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A MATTER OF TIME:

**What New Research Says
About Wisconsin's School
Choice Programs**



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Executive Summary

Wisconsin is the birthplace of the modern school choice movement, with Milwaukee launching the nation's first modern choice program over 35 years ago. In the decades since its creation, people have debated whether school choice produces better academic outcomes for students. Some studies have found benefits, while others have found little or no effect. One reason for these mixed results is that many studies do not account for the length of time a student spends in the program. Academic progress often doesn't happen overnight, particularly with students who are often behind when they enter a private choice school.

This report addresses that concern, and, for the first time, answers the question: what happens when students stay in Wisconsin's private school choice programs for several years? We gathered student-level data on more than 100,000 Wisconsin students between the 2018-19 and 2022-23 school years. Using established matching techniques, we compared students in private school choice programs (Milwaukee, Racine and Wisconsin) with similar students who remained in public schools. This is the first time such a study has been conducted on the Racine and Wisconsin parental choice programs. The results for the Wisconsin Parental Choice Program (WPCP) and Racine Parental Choice Program (RPCP) have undergone a rigorous peer-review process and were recently published in the *Journal of School Choice*. Similar research techniques were used to analyze the Milwaukee data, which is currently under review at an academic journal at the time of publication.

The key findings of this research are summarized in Table 1, which converts each program's achievement gains into the equivalent additional years of public school growth needed to produce the same result. For example, after two years in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP), students, on average, would gain the equivalent of 1.35 more years of knowledge relative to a similarly situated student in a public school. While fewer years of school choice show no statistically significant effect, significant growth appears by year 2 in the MPCP and year 3 in the WPCP.

Table 1. Equivalent Years of Education Gain from Choice Participation

Program	1 Year	2 Years	3 Years	4+ Years	Any
MPCP	No Effect	1.35 years	1.34 years	1.19 years	1.06 years
WPCP	No Effect	No Effect	0.48 years	1.15 years	0.46 years
RPCP	—	—	—	—	1.85 years

This data supports program expansion, not retreat. These findings undercut the case for winding school choice programs down. If anything, they argue for widening access — students who leave a choice program early, or never get the chance to enroll, may be missing the academic gains that only show up with time.

The findings were consistent across all three programs: students who stayed in school choice longer generally made larger gains in reading. The biggest gains appeared after students had spent several years in their new schools, suggesting that families and policymakers should not evaluate school choice programs based on short-term snapshots.

WHY THIS STUDY WAS DONE

Wisconsin has one of the oldest and largest school choice systems in the country with nearly 60,000 students* across the three programs under study here, plus the Special Needs Scholarship Program. While Milwaukee’s program has been studied for many years, much less was known about the statewide and Racine programs. This research focused on academic growth rather than a single test score. Instead of asking who scored higher on one test, the study examined how much students improved over four years – and compared that growth to similar students who stayed in public school over the same time period. This approach provides a better picture of learning over time than a single snapshot can offer.

THE PROGRAMS

Wisconsin has three major private school choice programs. Milwaukee’s program began in 1990 and was the nation’s first modern voucher program. Racine began its program in 2011. The statewide Wisconsin Parental Choice Program began in 2013, allowing eligible families outside Milwaukee and Racine to participate. Some key statistics about each program are found in Table 2. Note that the data in this analysis are for 2018-19 through 2022-23 school year, but the information below is the most recent available.

Table 2. Choice Program Statistics 2025-2026

	RPCP	WPCP	MPCP
Region Covered	Racine Unified School District (RUSD)	Remainder of the state other than City of Milwaukee, RUSD	City of Milwaukee
Choice Student Population	4,170	23,417	29,949
Percent of Students in Choice	21.09%	3.18%	31.89%
Income Limit	300% of Federal Poverty Limit	220% of Federal Poverty Limit	300% of Federal Poverty Limit
Voucher Payments	\$11,305 for K-8; \$13,799 for 9-12		

* Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. "Choice Program Data." <https://dpi.wi.gov/parental-education-options/choice-programs/data>

The most rapidly growing program is the WPCP, which has grown from 3,059 students in 2016 to 23,417 today — growth of 665% in about a decade. While private school choice funding amounts have increased in recent years, the program funding remains well below public school expenditures in the state. The average public school has revenue of \$16,361 per student in state and local aid (federal excluded), a disparity of \$5,056 per K-8 voucher student and \$2,562 per high school voucher student. In other words, the achievement gains documented in this report are being reached at a fraction of the cost of an average public school education.

