

# School Choice Improves Public Schools

*“The really big problem with public education has been its unwillingness to look at itself and change. No school bureaucracy will reform itself internally. It only comes through pressure. And the most effective form of pressure is choice.”*

**Kevin P. Chavous, D.C. Council Education Chairman**

*Updated January 2004*

School choice can be an impetus for positive change *within* a public school district. A growing body of research indicates that public schools respond favorably to competition—and the more options students have, the better public schools rise to the challenge of keeping and attracting students.

## Research

**Milwaukee** — A recent report demonstrates that the academic achievement of Milwaukee public school students has improved during a time of rapidly expanding educational options. The report shows that student performance on statewide exams increased on 13 of 15 grade and subject categories between 1997 and 2003. The gains came even as MPS educated more students who live in poverty or come from racial and ethnic minority groups.

“Milwaukee’s Public Schools in an Era of Choice,” American Education Reform Council, October 2003.

During the period of these gains, Milwaukee experienced rapid growth in tax-supported school choice and charter school programs. Former Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) Board Member John Gardner explained: “The expansion of choice has prompted a positive response from many MPS Schools, which in turn generated internal pressure for the comprehensive, systemic changes that have proven impossible in major urban districts.”

John Gardner, “How School Choice Helps the Milwaukee Public Schools,” American Education Reform Council, January 2002.

In other Milwaukee research, a noted Harvard economist, Caroline M. Hoxby, investigated the impact on public school productivity of school choice in Milwaukee (and of charter schools in Michigan and Arizona). In Milwaukee, she analyzed MPS schools most likely to have been affected by competition; those less likely to have been affected by competition; and a control group of Wisconsin public schools not exposed to vouchers. She concluded:

“Overall, an evaluation of Milwaukee suggests that public schools have a strong, positive response to competition from vouchers. ... [S]chools that faced the most potential competition from vouchers had the best productivity response.”

“School Choice and School Productivity (Or, Could School Choice be a Tide that Lifts All Boats?),” *Education Next*, Winter 2001.

Researchers with the Manhattan Institute also studied the competitive effects of Milwaukee’s school choice program. The positive effects of competition were especially strong among elementary schools, thanks to the city’s wide array of schools. Researchers found that elementary schools where more students who qualified for vouchers (and which thus faced greater competition) saw their 4<sup>th</sup> grade test scores rise faster than other schools, even when controlling for student race and income and school resources:

“If a public school had only 50% of its students eligible for private-school scholarships ... it could expect its average test score to decrease by just over 5 percentile points. On the other hand, if the same public school had 100% of its students eligible for private-school scholarships ... it could expect its average test score to increase by just over 10 percentile points—a 15-point difference.”

Jay P. Greene and Greg Forster, “Rising to the Challenge: The Effect of School Choice on Public Schools in Milwaukee and San Antonio,” Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, Civic Bulletin No. 27, October 2002.

These findings confirm numerous reports about the positive impact the voucher program has had on the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS). In a November 2002 documentary produced by AERC, “Freedom to Choose,” MPS Superintendent William Andrekopoulos states, “That competitive nature has raised the bar for educators in Milwaukee to provide a good product or they know that parents will simply walk...”

Members of the MPS board of directors have also noted the benefits of school choice in Milwaukee. Labor union member Director Ken Johnson said, “When choice came about, MPS had to rethink education: It’s now a matter of seeing parents as customers.” In a statement to the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, Director Joe Dannecker said, “Where schools go out and knock on doors, it has a huge impact on parents. They actually get interested and are willing to go down and visit the school.”

Some school choice opponents now agree about its benefits. “I really hate to say this because I’m not a choice supporter, but I do think that the threat of choice did force the public school system to make those changes,” said State Representative Christine Sinicki to the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*.

**Florida** — In two separate evaluations, researchers have found that Florida’s A+ Program—in which students at chronically failing schools are free to transfer to better performing public or private schools through Opportunity Scholarships—has raised achievement in Florida’s worst public schools. The public schools that face the greatest competition from school choice show the greatest academic gains.

The most recent evaluation of the A+ Program found, “Florida’s low-performing schools are improving in direct proportion to the challenge they face from voucher competition.”

The researchers compared low-performing public schools facing voucher competition to similar schools with no threat of competition. “The results show that voucher competition in Florida is leading to significant academic improvements in public schools. Public schools currently facing voucher competition or the prospect of competition made exceptional gains on both the FCAT and the Stanford-9 [state-sponsored] tests compared to all other Florida public schools and the other subgroups in our analysis.”

### **Low-performing schools facing the greatest competition recorded the highest gains relative to other Florida public schools:**

- √ 9.3 scale score points on the FCAT math test
- √ 10.1 points on the FCAT reading test
- √ 5.1 percentile points on the Stanford-9 math test

Jay P. Greene and Marcus A. Winters, “When Schools Compete: The Effects of Vouchers on Florida Public School Achievement,” Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, Education Working Paper No. 2, August 2003.

