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Lessons from the Voucher Schools

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How is Milwaukee's experiment to expand school choice for low-income students faring 15 years later?

First in a seven-day series

Now 15 years old, Milwaukee's school choice program is very much like a teenager - heartwarmingly good at times, disturbingly bad at others, and the subject of myths, misunderstandings and ignorance, even by the adults entrusted with its welfare.

And like a teenager, it remains - for all its familiarity - a bit of a mystery. Few people, even state officials, know what is going on inside all 115 schools in the program.

Over the last five months, the Journal Sentinel attempted to visit each school and find out. In visits to 106 schools, the newspaper focused not on politics and court battles, but on the classrooms themselves - the experiences of the nearly 14,000 students now served by choice schools at a cost this year to taxpayers of $83 million.

Fifteen years ago, state government created in Milwaukee the biggest lab in the United States for one of the nation's most provocative education ideas: giving low-income parents the chance to send their children to private schools using "vouchers" to pay school costs. Eight years later, the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program expanded dramatically, and religious schools of every kind were made available to those parents.

Those visits, along with dozens of interviews with parents, students, teachers, principals, administrators and academics, revealed that many of the popular conceptions and politically motivated depictions of the program are incomplete and, in some cases, flat-out wrong.

The Journal Sentinel found that:

• The voucher schools feel, and look, surprisingly like schools in the Milwaukee Public Schools district. Both MPS and the voucher schools are struggling in the same battle to educate low-income, minority students.

• About 10% of the choice schools demonstrate alarming deficiencies. The collapse of four schools and the state's limited ability to take action against others have led to some agreement on the need for increased oversight to help shut down bad schools.

• The voucher program has brought some fresh energy to the mission of educating low-income youth in the city by fostering and financially supporting several very strong schools that might not exist otherwise. There are at least as many excellent schools as alarming ones.

• The amount of taxpayer money going to pay for religious education in Milwaukee has no parallel in the last century of American life. About 70% of the students in the program attend religious schools. Religion guides the choices that parents make, and the curriculum that a majority of schools choose, and has led to a network of dozens of independent church schools led by African-American ministers throughout the city.

• The choice program regenerated parochial schools in the city, including dozens of Catholic and Lutheran schools, which were experiencing declining enrollment. Overall, it has preserved the status quo in terms of schooling options in the city more than it has offered a range of new, innovative or distinctive schools.

• Parental choice by itself does not assure quality. Some parents pick bad schools - and keep their children in them long after it is clear the schools are failing. This has allowed some of the weakest schools in the program to remain in business.

• There is no evidence that voucher schools have "creamed" the best students from Milwaukee Public Schools, an early concern expressed by some critics. Except for the fact that the public schools are obligated to serve all special education students, the kids in the voucher program appear have the same backgrounds - and bring the same problems - as those in the public schools.

• Creating a new school through the choice program is easier than most people expected. Creating a good new school is harder than most thought it would be.

Dorothy Smith, a mother, grandmother, foster mother and adoptive mother, has seen many different stripes of the program over the last 10 years. She has enrolled several kids in choice schools, as well as MPS schools. She stresses above all else the importance of parents getting into the schools to see for themselves what they have to offer.

"A lot of time information is sugarcoated," she said. "For me, the best way to find out is to go and see for yourself."

Indeed, the Journal Sentinel found that too much of the political debate over vouchers is divorced from what's going on in classrooms. With the exception of the element of religion, it's the same story that's being played out in urban classrooms across America - a story of poverty, limited resources, poor leadership and broken families.

Many people pit school choice and the Milwaukee Public Schools against each other, emphasizing the differences, suggesting that one must fail for the other to succeed. But

more than many politicians and educators realize - or some would care to admit - the challenges of school choice are the challenges of Milwaukee Public Schools.

Some of the articles in this series will touch on what makes the voucher schools unique. But the heart of the series will address the more universal challenges of educating urban, low-income youth, including the struggle to shut down the worst schools, improve the mediocre ones, and create more of the best.

Preserving private schools
What school best reflects the realities of the voucher program?

Is it Eastbrook Academy, where elementary school students learn Latin, where top-notch student work fills the hallways and where the principal, Julie Loomis, draws on her years on the staff of blue-blooded Brookfield Academy to set similar expectations for central-city kids?

Is it Grace Christian Academy, located in a dimly lighted, rented space in the basement of a church? Here, school leaders say they have developed their own curriculum, but one staff member said privately that there is none. When a reporter visited, many of the bookshelves were empty and students completed worksheets downloaded from an Internet site. Only one of four teachers on the staff has a teaching credential. The principal, Reginald Armstrong, said the founder of Grace Christian is a "very godly woman" who had a vision she should start a school.

Or is it St. Adalbert Catholic School, a century-old school, a once all-Polish but now all-Latino program, where a traditional curriculum is taught by fully licensed teachers in a crowded, bubblingly energetic atmosphere?