HOW THE STUDY WORKED

The ideal test of the effectiveness of school choice programs would randomly assign interested families to either a choice school or public school, then compare outcomes. Practically speaking, this only happens in situations where there is more interest in the program than there are available seats, and lotteries are held to determine admission.

However, Wisconsin's choice programs don't operate this way broadly enough to allow for a lottery-based study. This creates a problem of *selection bias* — where specific characteristics of families who choose to participate in school choice might differ in important ways from parents who do not make that choice. For instance, if the families who take the affirmative action to remove their children from traditional public schools are generally more active in their child's education than other parents, this could have spillover effects on academic outcomes unrelated to private school choice that would bias results.

Fortunately, common methods are available to account for this. In these studies, we used propensity score matching (along with several other methods) to identify comparable public school students. Propensity score matching has become one of the standard approaches for evaluating education policies when randomized experiments are not possible. Rather than comparing all choice students to all public school students, the method compares students who looked very similar across several demographic factors before entering the program. This reduces many of the differences that could otherwise bias the results.

Students were matched based on achievement on the first year of the Forward Exam, income as measured by eligibility for free or reduced lunch, grade level, race or ethnicity, English learner status, and region of the state. These variables are used to create a measure of the chance (propensity) that a student would participate in school choice, and comparisons are made between students in public schools and choice schools with a similar chance.

While no statistical method can eliminate every possible source of bias in an observational study, matching substantially improves the fairness of the comparison. It's a well-established approach that has been widely used in peer-reviewed studies of school choice, charter schools, and other educational interventions. Similar methods were used in the most comprehensive analyses of the MPCP beginning

in 2006 as part of the School Choice Demonstration Project (SCDP),* and have been validated in school choice evaluations more broadly in peer-reviewed work.†

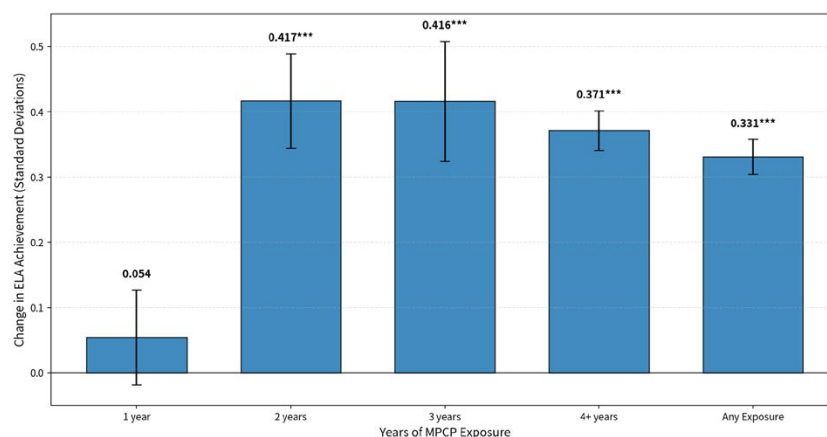
These two groups of similar students are compared on the change in their Forward Exam scores from 2018 to 2022 in English/Language Arts (ELA). Because four years of Forward Exam data was needed and the ELA test is not taken in high school, our sample is limited to students who were in third, fourth or fifth grade in the 2018 school year.

This change in test scores is standardized to have a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1. While typical year over year student growth varies dependent on grade level, existing research‡ suggests that we should expect about 0.31 standard deviations of growth across the grade levels we are studying under normal conditions in public schools.

