **Families are voting with their feet.** Open enrollment continues to expand, with students disproportionately leaving lower-performing districts for higher-performing ones—indicating that academic quality, not just funding levels, drives family decisions.

Introduction

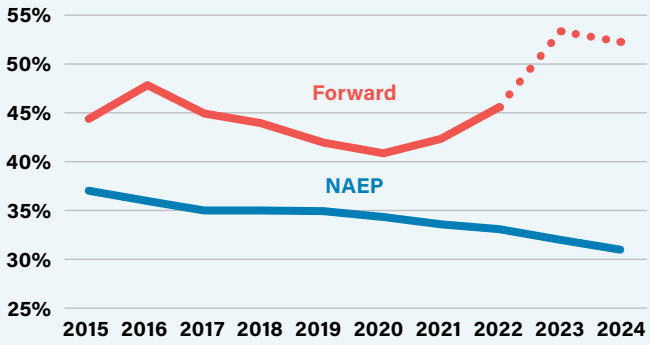
This report marks the eighth edition of WILL's *Apples to Apples* series. Following a two-year interruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the suspension of comprehensive statewide testing, the report has now been published for five consecutive years since resuming. The current edition draws on updated data from the 2024–25 school year, using Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) report cards along with supplemental DPI datasets.

The purpose of *Apples to Apples* is to present a comprehensive assessment of school performance in Wisconsin while ensuring comparisons account for differences in student populations. By controlling for demographic and institutional characteristics, the analysis aims to isolate the relationship between school sector and academic outcomes. Said another way, we aim to put schools on a level playing field.

This marks the second year since DPI changed the meaning of "proficiency" on the state exam. These changes have substantially inflated reported proficiency rates across the state. While results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) continue to show declining performance in Wisconsin, DPI's revised metrics indicate historically high Forward Exam proficiency levels. For example, Figure 1 shows proficiency in ELA as measured on the Forward exam over time, compared to proficiency in ELA on the NAEP.

While the NAEP scores were consistently a bit lower than the Forward Exam scores, the two generally moved together. However, when DPI altered the scores as shown by the dotted line, Forward Exam scores diverged to significantly higher levels of proficiency than the NAEP.

Figure 1. Fourth Grade NAEP and Forward Exam ELA Proficiency Over Time



Because of these changes, Forward Exam results are only directly comparable with results from the 2023-24 school year. As a result, while absolute proficiency rates should be interpreted cautiously, relative differences between schools and sectors remain meaningful.

New to this year's edition of the report is greater discussion of Wisconsin's largest school choice program, the open enrollment program. While we cannot measure outcomes for participating students due to the fact that we don't have student-level testing data in this report, we can examine the reasons why students leave, and which districts are gaining and losing the most students.

Consistent with prior editions, this year's *Apples to Apples* report finds that private choice schools and certain types of charter schools outperform traditional public schools when comparisons are made on a level playing field. Importantly, the report presents *all* findings, including those less favorable to choice. For instance, we again observe a negative association between independent charter schools and math proficiency at the statewide level. This is the third consecutive edition of the report to reach this conclusion. Our objective is not advocacy for a particular sector, but a transparent evaluation of student achievement across Wisconsin's education system.

Overview of School Choice in Wisconsin

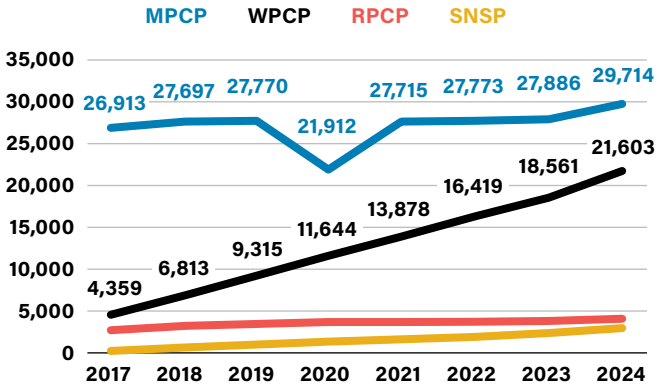
PRIVATE SCHOOL CHOICE PROGRAMS

Wisconsin currently operates four private parental choice programs serving students in different parts of the state:

- Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP)
- Racine Parental Choice Program (RPCP)
- Wisconsin Parental Choice Program (WPCP)
- Special Needs Scholarship Program (SNSP)

Each program differs in eligibility requirements, geographic scope, and enrollment limits. Figure 2 displays total enrollment across all choice programs since the 2017–18 school year.

