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# The Real Lessons of Milwaukee's Voucher Experiment

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Once upon a time, the mention of Milwaukee may have conjured up images of beer, bratwurst, motorcycles, Fonzie the good-hearted delinquent from "Happy Days," and a couple of working-class women called Laverne and Shirley. These days, Milwaukee is more likely to be associated with the nation's first private-school-voucher experiment, a program whose alleged success is now being touted as a justification for establishing similar voucher "experiments" around the country.

Billed as a model urban school reform by its supporters when it was passed in 1990, the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program was supposed to increase the academic performance of poor children, "empower" their parents, and force the Milwaukee public schools to improve by threatening them with competition. Despite its small size (no more than approximately 1,600 students have ever been enrolled at one time) and lack of clear academic benefits, the Milwaukee program continues to make big waves in educational policy circles. The "success" of Milwaukee's program is now cited as a reason to support SB1, the proposed Safe and Affordable Schools Act, and HR103, the American Community Renewal Act, both of which seek to provide federal funds to support private-school-voucher programs.

Until last year, one of the biggest problems voucher proponents faced when making their case was the failure of the five annual evaluations of the Milwaukee program, conducted between 1991 and 1995 by University of Wisconsin-Madison political science professor John Witte, to find any achievement advantage for students attending voucher schools. However, on Aug. 14, 1996, in a Wall Street Journal op-ed piece entitled "School Choice Data Rescued From Bad Science," Jay Greene of the University of Houston and Paul Peterson of Harvard University claimed that their reanalysis of data gathered by Mr. Witte revealed that, after three to four years in

Milwaukee's voucher program, students scored higher in math and in reading than students who had applied for the voucher program but were not admitted. According to Messrs. Greene and Peterson, these differences in achievement were "substantially significant"--an important-sounding characterization with no precise research meaning. (["New Studies on Private Choice Contradict Each Other,"](#) Sept. 4, 1996, and ["Statistics From Cleveland Add Fuel to the Voucher Debate,"](#) This Week's News.)

The case for vouchers seemed to strengthen further when a second reanalysis of the Witte data conducted by Cecilia Rouse of Princeton University purported to show an academic advantage for Milwaukee voucher students in math. Ms. Rouse's work was brought to national attention on Jan. 21, 1997, in a Wall Street Journal op-ed essay by Howard Fuller, Milwaukee's African-American former school superintendent. Mr. Fuller, now a distinguished professor of education at Marquette University, cited both of those reanalyses of the Witte data--by Messrs. Greene, Peterson, and Jiangtao Du and by Celia Rouse--to argue that "our courts and elected officials need to pursue every path to let this experiment continue."

Mr. Fuller's views are consistent with the shifting position of some elite opinionmakers on the issue of publicly funded vouchers. In a New York Times editorial last April entitled "Philadelphia School Wars," Brent Staples concluded that if Philadelphia Superintendent David W. Hornbeck fails to reform that city's schools, "vouchers could be the next stop." Several weeks later, The New York Times, drawing on the Greene, Peterson, and Du reanalysis of Mr. Witte's data, concluded editorially that "... the Milwaukee data should serve notice on the teachers' union--and large, urban districts everywhere--that if the schools do not improve quickly, vouchers could become irresistible."

On May 5, the Annie B. Casey Foundation joined the fray, arguing in its "Kids Count Data Book" that school choice should be among the nontraditional options and approaches considered to increase the school performance of children living in poverty. And in his second New York Times editorial on the subject, on May 15, Brent Staples argued that although "an early study" (presumably John Witte's five annual evaluations) showed no academic advantage for Milwaukee's voucher students, "two better-designed studies [actually reanalyses of data derived from Mr. Witte's study]--one from Harvard University, the second from Princeton--showed that the voucher students improved appreciably in math." Disconcertingly, in the same editorial, Mr. Staples mangled a number of facts about the situation in Milwaukee, apparently for the purpose of discrediting Milwaukee's public school system--a common tactic among some voucher supporters. He claimed, for example, that the existence of public Montessori schools is as a result of competition from the voucher program. In fact, Milwaukee has had public Montessori schools since 1976--15 years before the voucher program was implemented. He also claimed that "half the seats" in some Milwaukee magnet schools were "reserved for whites." Wrong again. Milwaukee's desegregation guidelines call for desegregated

schools to be between 30 percent and 70 percent African-American, and no school in the system reserves "half the seats" for whites.

The problems with the Greene, Peterson, and Du reanalysis of the Milwaukee data are manifold. For example, their own tables (specifically 4, 5, and 6) do not support their claims about reading achievement or, in some instances, about math achievement either. Furthermore, the number of students involved is so small (as few as 26 cases) that any claims about the significance of their findings must be viewed with considerable suspicion.

