School Choice WISCONSIN

Wisconsin's Most Cost-Effective K-12 Program

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Overview

Giving parents the opportunity to choose private schools is Wisconsin's most cost-effective K-12 investment.

In Milwaukee, Racine, and statewide, choice schools rank higher on official state Report Cards than traditional public schools.

Using the state Report Card as a measure of productivity, the choice school productivity advantage is **76 percent** in Milwaukee, **46 percent** in Racine and **33 percent** in the statewide program.

Productivity reported here is likely understated. First, while the choice programs have family income eligibility limits, this report compares choice students to *ALL* public school students. Moreover, revenue estimates exclude federal aid, a category where public schools have a significant edge.

Choice enrollment growth reflects popularity with Wisconsin families. During the last nine years, student enrollment grew 66 percent and private school participation grew 88 percent. The programs serve disproportionately non-white and economically disadvantaged families compared to all K-12 students.

Results reported here reinforce earlier research on cost effectiveness. Separate research shows other significant behavioral advantages for students in the Milwaukee program.

The Source of Data and Highlights

Official data from Wisconsin's Department of Public Instruction (DPI) are used to measure the cost-effectiveness of traditional public schools (excluding charter schools) and schools in Wisconsin's Private School Choice Programs (PSCP).

The DPI data show that giving parents the option to choose private schools represents the state's most cost-effective K-12 investment. Dollars spent at a PSCP school consistently produce a higher DPI Report Card score than at public schools.

Results are for 2023-24, the first year following a significant funding increase approved by the Legislature and Governor for PSCP schools. Despite a 23 percent average increase, PSCP schools continue to operate with substantially less revenue than public schools. Yet DPI data show PSCP schools with higher Report Card scores.

This report updates a 2023 School Choice Wisconsin (SCW) report estimating the cost-effectiveness of public and PSCP schools. To assure no bias, this and the prior report rely only on data and school rankings from the DPI.

As noted, the report also uses conservative assumptions which understate the PSCP cost effectiveness. For example, the report:

- Excludes federal revenue and thus understates resources available to public schools; and
- Compares PSCP students from income-limited families with public school students from all incomes. Were data available, the more appropriate comparison would have been between students from families with similar income.

Using a straightforward Cost-Effective Index (CEI), described in Attachment A, the report estimates that in 2023-24:

- Private schools in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP) were **76 percent** more productive than schools in the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS).
- Private schools in the Racine Parental Choice Program (RPCP) were **46 percent** more productive than public schools in the Racine Unified School District (RUSD).
- Private schools in the statewide Wisconsin Parental Choice Program (WPCP) were **33 percent** more productive than public schools outside of Milwaukee and Racine.

Prior Research

The SCW findings here, and in 2023, reinforce a 2019 study (see citation in References) by Corey DeAngelis, Ph.D., a scholar whose research has appeared in: *Social Science Quarterly; School Effectiveness and School Improvement; Educational Review; Peabody Journal of Education; Journal of School Choice;* and *Journal of Private Enterprise.*

Separate scholarship, by Patrick Wolf, Ph.D., and DeAngelis, examined "the effects of Milwaukee's school voucher program on adult criminal activity and paternity suits…[It finds] that exposure to the program … is associated with a reduction of around 53 percent in drug convictions, 86 percent in property damage convictions, and 38 percent in paternity suits. The program effects tend to be largest for males and students with lower levels of academic achievement at baseline."

A study for the Annenberg Institute (Brown University) found: "As of 2018, [Milwaukee choice] students have spent more total years in a four-year college than their MPS peers. The MPCP students in the grade three through eight sample attained college degrees at rates that are statistically significantly higher than those of their matched MPS peers."

Three PSCP Programs Examined

More than 90 percent of PSCP students participate in one of three programs: the MPCP, RPCP, and WPCP. A fourth, the Special Needs Scholarship Program (SNSP), is not addressed here.

Income eligibility provisions limit participation to families with income at or below 300 percent of the Federal Poverty Limit (MPCP and RPCP) and families with income at or below 220 percent of the Federal Poverty Limit (WPCP). Most comparisons in this report are between PSCP students and public school students from all income levels. It is assumed a comparison of students at similar income levels would show even greater productivity for PSCP students; data are not available to make that comparison.

Revenue: PSCP vs. Traditional Public

Table 1 compares per-pupil revenue at traditional public schools (statewide average) with estimated average per-pupil revenue at PSCP K-8 and 9-12 schools. The comparison is between 2021-22 — the year used for the prior SCW report — and 2023-24. Estimated PSCP revenue in 2023-24 was 77.6 percent of public school revenue, a notable increase from 2021-22 that reflects higher funding levels approved in the 2023-25 state budget.