Figure 2. Choice & Public Program Enrollment by Year



Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP)

The MPCP, established in 1990, is the nation's oldest school voucher program. Eligibility is limited to students residing within the City of Milwaukee whose household income does not exceed 300 percent of the federal poverty level—$96,450 annually for a family of four. The MPCP does not impose enrollment caps. During the 2025–26 school year, 29,949 students participated.

Racine Parental Choice Program (RPCP)

Launched in 2011, the RPCP extended private school choice in Wisconsin beyond Milwaukee. Eligibility is restricted to students living within the Racine Unified School District whose families earn no more than 300 percent of the federal poverty level—the same as the MPCP. Enrollment is uncapped. The program served 4,170 students in 2025–26.

Wisconsin Parental Choice Program (WPCP)

The WPCP expanded private school choice statewide in 2013. It has a lower income threshold than MPCP or RPCP—220 percent of the federal poverty level. For the 2024–25 school year, this equated to a household income cap of $70,730 for a family of four.

The WPCP has historically been subject to enrollment caps that increase incrementally each year. In 2025–26, up to 10 percent of students in each district were eligible to participate. The enrollment cap will be eliminated for the 2026–27 school year. Currently, only four districts have reached their enrollment ceiling. Total participation reached 23,417 students in 2025–26.

Special Needs Scholarship Program (SNSP)

The SNSP provides students with disabilities the opportunity to attend private schools better suited to their educational needs. Funding under SNSP is partially reimbursement-based: schools may receive up to $23,113 per student at a 100 percent reimbursement rate, and 90 percent beyond that threshold. Only 11 schools statewide accessed this higher reimbursement level in 2024–25. The program served 3,436 students and is not subject to enrollment caps.

FUNDING

Even with recent funding increases, private choice schools continue to receive significantly less per pupil than traditional public schools. For the 2024–25 school year, voucher payments were $10,877 for K–8 students and $13,371 for high school students. By comparison, traditional public schools have, on average, $16,362 per student in combined state and local funding. This gap would likely be even larger if federal revenue were included, but it is difficult to find data on exactly how much federal revenue is shared with private schools in the choice program.

As a result, K–8 voucher funding represents approximately 66.4 percent of average public-school spending, while high school vouchers represent about 81.7 percent.

CHARTER SCHOOLS

Charter schools are public schools granted flexibility from certain district regulations. As of the most recent data, 58 charter schools—approximately 26.1 percent of the sector—operate virtually. Virtual charter enrollment expanded rapidly during the COVID-19 pandemic, as families sought alternatives to improvised remote learning models in traditional schools.

Before 2020, charter enrollment hovered near 44,000 students. Enrollment surged during the pandemic and, while it has since declined modestly, remains well above pre-pandemic levels.

Wisconsin authorizes three types of charter schools: instrumentality, non-instrumentality, and independent charters. Funding for district-authorized charters varies by contract but is often linked to the state's independent charter funding level, which currently stands at $11,729 per student.

Charter Types

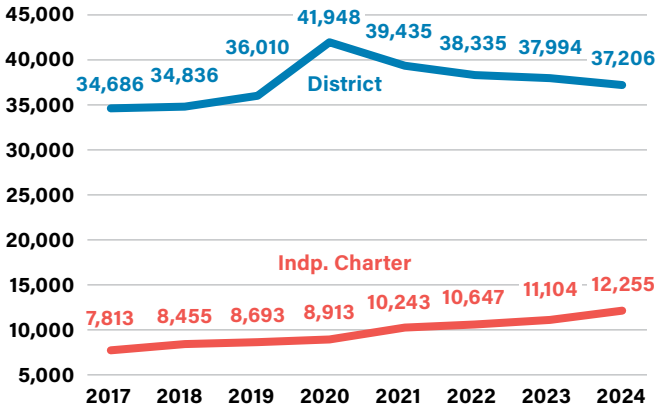
- **Instrumentality Charters:** Authorized by school boards. Staff are district employees and subject to collective bargaining agreements. These schools have limited autonomy over curriculum and operations.
- **Non-Instrumentality Charters:** Also authorized by districts but operate with greater independence. Staff are employees of the charter school rather than the district and are not unionized.

For analytical purposes, both categories are referred to collectively as **district charters** in this report.

