



REVIEW OF *SCDP MILWAUKEE EVALUATION REPORT #32*

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Summary of Review

The School Choice Demonstration Project has published a series of reports written in the fifth and final year of its evaluation of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP). This review is of Report #32, which compares the test performance of MPCP students to that of a sample of students from the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS). The comparisons revealed a mixed set of findings with no clear pattern. For example, a sample of low-income MPS students scored higher than MPCP students on average in 4th grade reading, math, and science, and in 8th and 10th grade math. MPCP students, on the other hand, scored higher than the MPS sample in 8th and 10th grade reading and science. The results are not particularly useful beyond providing a snapshot of how MPCP students and a comparison group of low-income MPS students performed on a battery of state exams. A supplemental analysis that found relatively more “very low” performing MPS schools was established by arbitrary cut scores and was potentially biased by unequal group sample sizes. The report correctly cautions readers not to make causal inferences about the effects of either sector given the descriptive nature of the analysis.

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REVIEW OF *SCDP MILWAUKEE EVALUATION REPORT #32*

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I. Introduction

The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP) is currently the largest urban school voucher program in the nation. At present, nearly 21,000 students use a voucher of up to \$6,442 to attend secular or religious private schools in Milwaukee. Voucher programs have long been the targets of intense debates over the efficient and appropriate use of public education funds.

In February 2012 the School Choice Demonstration Project¹ released a series of final reports from its five-year evaluation of the MPCP. The Wisconsin Legislature in 2005 required MPCP schools to administer nationally normed tests in grades 4, 8, and 10 to MPCP students, and also to submit the test scores to the School Choice Demonstration Project for purposes of evaluation. The reports address a range of issues related to the MPCP, including special education services, school climate and contexts, and test score performance. Of particular interest to policymakers has been the performance of MPCP students relative to students in the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS). The School Choice Demonstration Project report under review here is *Report #32, Milwaukee Longitudinal School Choice Evaluation: Annual School Testing Summary Report 2010-11*. It is authored by Anna M. Jacob and Patrick J. Wolf ²

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

This report describes the test score performance of MPCP students on the 2010-2011 Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examinations (WKCE). The WKCE tests students in reading and math in grades 3-8 and 10, and tests students in science, language arts, writing, and social studies in grades 4, 8, and 10. The report compares MPCP results with those of a sample of MPS students. Because participation in the MPCP is restricted to low-income families, comparisons were made with MPS students who were eligible for federal free- and reduced-price lunch (FRL) subsidies. The comparisons revealed a mixed set of findings. For instance, FRL-MPS students scored higher than MPCP students on average in 4th grade reading, math, and science, and in 8th and 10th grade math. MPCP students, on the other hand, scored higher on average than the FRL-MPS students in 8th and 10th grade

reading and science. Black-White and Latino-White achievement gaps were found to be larger among MPCP students than among low-income MPS students. All reported differences were large enough to be considered statistically significant. The report expressed differences in standard deviation units, which ranged from 0.06 to 0.95, with some favoring MPCP students and others favoring the low-income MPS students.

The report offers the following conclusions: “In general, comparisons of the test-score performance of similarly disadvantaged students in the MPCP and MPS tend to favor the MPCP students in reading and science but the MPS students in math” (p. 25). Moreover, the “comparisons also tend to show MPCP students performing at lower levels than their MPS peers in 4th grade but higher levels in 8th and 10th grades” (p. 25).

One section of the report responds to “several media reports” that “have emphasized the fact that low-performing schools endure in the Choice Program and recommend that the public school system of accountability be more fully applied to schools in the MPCP” (p. 19). The report concludes that school-level WKCE data “confirms that some MPCP schools, in some grades and some subjects, have very-low student performance . . . [and] also demonstrates that similarly low-performing schools endure in the MPS” (p. 19). Perhaps related to this point, the report’s executive summary notes a discrepancy between its results and results released by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction on March 29, 2011. By law the Department was required to include students who did not take the test in its calculation of MPCP proficiency rates—thus counting them as non-proficient when in fact their proficiency was unknown (these non-testers would be part of the denominator in those computations). According to the report, this deflates proficiency rates among MPCP students relative to deflated rates among MPC students because more MPCP students (3%) than MPS students (1%) opted out of testing. As an alternative, the SCDP analysis excluded non-testers in the denominator. This alternative calculation helps readers see the various ways that test outcomes can be calculated and in turn how they can produce varying results.

