

THE THREE A'S OF ACCOUNTABILITY ASSESSMENTS, AUDITS, AND ACCREDITATION

ASSESSMENTS: State Tests and Academic Performance

Are students who attend private schools via parental choice programs given the same state tests as public school students?

Yes. Private schools **must administer the same state assessments** to participating choice students that public schools use:

- The Wisconsin Forward Exam for English Language Arts and Mathematics for students in grades 3-8;
- The Wisconsin Forward Exam for Science for students in grades 4 and 8;
- The Wisconsin Forward Exam for Social Studies for students in grades 4, 8 and 10;
- The PreACT Secure for students in grades 9 and 10; and
- The ACT With Writing for students in grade 11.

The Wisconsin Forward Exam is designed to gauge how well students are doing in relation to the Wisconsin Academic Standards. These standards outline what students should know and be able to do in order to be college and career ready. The ACT is the leading national college admissions test that evaluates college readiness based on the scored areas of English, Reading, Math, Science, and Writing.

How do students in parental choice students perform on DPI report cards?

DPI produces report cards for every publicly funded school and district in Wisconsin, and for private schools participating in parental programs. These Accountability Report Cards include data on multiple indicators for multiple years across four priority areas (Student Achievement, Growth, Target Group Outcomes, and On-track to Graduation). Private schools in parental choice programs historically have outperformed public schools in many of these areas.

What other positive outcomes for choice students have been documented?

Students in the Wisconsin school choice program outscore public school students on the college-readiness ACT test.

Scholars at the School Choice Demonstration Project found that students in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program were more likely to attend and persist in college, less likely to become involved in criminal activity, and achieved higher academic results on some state standardized tests. Other studies in recent years show that students in parental choice programs do better than their peers. <https://scdp.uark.edu/milwaukee-parental-choice-program-evaluation/>

AUDITS: Financial Transparency

Financial transparency and accountability is required of schools participating in parental choice programs through an independent GAAP and other audits.

Schools must select an independent auditor to complete four audits: the September Enrollment Audit; the January Enrollment Audit; the Fiscal & Internal Control Practices Report; and the GAAP Financial Audit.

Before joining any parental choice programs, schools must submit detailed budgets, prove financial viability, and attend fiscal training sessions. Stricter guidelines also are in place for “start-up” schools that seek to participate in the program. Since 2017, Act 36 requires new schools to follow a more rigorous process. No new schools have been terminated from the program since its passage.

ACCREDITATION: School and Educator Requirements

Schools participating in the program must attain accreditation by an independent agency or obtain pre-accreditation prior to joining the program.

Accreditation requires schools to have degreed or licensed teachers, appropriate curriculum, accountable board governance, maintenance of student records, and a school environment conducive to learning.

Most private schools in Wisconsin are accredited, the same approach used in higher education to ensure quality. Schools participating in parental choice programs have many additional regulations to follow.

If at any time DPI finds that a school in the program is not abiding by these regulations, the school can have its funds withheld until compliance is met or be immediately terminated from the program.

OTHER SCHOOL REQUIREMENTS

Schools in the Milwaukee, Racine, and stateside programs must:

- Provide 1,050 hours of direct pupil instruction in grades 1–6 and 1,137 hours of direct pupil instruction in grades 7–12;
- Retain teachers who have a bachelor’s degree from an accredited institution of higher education and teacher aides who have a high school diploma or a GED or HSED;
- Administer background checks for all employees;
- Adopt written criteria for promotion of students from 4th to 5th and 8th to 9th grades;
- Meet state nondiscrimination policies;
- Allow students to opt out of religious programs; and
- Meet all health and safety codes.

STUDENT ELIGIBILITY

What information may private schools use in admitting or denying admission to students in the Milwaukee, Racine, and statewide parental choice programs?

Eligibility is based solely on family income, residency, the age of students entering grades K4, K5, and 1st grade and prior year attendance. *

Schools may not enroll students based on race, ethnic background, religion, prior test scores, grades, recommendations, or membership in a church or parish.

Schools must accept all eligible applicants during each of the school’s open application periods. For the Milwaukee and Racine programs, schools must use a random drawing to select students if there are more applicants than seats available. DPI conducts the random drawing for the Wisconsin program.

*Students must have been either (1) enrolled in a public school or home school in the previous year; (2) not enrolled in school in the previous year; (3) enrolled in private school under the

voucher program in the previous year; (4) be entering kindergarten, first grade or ninth grade; or (5) attended school in a different state the previous year.

STUDENT ELIGIBILITY: Special needs

Is a private school required to enroll a student with special needs and to provide the child with whatever services the child requires to learn?

A private school may not refuse to admit a student with special educational needs. However, state law permits a private school to offer only those services to assist students with special needs that it can provide with minor adjustments. Generally, parents and private schools work together to determine what is in the best interests of the children.

Further, the Special Needs Scholarship Program specifically is structured to provide private school options to parents seeking an alternative to public schools.

Just like private schools, not every public school is able to serve every special need student. But the net result of parental choice programs is more seats for more special needs students, a gain for state families.

CONSTITUTIONALITY

Are parental choice programs constitutional?

Yes. Both the Wisconsin Supreme Court and the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that private school voucher programs are constitutional because the government plays no role in the selection of the school. The courts ruled that private school voucher programs meet the state's secular interest of educating children. If a voucher is used to attend a religious school, it's because of a parental decision — not government fiat.

In 1998, the WI Supreme Court upheld the Milwaukee Parental School Choice Program as constitutional and determined the program did not violate the requirement for public schools — the program only adds options for parents.

In 2002, the United States Supreme Court upheld a Cleveland, Ohio program as constitutional and determined it was not in violation of the First Amendment or the Establishment Clause.

In 2020, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that prohibiting religious schools from publicly funded education programs violates the First Amendment, Free Exercise Clause of the US Constitution.