Finding 1: Milwaukee Results

These results reflect the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP), which is defined by student residency rather than school location. Any student living within Milwaukee Public Schools' boundaries is eligible, and while most attend participating schools within the city, some attend MPCP schools located outside Milwaukee. Figure 1 shows ELA growth for choice-participating students by years of school choice enrollment during the study period, relative to similar students who remained in public school. One year of school choice attendance directionally showed an increase in performance, but that relationship was statistically insignificant. A different result is seen after additional years of school choice attendance.

Figure 1.
ELA Achievement Gain by
Years of Private School
Choice, Milwaukee



* School Choice Demonstration Project. <https://scdp.uark.edu/milwaukee-parental-choice-program-evaluation/>

† Bifulco, Robert. 2012. Can Non-Experimental Estimates Replicate Estimates Based on Random Assignment in Evaluations of School Choice? A Within-Study Comparison. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/pam.20637>

‡ Bloom, Howard, Carolyn Hill and Mark Lipsey. 2008. Performance Trajectories and Performance Gaps as Achievement Effect-Size Benchmarks for Educational Interventions. *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness*. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED503202.pdf>

The numbers do not cleanly step up as one might expect. However, all years of school choice beyond the first are correlated with statistically significantly higher achievement growth. Attending a choice school for all four years of the study was correlated with 0.371 standard deviations of ELA growth — more than the expected gain from a year of typical schooling. Any exposure at all to school choice was related to 0.331 standard deviations of growth, also equivalent to more than one year of growth.

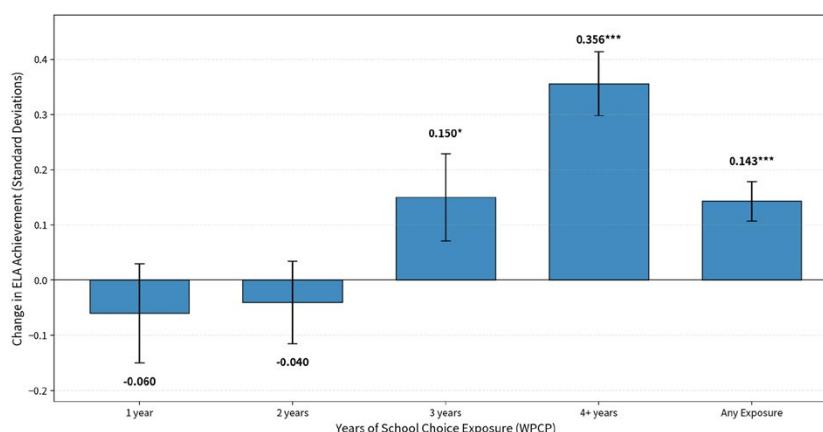
This suggests that changing schools may involve an adjustment period before students fully benefit from their new learning environment. This is consistent with existing research* that suggest prolonged exposure to traditional schooling alternatives like private school choice or public charter schools is often required before any significant improvements are found.

The School Choice Demonstration Project found significant improvement in reading scores from school choice participation by the 2010 school year in Milwaukee. This new research suggests those achievement advantages have persisted and even grown over time.

Finding 2: Statewide and Racine Results

The next analyses examined results in the Wisconsin Parental Choice Program and Racine Parental Choice Program. This is the first rigorous, student-level analysis of these programs. The statewide WPCP showed a similar pattern to Milwaukee. Small differences appeared during the first years. The first two years in the WPCP had negative coefficients, however these findings were statistically insignificant. Participation in the choice program at years three and four were associated with statistically significant increases in achievement growth.

Figure 2.
ELA Achievement Gain by
Years of Private School
Choice, Statewide



* Angrist, Jonathan, Parag Pathak, and Christopher Walters. "Explaining Charter School Effectiveness." *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*. <https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/app.5.4.1>

Four years of participation was associated with a 0.356 standard deviation increase in achievement. Any length of time enrolled in a private choice school was associated with a 0.143 increase in achievement, equivalent to slightly less than half a year of schooling.