- **Independent Charters:** Authorized by entities other than local school boards, such as the Universities of Wisconsin Office of Educational Opportunity or the City of Milwaukee. These schools enjoy the greatest operational flexibility.

Since 2017, enrollment in district charters increased by 8.20 percent. However, there has been a decline in district charter enrollment since 2020. Independent charter enrollment grew by 56.85 percent in the same time frame as depicted in Figure 2.

Figure 3. Charter School Enrollment by Year

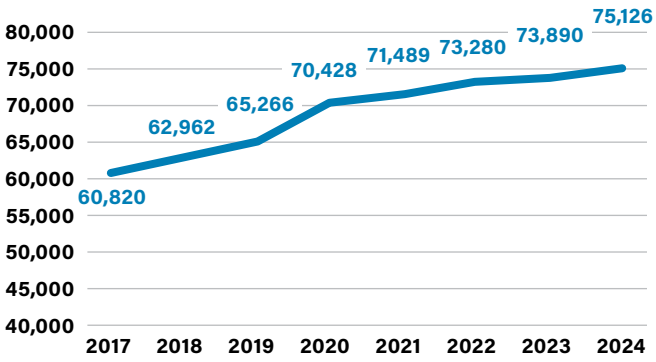


OPEN ENROLLMENT

Wisconsin's public-school open enrollment program is the largest school choice initiative in the state. It allows students to attend public schools outside their home district, subject to seat availability. Each January, school boards must identify the number of open seats by grade level.

Receiving districts may consider disciplinary history and special education capacity when reviewing applications. In the most recent school year, 75,126 students participated in open enrollment as shown in Figure 3. This is the highest number of participating students on record, beating the 2023-24 school year by more than 1,200 students.

Figure 4. Open Enrollment by Year



METHODS

Wisconsin is unusual in the breadth of demographic data it provides across all school sectors. Available data includes racial composition, economic disadvantage, enrollment size, English learner status, and grade configurations. These data enable a more detailed analysis than is typically possible outside of studies using restricted individual-level datasets, such as those conducted by the School Choice Demonstration Project.

The *Apples to Apples* analysis incorporates the following school-level variables:

- Percentage triggering the minority category
- Percentage of economically disadvantaged students
- Total school enrollment
- Percentage of English language learners
- Grade levels served

Student achievement outcomes were drawn from DPI's WISEdash system for the 2024–25 school year and focus on reading and mathematics proficiency. Results are aggregated at the school level, and students assessed via alternative exams for severe disabilities are excluded.

Economic disadvantage is typically measured using eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch. However, districts participating in the Community Eligibility Provision use alternative indicators, such as eligibility for public assistance or income data collected through supplemental forms. These proxies are less precise and present challenges for researchers.

Notably, data for private choice schools tend to understate the number of low-income students they serve. As a result, estimates of choice school performance relative to other sectors should be interpreted as conservative.

For the first time this year, we also include disability rate as a control variable in the analysis. In the past, mismeasurement of this data has led us to exclude the variable. In general, prior research suggests that DPI data substantially undercounts disability in choice schools by as much as 600%. True disability rates in these schools are likely closer to, though still somewhat lower than, those observed in traditional public schools (15.7% in this year's data).

This year reported disability rates for choice schools increased to 4.1%. While this figure still

reflects substantial undercounting, it provides an opportunity to incorporate a more demanding and conservative control into the analysis. As a result, estimates presented this year should be interpreted as setting a higher bar for choice schools' performance, even under assumptions that likely overstate differences in student disability composition across sectors.

To estimate sector effects, we model school-level test outcomes using district fixed effects, which control for time-invariant differences across districts such as funding structures and local policies. Only voucher students are included in the private school testing analysis, even though some choice schools have all of their students participate in testing. This allows the analysis to isolate the effect of school choice participation.

The primary model is specified as:

$$\text{Test Score} = \beta_1(\text{Private}) + \beta_2(\text{District Charter}) + \beta_3(\text{Independent Charter}) + \beta_4(\text{Controls}) + \mu$$

Results

Table 1 on the next page summarizes statewide proficiency results by sector.

After controlling for demographic factors, private choice schools demonstrate statistically significant advantages in ELA, but similar performance in math. Specifically, proficiency rates are approximately 4.1 percentage points higher on average in ELA with other factors controlled for.