The answer may well be the third option. The principal effect of choice has been more to preserve the city's private schools, many of them Lutheran and Catholic ones, than to create schools that innovate or reform. Simply going by the numbers, more than half of the students in the program attend Catholic and Lutheran schools that operate in time-tested ways and rarely attract outside attention. Add in other religious schools, and nearly three-quarters of the students in the program attend religious institutions of learning.

Many of the schools feature drill-oriented instruction in math, a heavy reliance on phonics in reading, strict discipline codes and uniforms. More scarce are experimental or "student-centered" approaches.

The voucher program has led to the creation of more than 50 new private schools in the city, and those schools offer examples of both the best and the worst of the program.

The range includes Notre Dame Middle School, an all-girls program on the south side, where the expectations are high and the students often meet them. At Notre Dame, the teachers and administrators work with the predominantly Latina students and families even after they graduate, trying to make sure they make it through high school and on to college. But the range also includes the Academy of Excellence Preparatory School, where reporters found only one administrator and two students the day they visited. The trio was about to leave for McDonald's.

Based on firsthand observations and other reporting, Journal Sentinel reporters concluded that at least 10 of the 106 schools they visited appeared to lack the ability, resources, knowledge or will to offer children even a mediocre education. Most of these were led by

individuals who had little to no background in running schools and had no resources other than the state payments.

Nine other schools would not allow reporters to observe their work. The quality of several of those has been questioned by educators and policy-makers outside the schools who are familiar with their operations.

Uphill climb to success
Even major advocates for the program say they did not realize 15 years ago how hard it was to start good schools from scratch.

Consider CEO Leadership Academy, a high school finishing its first year. It has strong support from an influential group of ministers. The school has been given expert advice on how to create both educational and business operations; it benefited from financial boosts to get started; and it is housed in a beautiful new wing of New Hope Missionary Baptist Church, 2433 W. Roosevelt Drive.

But Denise Pitchford, a former assistant principal in Milwaukee Public Schools who heads the school, says the first year has been a struggle. Many of the school's 60-plus students came to the school years behind in their basic abilities. Catching up became the top priority.

Instead of diving into project-based learning as they had hoped, teachers had to return to the basics. In one English class this last winter, 15 students tried to label different types of sentences as declarative, interrogative, or exclamatory. In a religion class, the teacher reviewed the story of Adam and Eve. Although the academics started slowly, attendance has been strong, at about 96%.

"We see sparks," Pitchford sad. "We see kids actually want to be here."

Building on what has been started at CEO is one matter. Cracking down on schools that didn't start with the strengths of CEO - sometimes to startling degrees - is another challenge altogether.

Sa'Rai Nance was a teacher's aide when she says she heard from God that she should open a school. But, judging by the lack of a curriculum and structure at Sa'Rai and Zigler Upper Excellerated Academy, the charge appears to have come with few details about how she could do that successfully.

A big surprise has been the ease with which new schools, some poorly prepared, are able to join the program, said David Prothero, the director of Catholic education for the Archdiocese of Milwaukee. "We never saw that coming," he noted, adding that recent efforts to put the worst schools out of business are good, but "about eight years too late."

The issue came to the forefront last year when the now-defunct Mandella School of Science and Math turned into a public catastrophe after the owner over-reported students and used state dollars to buy two Mercedes-Benz automobiles. He is currently trying to withdraw a guilty plea made earlier this year in the case.

The Department of Public Instruction, which oversees the program, is working toward a much tighter system of financial regulations, including more extensive audits. The theory is that schools with financial problems are more likely to be troubled in other areas as well, including educationally, said Tony Evers, the deputy state superintendent.

For the most part, the school choice community supports increased financial regulation. Staff at School Choice Wisconsin even took the step of doing background checks last winter on 50 new school proposals, in an effort to alert state officials to potential problems.

Sense of family

One core idea behind vouchers - that parents could be counted on to pick a strong school for their children or pull their kids from the worst - has not proved uniformly true. Some parents continue to send children to weak schools.

Alex's Academics of Excellence, a school started by a convicted rapist, continued to enroll students even after facing two evictions, allegations of drug use by staff on school grounds, and an investigation by the district attorney.

Four of the worst schools have closed - Alex's, Mandella, Academic Solutions Center for Learning and Louis Tucker Academy. But the closures were the result of outside intervention or financial malfeasance, not parents voting with their feet.

Interviews with dozens of parents made it apparent that families pick schools in idiosyncratic, unexpected and misunderstood ways.

Above all else, parents appear to be looking for a feeling of community and safety.

They might trade off trained teachers for small class sizes. Or geographic proximity for a feeling of intimacy. Or overall academic success for a school their child likes.