To be sure, the report emphasizes its descriptive nature (“this report describes the test scores of students in the two sectors, plain and simple”) (p. ii) and draws few direct inferences from the analysis. The descriptive data are meant to speak for themselves.

III. The Report’s Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

The report’s findings consist of descriptive statistics of test performance as measured by WKCE average scale scores and proficiency rates. Summary statistics are presented for MPCP and MPS sectors at the student and school levels. Histograms of scale scores from MPCP and MPS schools are also presented to explore differences in test score distributions across sectors. The report established a cut-score, scores below which signified “very low performance” (p. i).³ No rationale was provided as to how these cut scores were chosen. The cut-scores were used to make the determination that “low-performing schools [at least equally] endure in the MPS under the public-school accountability system” (p. 19). The

report concludes that “[o]f the 76 very low performances by school, grade-level, and subject in 2010-11, a total of 35 were from MPCP, while 41 were from MPS” (p. i). The report neglects to consider that the number of schools in the very-low-performance category could be a direct function of the number of schools in each sector sample. There are simply far more MPS schools in the sample (the report’s Table 5 on p. 14 shows that there are 44% more MPS schools in 4th grade calculations, 24% more in 8th grade, and 143% more in 10th grade). The probability is thus greater, assuming the two sector’s test scores are normally distributed, that more schools would fall in the tails of the distribution (see the report’s Figures 8ab and 9ab on p. 15).

Throughout the report comparisons between MPCP and MPS students are qualified with apt warnings such as, “it would be a mistake for readers to draw conclusions concerning the effectiveness of the MPCP based on these or any other annual descriptive statistics” (p. 4). The report’s authors are correct that the study design is not equipped for such causal inferences. The report offers no specific implications of the general patterns observed in the test performances of MPCP and low-income MPS students. The data are presented descriptively without much explanation.

One of the report’s conclusions noted above (“comparisons also tend to show MPCP students performing at lower levels than their MPS peers in 4th grade but higher levels in 8th and 10th grades”[p. 25]) may slightly overstate the data. While the FRL-MPS sample did score higher on average than MPCP students in 4th grade reading, math, and science, the 8th and 10th grade MPCP students scored higher in reading and science, but not in math. MPCP and FRL-MPS students split on the staple disciplines of reading and math.

IV. The Report’s Use of Research Literature

No research literature was referenced in the report. There was really no need for it to do so, as this amounted to a descriptive report on test performance; no research questions were posed or explored.

V. Review of the Report’s Methods

The methods employed were sound, descriptive in nature, and for the most part clearly described. Expressing scale score differences in standard deviation units was particularly helpful, as was portraying the distribution of test scores among the sectors via histograms. The rationale for setting cut scores designated as representing “very low” test performance was not articulated. Further, the comparison between the numbers of “very low” performing schools in the MPCP and MPS sectors was potentially biased by unequal group sample sizes. The creation of the FRL-MPS sample was not ideal because the eligibility standards for federal FRL and the MPCP are different.⁴ Nonetheless, using FRL represents a good-faith attempt at identifying a comparison group. The report acknowledges the potential for inequality between the groups.

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

The report's summary statistics appear accurate. Inferential statistics were used among the comparisons, which invite interpretations about relative performance between MPCP and MPS schools. However sufficient cautions were noted throughout the report in drawing inferences about relative effectiveness.

VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

There is not much to take away from this report. The results are not particularly useful beyond providing a snapshot of how MPCP students and a comparison group of low-income MPS students perform on a battery of state exams. The report correctly cautions readers not to make causal inferences about the effects of either sector, given the descriptive rather than analytical nature of the analysis.

Notes and References

1 The School Choice Demonstration Project (SCDP) is housed in the Department of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas (<http://www.uark.edu/ua/der/SCDP/Research.html>).

2 Jacob, A. M., & Wolf, P. J. (2012). *Milwaukee Longitudinal School Choice Evaluation: Annual School Testing Summary Report 2010-11*. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas School Choice Demonstration Project. Retrieved February 27, 2012, from http://www.uaedreform.org/SCDP/Milwaukee_Research.html.

3 “Very low performance” was defined as below a scale score of 400 in 4th grade math and reading and below a scale score of 450 in 8th and 10th grade math and reading (p. i).

4 Eligibility for the federal lunch program is a family income at or below 185% of the poverty line. In contrast, initial eligibility for the MPCP is at an income ceiling of 175% of the poverty line, and renewal into the MPCP is at 220%.

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#32: Milwaukee Longitudinal School
Choice Evaluation: Annual School
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