District charter schools show a significant 2.79-point advantage in ELA, but lower outcomes in math by 6.2 percentage points. Independent charter schools exhibit no statistically significant differences from traditional public schools in either subject.

The magnitude of Wisconsin's achievement gaps is underscored by the coefficients for race and income. Schools serving entirely African American students are predicted to have proficiency rates 33.1 percentage points lower in ELA and 40.8 points lower in math than otherwise comparable schools. Schools serving exclusively low-income students face even larger deficits—40.9 percentage points in ELA and 44.5 in math.

Milwaukee-specific results show similar patterns in Table 2 on the next page. Choice students outperform traditional public-school peers by approximately 5.8 percentage points in ELA and 7.87 points in math. Both district and independent charters show strong positive associations with achievement in the city.

Figure 4 depicts the median difference in what ELA proficiency would be predicted in a school from our model with the proficiency level actually observed for all schools in the state. It is here that independent charter schools shine—the median independent charter school has ELA proficiency levels 5% higher than would be predicted based on demographics. Private choice and district charters also show about 1% higher proficiency than predicted.

Figure 5. Median Difference in Proficiency vs. Predicted, ELA

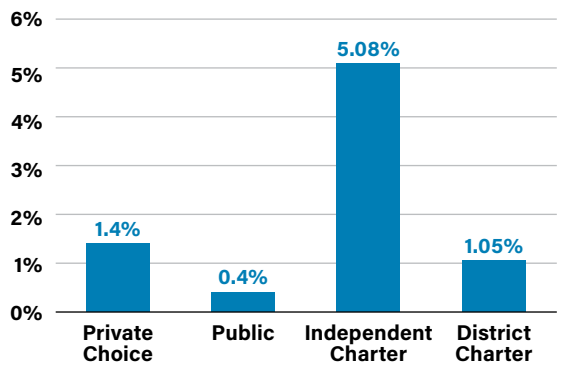


Table 1. Math and ELA Proficiency, Statewide

VARIABLES	(1) ELA Proficiency	(2) Math Proficiency
Private	0.0406***	-0.00741
	(0.0135)	(0.0152)
District Charter	0.0279***	-0.0620***
	(0.0102)	(0.0115)
Indp. Charter	-0.00888	-0.0209
	(0.0301)	(0.0339)
African American	-0.331***	-0.408***
	(0.0319)	(0.0359)
Hispanic	-0.0147	-0.0672*
	(0.0333)	(0.0375)
Disability	-0.451***	-0.508***
	(0.0502)	(0.0564)
Low Income	-0.409***	-0.445***
	(0.0159)	(0.0179)
English Learner	-0.202***	-0.148***
	(0.0496)	(0.0558)
Enrollment	2.78e-05***	2.92e-05***
	(8.37e-06)	(9.42e-06)
Grades 6-8	0.0793***	0.0962***
	(0.0122)	(0.0137)
Grades 9-12	-0.00278	0.0141
	(0.0122)	(0.0137)
Grades K-12	-0.00903	-0.0570***
	(0.0178)	(0.0201)
Grades K-5	0.102***	0.129***
	(0.0116)	(0.0131)
Grades K-8	0.0739***	0.0664***
	(0.0144)	(0.0162)
Constant	0.710***	0.740***
	(0.0141)	(0.0159)
Observations	1,886	1,887
R-squared	0.567	0.577

Standard errors in parentheses
***** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1**

Table 2. Math and ELA Proficiency, Milwaukee

VARIABLES	(1) ELA Proficiency	(2) Math Proficiency
Private	0.0580*	0.0787**
	(0.0311)	(0.0335)
District Charter	0.107***	0.131***
	(0.0284)	(0.0307)
Indp. Charter	0.0374	0.0757**
	(0.0285)	(0.0308)
African American	-0.517***	-0.427***
	(0.0404)	(0.0436)
Hispanic	-0.205***	-0.152***
	(0.0486)	(0.0525)
Disability	-0.290**	-0.255*
	(0.129)	(0.140)
Low Income	-0.216***	-0.190***
	(0.0439)	(0.0475)
English Learner	-0.338***	-0.259***
	(0.0578)	(0.0625)
Enrollment	-4.38e-06	2.33e-05
	(2.18e-05)	(2.35e-05)
Grades 6-8	0.0778	0.0871
	(0.0640)	(0.0691)
Grades 9-12	0.0160	0.0406
	(0.0564)	(0.0608)
Grades K-12	-0.0161	-0.0256
	(0.0588)	(0.0636)
Grades K-5	0.0632	0.119*
	(0.0568)	(0.0615)
Grades K-8	0.0577	0.0611
	(0.0550)	(0.0594)
Constant	0.768***	0.593***
	(0.0692)	(0.0747)
Observations	244	244
R-squared	0.718	0.635

