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Unfinished Business in Milwaukee

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In June of 1998, the Wisconsin Supreme Court found constitutional the expansion of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program to include religious schools. The refusal of the U.S. Supreme Court to review the Wisconsin decision means that, for the time being, the only voucher program in the country that involves religious schools without a constitutional sword over its head is Milwaukee's.

Although the constitutionality of the Milwaukee program is settled, its impact is still a matter of heated debate, a debate that continues to have national significance as state legislatures and the U.S. Congress consider voucher bills. Some disagreements over vouchers are not likely to be resolved by additional data. However, to the extent that data can help shape public policy that frames government-financed private-school-voucher programs, there is much yet to be learned from Milwaukee.

Unfortunately, in 1995, when the Wisconsin legislature expanded the Milwaukee program to include religious schools, it effectively removed the requirement that the program be evaluated. Currently, the only evaluation component left in the law requires the Wisconsin legislative audit bureau to conduct an audit of the program. The audit bureau's report is expected sometime late this year or early next year, but voucher schools are not required to participate in the statewide testing program, to administer the same tests, or to share the testing data they have on their students. Therefore, it is doubtful that the audit bureau's report will have much to say about the relative academic performance of voucher schools.

The legislature's decision to virtually eliminate any evaluation of the performance of the Milwaukee program is puzzling because the effects of the Milwaukee voucher program were (and still are) far from settled. For example, between 1990 and 1995, the University of Wisconsin-Madison political science professor John Witte conducted the annual evaluations required by the original legislation. He found that attending voucher schools conferred no achievement advantage. Using a different

approach to the same data, the researchers Jay P. Greene, Paul E. Peterson, and Jiangtao Du concluded that attendance at voucher schools had a cumulative achievement effect that only showed up after three or four years. They reported that students who were in the program three or four years had significantly higher scores in reading and in math than students who applied for but were not admitted to the program. Cecilia Rouse conducted a third analysis of Mr. Witte's data. She found a significant advantage in math for voucher students who were in the program for three or four years and no achievement advantage in reading for voucher students.

Given the differing interpretations of the same data and the small number of students involved, it would have been desirable for the Wisconsin legislature to address the perceived flaws in the data by drafting a tightly drawn and comprehensive evaluation provision when it expanded the program. However, since the legislature did not, both supporters and opponents of educational vouchers can point to the Milwaukee program and claim support for their views. As the program continues and expands, virtually no new data are being systematically collected, and important public-policy questions remain unanswerable.

One of the fundamental arguments of many voucher supporters is that private schools do a better job of educating children than public schools. Roman Catholic schools have, of late, been deemed particularly praiseworthy. It would be helpful to know how Catholic and other private schools participating in the Milwaukee voucher program are performing, but the Milwaukee Archdiocese refuses to release its test results. Rumor is that its voucher students are performing less well than their public school counterparts. In truth, no one knows. The last time the public saw the archdiocesan test results was in 1991, when *The Milwaukee Journal* succeeded in getting them. Those results suggested that when children of similar social and economic background were compared, Catholic schools were doing no better and perhaps a bit worse at educating minority children than the Milwaukee public schools.

Achievement data are not the only sort of information currently unavailable in Milwaukee. Also missing is information relevant to issues such as racial segregation and social-class stratification. According to the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, following the Wisconsin Supreme Court's ruling, the number of private schools participating in the program increased from 23 nonreligious schools in 1997-98 to 86 private schools (30 nonreligious and 56 religious) in 1998-99. The number of students involved increased from 1,500 to 6,050. The program is legally allowed to enroll up to 15,000 students. Given this increase in enrollment (and the potential for future increases), it would be very helpful to know whether Milwaukee's voucher program increases, decreases, or has no impact on school segregation in the city. Right now, no one can say for sure; however, there may be reason to be concerned. Of the 6,050 students the state department of public instruction says were in the program as of January 1999, 2,274 were already enrolled in a private school; 1,114 had never been enrolled in school before; 1,295 had been in the voucher program the preceding year; and 1,367 were enrolled in the Milwaukee public schools the preceding year. No one knows the racial or ethnic characteristics of students who were previously enrolled in private schools, nor those who

were never enrolled in school before. It is likely, however, that the majority of students previously enrolled in private schools were white. As time passes and students move into and out of voucher schools, it will be impossible to know what impact the voucher program is having on racial isolation without the ability to gather systematic data.

A good deal of the pro-voucher argument concerns the alleged efficiency of private schools. In Milwaukee, the benefits of the voucher program relative to its cost cannot be clearly determined. It would appear, for example, that since the state now pays up to \$4,894 per voucher student, and a majority of voucher students are in the relatively cheap pre-K-through-3 grades, voucher schools may currently enjoy a financial advantage over Milwaukee's public schools. The relative costs of public and voucher schools cannot be accurately calculated, however, without being able to gather and analyze comparable financial data for the schools and school systems involved in the program.

One of the bedrock principles advanced by voucher advocates in Milwaukee and elsewhere is the importance of parents' being able to choose the schools that their children attend. Thus empowered, parents will impose accountability on voucher schools by "voting with their feet." Given the importance of this principle to the voucher reform, it is important to learn the extent to which the Milwaukee voucher program provides genuine as opposed to formal options for parents. There is some evidence to suggest that this is an area that merits careful attention.

This past spring, People for the American Way and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People sponsored an investigation into the admissions procedures and other practices of Milwaukee's voucher schools. The investigation, conducted by the Metropolitan Milwaukee Fair Housing Council, found instances of unlawful admissions requirements, such as requiring parental agreement to support and engage in religious activities, to be active in school fund raising, and to provide volunteer services. The legal requirement to randomly admit students was not always followed, nor was the right to opt out of religious activity. A number of schools appear to have imposed fees that are illegal under the Milwaukee parental-choice law. Further, some schools have enrollment periods that may operate in such a way as to discourage the enrollment of new voucher students. At the moment, there is no way to know the degree to which such school practices or other factors restrict parent choices.

According to a recent report by the Milwaukee-area voucher advocate Susan Mitchell, when the Milwaukee program was enacted in 1990, it was intended to accomplish three purposes: "to foster more educational options for poor parents, better achievement for their children, and improved performance in the Milwaukee public schools." After nine years, no one can say with assurance whether or to what extent the program has met those objectives. The time has come to make a renewed effort to assess the educational, economic, and social impacts of Milwaukee's voucher program.

Some researchers, policymakers, and interest groups are currently promoting the idea of a national voucher experiment as a way of addressing unresolved questions about

educational vouchers. It would be far better to focus on Milwaukee, where a large voucher program already exists and is under no constitutional threat. The time is right for a team of social scientists to approach the Wisconsin legislature with a well-thought-out evaluation plan recognized as fair by both voucher advocates and voucher skeptics. Good public policy demands that the legislature be willing to modify the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program legislation so that such an evaluation could be carried out if such a plan comes forward.