Table 1. Comparison of Estimated Revenue for PSCP vs. Traditional Public Schools

	2021-22	2023-24
Average Public Revenue	**$14,216**	**$15,340**
Average PSCP State Payment	$8,490	$10,488
PSCP Fundraising Estimate	$1,147	$1,417
Estimated PSCP Revenue	**$9,636**	**$11,905**
PSCP Revenue As % of Public Revenue	67.8%	77.6%

Even with funding increases approved in 2023, Table 1 shows a substantial continuing gap between PSCP and public school revenue. As explained in Attachment B, conservative assumptions mean the revenue amounts displayed in Table 1 understate the PSCP-public school funding gap.

Measuring Effectiveness

The following describes the methods used to measure school effectiveness.

Substantial data are available, primarily from the DPI Report Cards, to compare public schools and private PSCP schools. Reliance on DPI data and rankings neutralizes the possibility of "pro-school choice" bias.

Two Measures of Effectiveness

- **DPI Report Cards.** The DPI Report Card is the principal measure of effectiveness used in this report. Per the DPI, Report Card scores reflect "data on multiple indicators for multiple years across four Priority Areas (Achievement, Growth, Target Group Outcomes, and On-track to Graduation)." The overall scores rank public and private choice schools on a scale of 0-100. As described in Attachment A, this report uses the overall numeric Report Card score to calculate a CEI.
- **ACT Results.** This report also provides comparative data on the college-readiness ACT test. This is an additional measure of effectiveness. The DPI data allow for PSCP and school public comparisons.

Results

Table 2 displays: Report Card scores; estimated per pupil revenue; and resulting CEI scores for PSCP and public schools. ***On all comparisons, Report Card scores for PSCP schools are higher than public districts while revenue is substantially lower.***

Table 2. Report Card Scores, Per Pupil Revenue & CEI Scores, PSCP vs. Public

	Report Card Score	Per Pupil Revenue	Cost-Effectiveness/$1,000 of Revenue
MPCP*	70.8	$11,905	5.95
MPS**	55.7	$16,442	3.39
RPCP*	72.7	$11,905	6.11
RUSD***	61.3	$14,629	4.19
WPCP*	71.8	$11,905	6.03
Statewide Public**	69.8	$15,340	4.55

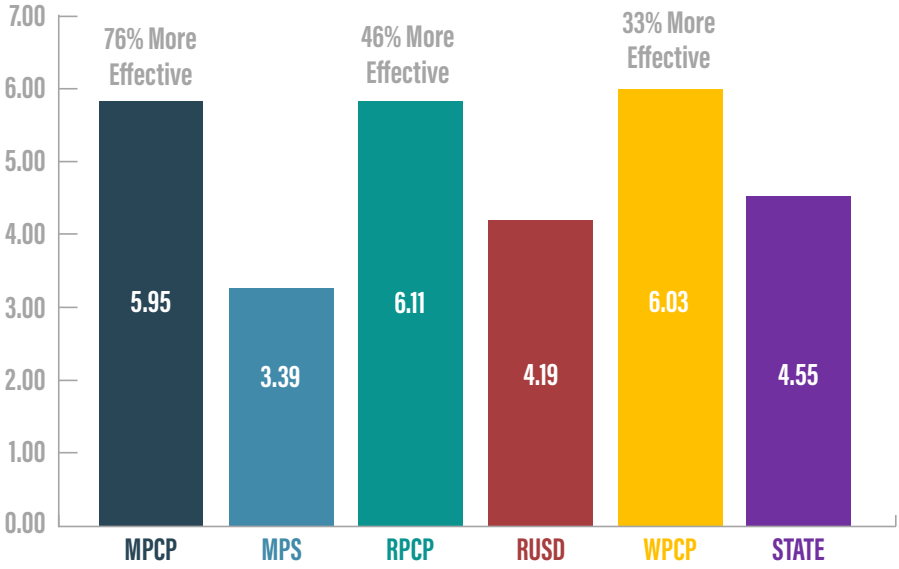
**DPI data were used to calculate PSCP Report Card scores. See Attachment D for methodology.*

***Charter schools excluded.*

****RUSD score calculated for this report is higher than score of (56.4) reported by DPI. See Attachment D.*

Figure 1 uses the CEI scores from column 3 of Table 2 to show the relative effectiveness of PSCP schools and public schools. (The higher the CEI score, the more effective a school or program is.)

Figure 1. Productivity: PSCP vs. Public Schools



Standardized Test & ACT Scores

DPI Report Card scores are based in part on test scores, i.e., the Wisconsin Forward, PreACT Secure, ACT Aspire, and ACT examinations.