Standard errors in parentheses
***** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1**

Table 3. Biggest Gainers & Losers, Open Enrollment (2024-25)

District	Loss Ratio	Net Loss
Winter	-16.99%	**-35**
Genoa City J2	-15.01%	**-62**
Butternut	-13.64%	**-24**
Hustisford	-13.00%	**-36**
Sharon J11	-12.18%	**-24**
Hartford J1	-11.68%	**-152**
Palmyra-Eagle	-11.32%	**-59**
Milwaukee	-11.20%	**-7344**
Random Lake	-11.11%	**-72**
Delavan-Darien	-10.99%	**-184**

District	Gain Ratio	Net Gain
McFarland	234.36%	**5477**
Grantsburg	156.55%	**1254**
Northern Ozaukee	63.89%	**522**
Gilman	43.62%	**123**
Yorkville J2	36.13%	**168**
Shorewood	28.39%	**544**
Saint Croix Central	24.32%	**387**
Nekoosa	23.80%	**233**
Paris J1	23.11%	**58**
Geneva J4	22.97%	**34**

Net Open Enrollment

In this section, we investigate what factors drive students to open enroll out of their home district into a neighboring school district. Here, we use the "net" open enrollment which is the total number of open enrollees in minus the number of enrollees out. Positive numbers are indicative of districts that are gaining students through this process, while negative numbers indicate districts that are losing students. First, we present some preliminary data on the districts that are gaining and losing the most students as a share of their total enrollment in Table 3.

Most of the "big loser" districts are small, but Milwaukee is of particular note. The district is a net loser of more than 7,300 students in open enrollment. At the other end of the spectrum are McFarland and Grantsburg, which both see their attendance gain ratio of greater than 100%. McFarland's baseline enrollment, according to the most recent data from DPI, is 2,337. The district would likely be unsustainable in the absence of so many open enrollment kids.

Because many measures of school district success are highly correlated with each other, it is challenging to examine the factors that affect open enrollment decisions in a regression analysis that considers all the factors at the same time. Consequently, Table 4 below presents some difference-of-means tests between districts with a positive and negative ratio in open enrollment.

In general, it seems clear that families are moving to higher performing districts. Districts that gained students had statistically significantly higher achievement, growth, and graduation scores on the state report card. These districts were also more likely to offer extensive access to AP or IB classes as measured by the percentage of students who take them.

The story with funding is less clear. While gaining districts did have slightly higher total revenue by about $492, this was not a statistically significant difference. However, families do tend to move to districts with higher property taxes—about $1,324 more on average in gaining districts. This suggests that families move their kids to wealthier districts (because those districts are responsible for a larger share of their student funding) but not necessarily districts that are better funded overall.

Table 4. Difference of Means, Open Enrollment Gainers & Losers

Factor	Losers	Gainers	Difference (SD)
Achievement Score	65.69	73.80	8.10(1.060)***
Growth Score	62.36	67.32	4.96(0.9659)***
Grad. Rate Score	94.65	96.52	1.866(0.4400)***
AP/IB Take Up	13.31%	18.20%	4.89%(1.4115)***
Property Tax PP	$7,182.68	$8,453.56	$1,324.88(436.44)***
Total Revenue PP	$18,360.50	$18,852.61	$492.12(362.19)

Standard errors in parentheses
***** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1**

Conclusion

Access to individual-level student data would allow for even more precise comparisons across sectors. This data will be coming from WILL in the coming months through a number of peer-reviewed publications.

The advantages associated with school choice cannot be explained away by selective enrollment or exclusion of students with disabilities. Even after accounting for these factors—and correcting for underreported disability rates—private choice and charter schools continue to demonstrate academic advantages.

When recent funding increases are taken into account, these schools also remain a more cost-effective option for taxpayers. Once again, the *Apples to Apples* analysis shows that choice and charter schools deliver stronger academic outcomes at lower per-pupil costs, offering Wisconsin taxpayers greater value for their investment. As school choice programs face ongoing legal and policy challenges, these findings provide critical evidence of their effectiveness.

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