An earlier evaluation sponsored by the Florida Department of Education also identified positive effects of the A+ Program on the state's public schools.

The report declared: "The Florida A-Plus Program is a school accountability system with teeth ... [T]he A-Plus Program has been successful at motivating failing schools to improve their academic performance. ... [S]chools receiving a failing grade from the state in 1999 and whose students would have been offered tuition vouchers if they failed a second time achieved test score gains more than twice as large as those achieved by other schools. ... [T]he performance of students on academic tests improves when public schools are faced with the prospect that their students will receive vouchers."

"An Evaluation of the Florida A-Plus Accountability and School Choice Program," Florida State University, the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, and Harvard University Program on Education Policy and Governance, February 15, 2001.

The Urban League of Greater Miami and others hired education researcher Carol Innerst to identify whether Florida schools took steps to avoid "failing" designations. Based on documents from schools throughout Florida, she said the Florida choice program "instilled in the public schools a sense of urgency and zeal for reform not seen in the past, when a school's failure was rewarded only with more money. ..."

"Competing to Win: How Florida's A+ Plan Has Triggered Public School Reform," Urban League of Greater Miami, Collins Center for Public Policy, Floridians for School Choice, James Madison Institute, Center for Education Reform, April 2000.

**Maine & Vermont** — A Friedman Foundation study in early 2002 concluded that competition for students because of choice programs in Maine and Vermont increases standardized test scores at public high schools.

"The Effects of Town Tuitioning in Maine and Vermont," 2002, available at [www.friedmanfoundation.org](http://www.friedmanfoundation.org).

**San Antonio, Texas** – Since 1998, every student in the Edgewood school district in San Antonio, Texas, has been eligible for a private school scholarship through a privately funded program—and Edgewood schools have improved in response, argue researchers.

Looking at district-wide improvements on the statewide Texas Assessment of Academic Skills test from 1998 to 2001, and controlling for student demographics and school resources, researchers found:

- √ Edgewood's improvement outperformed 85 percent of all Texas school districts
- √ Among Hispanic students (97 percent of Edgewood's population), Edgewood outperformed 73 percent of Texas districts
- √ Among lower-income students (93 percent of Edgewood's population), Edgewood outperformed 75 percent of Texas districts

Jay P. Greene and Greg Forster, "Rising to the Challenge: The Effect of School Choice on Public Schools in Milwaukee and San Antonio," Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, Civic Bulletin No. 27, October 2002.

## News Media

In Milwaukee, the nation's oldest and largest urban school choice program, news reports frequently link positive developments in the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) to school choice.

- √ Wisconsin's largest newspaper, *The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, reported that several public schools in Milwaukee have received "more freedom to shape their programs than traditional [public] schools. ... The schools clearly were aiming to reshape themselves to be more appealing in a more competitive school market." (November 15, 2000)
- √ The *Journal Sentinel* later reported on changes in "the fundamental realities of how many [public] schools operate in Milwaukee." It described "decisions to make schools more independent, more innovative, more attuned to their communities—and, most of all, more popular with parents in an era where Milwaukee parents have more choices for publicly funded education than perhaps anyone in American history." (November 28, 2000)
- √ The paper also reported that "the spirit of choice is permeating the [MPS] ... [S]chools are trying with once-unthinkable earnestness to win over parents." (January 7, 2001) A January 23, 2001, editorial said, "Milwaukee's choice program [has] put pressure on Milwaukee Public Schools to improve."

Within this new environment, MPS campaigned to encourage parents to choose public schools. The campaign included print and broadcast ads, billboards, and open houses. Former MPS Superintendent Spence Korté stressed that MPS wants to be competitive. Appearing statewide on Wisconsin Public Television, Korté said:

"Like many other monopolistic operations, you get a little bit complacent when you're the only game in town. ... We needed to be able to compete, to really get better, and to be more sensitive to what parents are telling us they need." (January 12, 2001)

- √ Interviewed earlier on Milwaukee's WTMJ-TV (NBC), Korté had said, "We are dedicating ourselves to make sure that public schools know how to reach out and know how to serve families, and we're the logical place for people to start for their educational programs. We hope they'll give us a good look." (January 10, 2001)

The district's appeal to parents paid off. The *Journal Sentinel* recently reported, "Enrollment in [MPS] unexpectedly climbed this fall, reversing a three-year slump, as an intense marketing campaign began to bear fruit." The article said "MPS has been losing students since the 1997-98 school year because fewer children are being born in Milwaukee and because the district must compete for that shrinking pie with the private school choice and charter school programs." (October 5, 2001)

The *Journal Sentinel* reported that according to former citywide school board member John Gardner, "MPS was winning families over by aggressively promoting its schools and by paying more attention to parents' requests for child care, smaller class sizes, specialized education programs and other improvements. Budget rules that give each school in the district a set amount of money per student gave school administrators and teachers an incentive to seek more students."