Some seek a smaller school after struggling against what they perceive as an impersonal bureaucracy at Milwaukee Public Schools. They might desire education in a particular religious community, or simply among people they feel comfortable around.

Nicole Franklin, a parent and teacher at Blyden Delany Academy, an Afrocentric school, said, "When there's a 'situation' it's like a big family here. It really feels good working with people who feel comfortable with you, who are coming from your world."

Often, the families - and some of the school founders themselves - appeared to be motivated more by a dissatisfaction and personal frustration with MPS than anything else.

Indeed, the students at the vast majority of these schools are not high achievers from the public schools. Early critics of the program charged that the schools would "cream" the best and brightest from MPS. While a very small number of schools in the choice program draw more motivated students, and choice schools are not obligated to serve special-education students, many of the schools serve large numbers of at-risk students or even specialize in students who have struggled in MPS.

Of the parents interviewed for this series, many more had children who were struggling than soaring in public schools.

Embracing religion

If any single factor distinguishes the families and parents at the choice schools from those in MPS, it is religion. Students in the choice program pray together in class. They read the Bible, the Qur'an or the Torah. They attend Mass. Most schools report that even students from families outside of their faith accept - and seek out - religion as part of education.

"I wanted (my granddaughter) to get a Catholic education," said Dolores Cooper, a Baptist whose granddaughter, also named Dolores, attends Messmer High School. "It teaches values."

At Dr. Brenda Noach Choice School, middle school students recently were watching Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ." Pastor Charles Ewing, who runs the school's daily operations, explained afterward that the school, and its curriculum, are centered on God.

On one recent Friday afternoon at Salam School, a Muslim school on the city's south side, the students gathered for a schoolwide prayer service. The girls all wore light-blue scarves covering their heads; rows of sneakers lined the walls of the room. Kneeling on carpets spread across the gym floor, the children listened as an imam prayed: "Allah make us better Muslims; Allah make us proud Muslims."

Not only has choice fostered religious start-ups like Ewing's school, it has preserved many of the existing religious schools in the city.

Some, such as Messmer High School, where Dolores Cooper's granddaughter attends, have embraced a new mission, educating a largely non-Catholic student body in a Catholic tradition. Others are uncertain whether they will try to retain their identity as parish schools, serving predominantly Catholic pupils, or stake out a new role.

To Kenneth Marton, the principal of Christ Memorial Lutheran school, choice means one thing above all else: "We can continue our mission to bring Jesus Christ, evangelize, work with the students."

Assessing the broader impact of choice - the effect it has had on the lives of the thousands of students who have participated, and on the quality of education in the city overall - is a trickier task.

There has been almost no research using fresh data about the performance of students in voucher schools since 1995, when the state Legislature dropped a requirement that there be an annual performance report on the schools.

Nor have the voucher schools provided a real solution to the problems confronting inner-city youth.

Howard Fuller, the former MPS superintendent who is the most prominent advocate of the voucher program, argues that school choice has prompted some talented educators to open schools and given low-income families a chance to make the private schooling choice that wealthier families have always had.

But Martin Carnoy, a Stanford University professor who has been critical of vouchers, says: "I don't see what the big impact of all of this was. Milwaukee's on the map as having done this. Not many other places jumped on the bandwagon, and I think the reason is they don't see anything spectacular and terrific happening. Basically, they can live without it."

There is a case to be made that the voucher schools have had a positive effect on the Milwaukee Public Schools as a whole, but it is anecdotal and strongly subject to opinion.

There are signs that the performance of MPS students on standardized tests has improved, and that a sense of reform has taken hold in MPS, as shown by the work of the current and

most recent school superintendents, William Andrekopoulos and Spence Korte.

Others argue that the voucher program has drained resources and attention from MPS and crimped efforts to advance the far greater number of students - more than 85,000 - who still attend the main body of MPS schools.

The biggest impact of choice may be intangible. It opened the door for the spread of other forms of school choice, including charter schools, which have taken innovative paths and have been growing rapidly in enrollment. The voucher movement elicited soul-searching among educators as to the definition, and nature, of a public school.

When the state created the Milwaukee voucher program, nothing like it existed in the U.S. It was a blank slate, an opportunity for both parents and school operators to do things that hadn't been done before.

As Paul Hill, chairman of the National Working Commission on Choice in K-12 Education, a Brookings Institution effort, wrote in 2003, " 'Choice' does not educate anyone. Choice is not a teacher, a classroom or an instructional resource. If choice affects what students learn, it works indirectly, by leading to changes in what students experience, read and hear."

After 15 years, the slate is no longer blank. Some that has been written on it has been good; some of it bad. It is unfortunate, then, that the debates about the program often seem removed from the real dynamics that play out in classrooms each day.

It is in the city's classrooms that common ground, and a common cause, can be found.

Leonard Sykes Jr. of the Journal Sentinel staff contributed to this report.