



## School choice benefits Wisconsin students

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Last week, Mike McCabe (formerly) of the Wisconsin Democracy Campaign argued in this newspaper that “truth in labeling” requires labeling Wisconsin’s Parental Choice Program the “nation’s first scholastic welfare program” because the taxpayers are “picking up the tab.”

McCabe’s insistence on the “welfare” label is a not-so-subtle insinuation that conservative supporters of school choice are hypocritical to support a welfare program. Although it’s certainly interesting to see a left-wing activist find a welfare program he doesn’t like, this critique misses the broader context and fails on its own terms.

Following McCabe’s own logic, the Parental Choice Program can’t be the first “scholastic welfare program” because it was long predated by our taxpayer-funded district school system.

Taxpayers subsidize attendance in district schools in the same way they subsidize students in the parental choice program. Are we all welfare recipients now?

For that matter, we can see that “voucherization” of other government welfare programs has generally been a positive force. Although not without their flaws and unintended consequences, welfare programs that provide recipients access to greater choices in the market are superior to the government-provision programs that they replaced.

For example, housing vouchers allow people to decide where they live rather than forcing them into notoriously run-down and dangerous “projects.” Food vouchers allow recipients to shop in the same grocery stores as everyone else rather than waiting in line for barely edible “government cheese.” And unlike our shamefully broken VA system, where veterans frequently suffer and die on wait lists to get care from government-run hospitals, Medicaid vouchers allow recipients to choose where to receive their healthcare.

Though imperfect, these programs introduce market forces into places where they were previously absent, and are generally seen as an improvement.

Likewise, school choice programs give parents more control over where to send their children based on their particular needs. It’s no wonder that so many parents are embracing the ability to choose schools that have been shown to be safer and higher performing.

That's right, contrary to McCabe's claim that voucher students are "doing somewhat worse" than their district school peers in Wisconsin and elsewhere, the near-consensus of high-quality research finds that school choice programs improve student outcomes, including improving performance on standardized tests, increasing rates of high school graduation and college matriculation, and even reducing rates of criminality.

A five-year longitudinal study of Milwaukee's school voucher program found that voucher students performed as well or better on standardized tests than students from similar backgrounds attending district schools. More importantly, Milwaukee voucher students enrolled and persisted in four-year colleges at a rate four to seven percentage points higher than similar district school students. And earlier this year, researchers found that students who had attended private schools using vouchers for a sustained period of time — especially young males — were significantly less likely to engage in criminal activity than their district school peers.

Moreover — again contrary to McCabe's assertion — the voucher program produces these results at a lower cost per pupil than district school students.

For example, according to the most recent figures from Department of Public Instruction, the state provides Beloit more than \$9,300 per district school student. Taking local revenue into account, the average expenditure per student in Beloit is \$12,880. This exceeds the cost of a voucher by more than \$5,000 per student.

Beloit is not unique. Statewide, vouchers cost \$7,200 for K-8 and \$7,856 for high school while the average per pupil expenditure at Wisconsin district schools is \$12,705. Once local, state and federal revenue is taken into account, there is not a single district in the state where vouchers cost more per pupil than district school students.

Simply put, taxpayers save money when students accept a voucher rather than attend their assigned district school. District school students benefit from choice as well. When students have the option to leave, district schools are more responsive to their needs. Five studies of the competitive effects of Milwaukee's voucher program found that the increased choice and competition had positive effects on district school performance. A 2009 study by Dr. Jay Greene and Ryan Marsh of the University of Arkansas concluded, "It appears that Milwaukee public schools are more attentive to the academic needs of students when those students have more opportunities to leave those schools."

School choice expansion in Wisconsin is about expanding opportunities for our children to receive the best education that they can. Opponents can call it "welfare" or whatever they want, but they can't deny that school choice provides better results at a lower cost.

Let's not let half-truths and silly rhetoric destroy a program that helps the kids who need it most.

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