

**ASA**  
*Advocates for  
Student Achievement*



## Challenges Facing the Milwaukee Public Schools

### Milwaukee's Education Marketplace

#### Introduction

In its March 2007 report "Challenges Today and Tomorrow: An Analysis of the Present and Future Financial Condition of MPS," the Wisconsin Taxpayer's Alliance, identified the Milwaukee Public School's "declining market share," or loss of student enrollment to other education options, as one of the key challenges facing the district. "The Milwaukee area is a competitive one for K-12 education," the report's authors noted. "Parents and students have a number of options in addition to MPS, including parochial schools, charter schools, and several 'choice' programs."

Indeed, the city of Milwaukee has been at the center of efforts to reform education in the United States through the development of taxpayer-supported alternatives to the public education system for more than two decades. The city is home to Howard Fuller, PhD, a national leader in the movement. In 1990, the state legislature enacted the nation's first school voucher program.

There are numerous other options outside of MPS for Milwaukee students, including charter schools operated by other authorities, private schools, and the Chapter 220 voluntary integration program, which lets students from Milwaukee attend suburban schools. Wisconsin also has a unique open enrollment law that lets students apply to attend the schools of any district in the state. Enacted for

the 1999-2000 school year, there are now more than 4,300 students from Milwaukee using this option.

However, the largest program, by far, is the state voucher program, which provides students who live below the poverty line with a ‘voucher’ worth \$6,607 that can be used to attend more than 120 private schools. In 2008, for the first time, the number of students using vouchers exceeded 20,000. The total size of the voucher program for 2008 is estimated at \$129 million, up from \$120 million in 2007.

As noted, the presence of these options has resulted in a loss of market share for MPS. An analysis by the Journal Sentinel shows that, enrollment at MPS has dropped from 97,000 in 1998 to fewer than 80,000 in 2008, a decline of nearly 18%. During that time, enrollment in the voucher program grew from over 6,000 to more than 20,000.

**Projected 2008 Enrollment**

Option	Students	Percent of Total
MPS	79,500	68%
Choice Schools	20,244	17%
UWM, City of Milwaukee Charter Schools	5,015	4%
Open Enrollment Program	4,367	4%
MPS Instrumentality/ Charter Schools	3,190	3%
MPS Partnership and Alternative Schools	2,629	2%
Chapter 220 Program	2,525	2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>117,470</b>	

Source: Journal Sentinel

## The Debate Over Vouchers

The voucher program has inspired a vigorous debate from proponents and detractors over the cost, scale, and efficacy of the program. Vouchers are often an issue in school board elections, driving interest from advocacy groups as well as financial contributions to candidates.

In Milwaukee, the voucher program is limited to students from low-income families. Backers of the program argue that vouchers give students an opportunity to transfer from poor performing public schools to private and sectarian schools with high achievement and graduation rates.

School Choice Wisconsin, the state’s leading voucher advocacy organization, tracks studies of students in Milwaukee’s voucher program and similar programs around the country. A January 2008 study by the group found that students attending voucher schools are more likely to graduate from high school. The study looked at students over a four-year period and concluded “had MPS graduation rates equaled those for (voucher) students, the number of MPS graduates would have been 14 per cent higher.”

The group also points to research suggesting that MPS per-pupil spending has increased during the expansion of the choice program in Milwaukee, and that the district has more become responsive to parents in terms of programming and educational innovation.

Opponents of vouchers argue that the program decreases revenue for MPS through decreased enrollment and increased costs for Milwaukee taxpayers (the “funding flaw”) and that private schools are not accountable for the tax dollars they receive. There is also

concern that choice schools ‘cream’ off the best students—leaving MPS with a higher percentage of high needs and hard to serve children, as well as charges that private schools systematically discourage enrollment by students with special education needs. Opponents also argue that little evidence exists to support claims that students using vouchers receive a superior education.

In terms of student achievement, there is controversy over whether students in voucher schools perform any better than students in public schools, after accounting for factors such as income, race, and parental education and involvement. Studies are now underway that aim to compare test scores and graduation rates among MPS and voucher student populations.

### **Summary**

The challenge facing MPS in confronting an environment of growing educational options is to create quality programming aimed at serving Milwaukee’s diverse student population, and to regain public confidence that the school district can provide the majority of its students with a quality education. District leadership will have to work closely with state legislators to resolve ongoing funding issues and with community partners to create innovative options for children and their parents.

### **Sources**

“Challenges Today and Tomorrow: An Analysis of the Present and Future Financial Condition of MPS.” Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance. March 2007.

“20,000 students now use vouchers.” *Journal Sentinel*. November 9, 2008.

“Graduation Rates for Choice and Public School Students in Milwaukee.” John Robert Warren, PhD. School Choice Wisconsin. January 2008.

“Milwaukee’s Public Schools in an Era of Choice.” School Choice Wisconsin. February 2007.

### ***About Advocates for Student Achievement***

*Formed in 2007, ASA’s mission is to increase academic achievement for every student in Milwaukee by recruiting and electing school board members who have the talent, focus, and experience required to make its urban schools among the best in the nation. For more information, visit: [www.asamke.org](http://www.asamke.org).*