The Racine program also showed positive results. However, the smaller sample size of students created balancing issues that did not allow for the same year-by-year analysis as our evaluation of the other programs. Any exposure at all to the RPCP was related to an increase of 0.572 standard deviations in student growth — essentially almost two years ahead of where they would be expected to be had they stayed in public schools. These are eye-opening results, and do suggest rather dramatic benefits of school choice in the program.

VERIFYING THE RESULTS

To make sure these results weren't an artifact of any single statistical method, we used other statistical models to verify our findings. These included a traditional regression analysis, and inverse probability of treatment weighting. Each approach produced similar conclusions. The overall message remained the same: longer participation in school choice was linked with greater academic growth.

We also tested whether the findings could simply reflect students staying in the same school longer. To test for this, we matched students with two or fewer years of school choice with students with three or four years of school choice based on their likelihood to have participated longer. This represents a tough stress test of the model because the “control” group participant base shrinks severely, but nonetheless similar conclusions were reached.

DISCUSSION

Although the pattern of increasing benefits over time was similar across programs, the size of the estimated effects differed somewhat. Several factors could explain these differences. Milwaukee's program is older and serves a different student population along economic and racial lines than the statewide program. Students entering the programs may differ in prior educational experiences, participating private schools may have different instructional models, and local education markets vary substantially across Wisconsin. Because the purpose of this study was to estimate overall program effects rather than identify the mechanisms behind them, additional research would be needed to determine why impacts vary across settings.

IMPORTANT LIMITATIONS

Because families choose whether to participate in school choice, researchers cannot completely rule out differences that cannot be measured, such as parental motivation or family involvement. The study also took place during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Private and public schools often responded differently during this period, with private schools being more likely to reopen sooner.*

For these reasons, the findings should be viewed as strong evidence of a relationship between school choice participation and student achievement growth rather than absolute proof that school choice alone caused every improvement in every context.

* Fuchs-Schundeln, Nicola, Dirk Krueger, Andre Kurmann, Etienne Lale, Alexander Ludwig and Irina Popova. "The fiscal and welfare effects of policy responses to the Covid-19 school closures." *Econstor*. <https://ideas.repec.org/p/zbw/icirwp/4121.html>

Conclusion

Previous research on Milwaukee's voucher program found positive long-term effects on reading achievement after students had spent several years in participating schools. The present study reaches a remarkably similar conclusion using more recent student-level data and extends those findings to Wisconsin's newer choice programs. These analyses suggest a consistent pattern across multiple cohorts and multiple regions of the state. The recurring finding across all three parent choice programs — that benefits increase with time — strengthens confidence that the relationship is meaningful rather than a statistical anomaly.

This is also the first comprehensive, peer reviewed analysis of school choice programs in Wisconsin outside of Milwaukee. Education reforms are often judged too quickly. This

Conclusion

research suggests that patience matters. Students may need several years in a new school before the full academic benefits become visible. For families, the findings suggest that changing schools should be viewed as a long-term decision. For policymakers, the results suggest that evaluating programs after only one year may underestimate their impact.

In addition to a peer-reviewed version of the MPCP study, future work with this dataset will include a similar comprehensive analysis of Wisconsin's charter school sector. This forthcoming research will also be accompanied by a similar explainer.

The debate around the continued existence of school choice programs in Wisconsin cannot be ignored in this context. Proposals to end or phase out the programs have become increasingly common* in recent years. This research offers important context for this debate. Ending school choice wouldn't just eliminate a choice for families — it would eliminate the option most likely to produce better educational outcomes for their kids.

Across more than 100,000 Wisconsin students, the evidence points in one direction: time and consistency matters. Students who remained in Wisconsin's private school choice programs for several years achieved significantly larger academic gains than similar students who stayed in public schools — and the longer they stayed, the larger the advantage grew.

* Buck, Daniel. "Democrats Aim to Kill School Choice from Wisconsin to the Rest of the US." *Fox News*. <https://www.foxnews.com/opinion/democrats-aim-kill-school-choice-wisconsin-rest-us?msocid=34297bbaac0f6177091c6ed1adcb60aa>





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