In Ms. Rouse's case, she writes that "... I estimate that private school students gained approximately 1.3 percentage points per year (in math and reading combined) and the effect has a p-value of 0.063." Since the standard protocol for statistical significance is 0.05 or lower one must wonder just what Ms. Rouse has demonstrated. She goes on to say that she "had to impute the total math score for a significant fraction of Milwaukee public school students," that there was "substantial sample attrition in later years," and that her statistical strategies "cannot substitute for better data." It is hard to see how evidence this weak suggests that a nationwide "experiment" with taxpayer-financed vouchers is either a good way to improve the quality of education for poor children or a wise use of public money. Nevertheless, the shift of elite opinion toward vouchers continues.

Exotic statistical treatments deployed in an attempt to divine the putative academic benefits conferred by Milwaukee's voucher program may be useful in confusing editorial writers, but they can reveal nothing about the more important political lesson to be drawn from Milwaukee's experience with vouchers. That lesson is now emerging as the coalition that successfully created the voucher program in Milwaukee crumbles.

The pro-voucher coalition has always had a diverse cast of characters representing a volatile combination of interests. The author of the 1990 voucher bill, Annette "Polly" Williams, an African-American Democratic member of the Wisconsin Assembly, saw her voucher plan as a way of supporting African-American community schools and weakening the hold that white-dominated institutions had over the education of black children. To Michael Joyce, the president of Milwaukee's right-wing Bradley Foundation, the voucher program represented a step toward the sort of unrestricted, free market plan first envisioned by economist Milton Friedman. Polly Williams gave the program legitimacy as an effort to empower poor (primarily African-American) parents, and Michael Joyce provided millions of dollars to help keep the program visible and the public-policy pot boiling. Wisconsin's conservative Republican governor, Tommy Thompson, and Milwaukee's "New Democrat" mayor, John Norquist, provided a bipartisan cheerleading squad. For Gov. Thompson, vouchers fit nicely in the general privatization and deregulatory trajectory he has charted for Wisconsin's public institutions. For Mayor Norquist, the voucher program offers a chance to stem white

flight--if students attending Milwaukee's overwhelmingly white Roman Catholic school system become eligible for taxpayer-financed vouchers. And for the Catholic Church, vouchers are a potentially vital fiscal lifeline.

In 1995, with Republicans in control of both Wisconsin legislative chambers and the Milwaukee business community solidly on board, voucher supporters succeeded in passing legislation that included religious schools in the program and in removing all limits on the number of low-income students who could participate. At the same time, the troublesome evaluation component of the program was eliminated, effectively destroying the program's value as an experiment, and revealing how cynically the "let's experiment" argument is used by many voucher advocates.

In the midst of this political success, the voucher coalition began to come unglued. Although the program's expansion to include religious schools was almost immediately blocked in court, the program's maximum enrollment was allowed to rise to 15,000 (only about 1,600 students actually enrolled) and the percentage of voucher students that a school could enroll was no longer limited. In short order, two new voucher schools failed, with allegations of inflated enrollment figures and missing or fraudulent financial data being widely reported. And some voucher parents began to complain about supplementary fees and demands to raise funds for or provide services to the schools their children attended, practices that created an economic barrier for poor parents who wanted to participate in the program.

Shortly after the 1995 expansion of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program was ruled unconstitutional by a Wisconsin circuit court on Jan. 15, 1997, Polly Williams was ready with her own revision of Wisconsin's voucher legislation. Ms. Williams' bill does not include religious schools and restores provisions intended to better monitor the fiscal affairs and administrative practices of voucher schools. She was immediately opposed by erstwhile allies such as the Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce, the Wisconsin Catholic Conference, and the Bradley Foundation-funded Partners Advancing Values in Education, formerly the Milwaukee Archdiocesan Education Foundation, scholarship program.

Bradley Foundation President Joyce (who once claimed that "the Lord God" had led him to support Ms. Williams) and former Superintendent Fuller, who has close ties to both the Bradley Foundation and Milwaukee's white business establishment, remained uncharacteristically quiet about Ms. Williams' legislative proposals. Even the normally loquacious Tommy Thompson and John Norquist could find little to say about her efforts.

According to longtime Williams aide Larry Harwell, a takeover of the voucher agenda by free-market ideologues and Catholics would threaten the principles that have guided the program from its inception. Mr. Harwell is right to be concerned, but it is too late--the agenda is already out of Polly Williams' hands. An angry Ms. Williams told the

education journal Rethinking Schools: "When I formed a coalition with Tim Sheehy [the president of the Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce] and the Catholic archdiocese, and those people who say they supported us, I did so because it was a way of helping my parents. I knew all along they didn't care about my children. They cared about their agenda."

The Milwaukee voucher program has allowed a small number of poor parents to send their children to private schools, but it has failed to deliver the educational benefits supporters claimed for it. The most important lesson to be learned from Milwaukee's experience is not educational, but political. It's a lesson in how the white power structure has used the Milwaukee program to advance an agenda that has little, if anything, to do with the needs of impoverished African-American children.

As a disgusted Polly Williams told Rethinking Schools, "If they really cared about our community the way they say, we would not be in such dire need right now. They have all the power and money in their hands. They could help make the conditions better in our community. But they don't."