Attachment C shows the favorable comparison of PSCP schools and public schools.

Scholarly research shows that Milwaukee choice students enter the program at levels below MPS peers. It is reasonable to assume this also is the case for many students in the Racine and statewide choice programs. This makes the data in Attachment C particularly noteworthy. It compares PSCP achievement and growth scores with those of traditional public schools. In ***16 of 18 comparisons PSCP scores are higher.*** The two comparisons where that is not the case involve public school students from all income levels and PSCP students from families at or below 220 percent of the Federal Poverty Level.

Demographics

As a percent of all K-12 students, PSCP students are disproportionately non-white and from economically disadvantaged families. Two factors are at work. First are the income eligibility restrictions. Second, the academic performance of non-white students in public schools causes many of their parents to seek options.

Table 3 provides a demographic breakdown (*see next page*).

Table 3. Racial and Economic Composition of PSCP and Public School Students

(Source: 2023-24 DPI Report Card)

	PSCP		Public	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
American Indian or Alaskan Native	140	0.3%	8,175	1.0%
Asian	1,771	3.6%	34,080	4.3%
Black or African American	15,263	30.7%	69,961	8.8%
Hispanic/Latino	13,761	27.6%	112,107	14.1%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	43	0.1%	639	0.1%
White	16,478	33.1%	530,376	66.5%
Percent Two or More Races	1,825	3.7%	42,535	5.3%
Unknown	512	1.0%	0	0.0%
Total	49,793		797,872	
Students with Disabilities*	977	2.0%	121,872	15.3%
Economically Disadvantaged	34,179	68.6%	340,384	42.7%
English Learners	4,810	9.7%	53,359	6.7%

**The 2% estimate for PSCP is wrong. See below.*

Special Needs

Some contend that PSCP schools use selective admission criteria and don't adequately serve students with special education needs.

This is untrue.

Regarding admission, PSCP schools use no admission criteria other than residence and family income. If applicants exceed available space a random lottery is used.

Regarding special needs, the DPI estimate of 2 percent in Table 3 above is wrong. DPI uses a definition that excludes many students with special needs.

Exhaustive independent research on the MPCP addressed the question of participation by special needs students. The work was directed by John Witte, Ph.D., of the University of Wisconsin and Patrick Wolf, Ph.D., of the University of Arkansas as part of the School Choice Demonstration Project. They estimated the disability rate of the MPCP was between 7.5% and 14.6%.

Additionally, SCW and the Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty have more recently investigated the topic twice (see references). Their reports reaffirmed Witte's and Wolf's earlier work.

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Attachment A — Measuring Cost Effectiveness The Cost-Effective Index (CEI)

This report uses a CEI that measures the relationship between per pupil revenue (input) and the DPI Report Card scores (output).

To illustrate, consider two schools with the same DPI Report Card numeric score but different levels of revenue. One has $10,000/pupil; the other $8,000/pupil. The school with revenue of $8,000/pupil is 25% more productive ($10,000-$8,000 = $2,000/$8,000 = 25%). It will have a higher CEI score.

The following equation shows how the CEI is calculated.

$$\frac{\text{DPI's Report Card Score}}{\text{Per-Pupil Revenue/1000}} = \text{CEI}$$

Using that formula, a school with a score of 65 and per pupil revenue of $12,000 would have a CEI of 5.4 per $1,000 of revenue. See below.

$$\frac{65}{12} = \text{5.4 per \$1,000 of Revenue}$$

The higher the index score, the more productive a school is. So, compared to the 5.4 score above, a school with a DPI Report Card score of 65 and revenue of $13,000/pupil would have a CEI index score of 5.0 (65/13).

Comparing Productivity

The relative productivity of schools (or districts) is determined by comparing CEI scores. The formula below uses the two examples from above to illustrate. It shows that the school with revenue of $12,000/pupil is 8% more productive.

$$\frac{5.4}{5} - 1 = 8\%$$

Attachment B — Determining Revenue

Measures of revenue used in this report are described below. Because of conservative assumptions, they understate actual public school revenue.

Public school revenue. The DPI reports public school revenue from four sources: (1) state aid; (2) local property taxes; (3) federal aid; and (4) local non-property tax revenue. In calculating the CEI, this report uses only the first two. It excludes federal aid and non-property tax revenue available to public schools. (It also excludes private donations received by public schools. An example of this can be found in a recent article published by Wisconsin Public Radio on May 12, 2025. The article described a donation of $500,000 to Milwaukee Public Schools by the Greater Milwaukee Committee.)

Private school revenue. Revenue for students in choice programs consists mainly of state per pupil payments. Many PSCP schools supplement the state payments with private fundraising. This report uses (1) the average state payment to private schools and (2) an estimate of private fundraising based on pre-audited information provided to SCW from 2021-22 (last year available). The fundraising estimate likely overstates actual private revenue, given a reduced need for fundraising based on higher voucher payments approved in 2023.

Attachment C — Standardized Tests and ACT Tests

The DPI reports scores based on (1) achievement (raw scores) and (2) growth in raw scores.

The DPI defines "achievement" and "growth" scores as follows:

"The Achievement priority area is designed to show how well students are doing in relation to the grade-level expectations of the Wisconsin Academic Standards. DPI uses state assessment data over the past three years to build a score, with more recent years bearing more weight on the score. Achievement is a points-based measure that gives credit for outcomes at multiple performance levels, with higher levels of performance earning more points."

"The Growth priority area evaluates schools on their students' growth over time compared to the growth of similar students in other Wisconsin schools. This measure provides information on a school's contribution to their students' progress, regardless of the prior achievement level of those students."

Scholarly research shows that Milwaukee choice students enter the program at levels below MPS peers. It is reasonable to assume this also is the case for many students in the Racine and statewide choice programs. This makes the data in the table below particularly noteworthy. It compares PSCP achievement and growth scores with those of traditional public schools. In 16 of 18 comparisons PSCP scores are higher. The two comparisons where that is not the case involve public school students from all income levels and PSCP students from families at or below 220 percent of the Federal Poverty Level.

Standardized & ACT Test Comparisons, PSCP vs. Public, 2023-24

	Overall Report Card Score	Overall Achievement Score	Achievement ELA Score	Achievement Math Score	Overall Growth Score	Growth ELA Score	Growth Math Score
MPCP	70.8	40.6	44.4	36.8	75.9	78.8	73.0
MPS	55.7	22.3	25.6	18.9	64.4	68.7	60.0
RPCP	72.7	51.9	52.9	50.9	73.0	74.7	71.3
RUSD	61.3	34.2	38.1	30.1	65.3	71.1	59.4
WPCP	71.8	62.8	65.4	60.2	69.7	72.0	67.4
Statewide Public	69.8	64.2	63.2	65.1	65.8	65.4	66.2

See Attachment D for methodology.

The data for 2023-24 are part of a pattern.

Achievement results for the previous six years show, on average, that:

- Milwaukee choice students outscore MPS in all years in Total, ELA, and Math Achievement scores.
- Racine choice students outscore RUSD in all years in Total, ELA, and Math Achievement scores
- Non-Milwaukee/Racine choice students outscore the Public schools 1 out of 6 times in Total Achievement, 4 out of 6 times in ELA Achievement, and 1 out of 6 times in Math achievement. This is the most demanding comparison, as it compares low-income students (at or below 220 percent of FPL) with students from all income levels.

Growth results for the past six years show, on average, that:

- Milwaukee choice students outscore MPS in all years in Total, ELA, and Math Growth scores.
- Racine choice students outscore RUSD in all years in Total, ELA, and Math Growth scores.
- Non-Milwaukee/Racine choice students outscore Public schools in all years in Total, ELA, and 6 out of 7 years in Math Growth scores.

ACT Scores

Eleventh grade students take the college-readiness ACT test. Despite income eligibility limits on participation, PSCP students consistently outscore public school students from all income levels.

The table below presents average PSCP and public school ACT scores for a nine-year period. Highlights:

- In 8 of 9 years, the MPCP score exceeded that for MPS students.
- The RPCP score exceeded that for RUSD in all the years.
- The WPCP score exceeded that for public schools' students in all the years.

ACT Scores, PSCP vs Public, 2015-16 Through 2023-24

ACT Composite Scores									
School Year	**15-16**	**16-17**	**17-18**	**18-19**	**19-20**	**20-21**	**21-22**	**22-23**	**23-24**
MPCP*	17.5	17.2	17.2	16.9	17.4	16.4	16.8	16.9	16.6
MPS (All Income)	16.5	16.3	16.1	15.5	16.0	16.8	15.8	15.8	15.9
RPCP*	19.6	20.0	19.4	17.7	18.5	17.1	17.6	16.8	17.4
RUSD (All Income)	17.7	17.2	16.9	17.1	16.9	16.3	16.5	16.0	16.2
WPCP**	22.5	21.3	21.0	20.6	20.4	19.7	20.4	20.7	20.8
Statewide All Income	20.1	20.1	19.8	19.6	19.8	19.1	19.2	19.3	19.2

**Eligibility limited to families with income at or below 300 percent of the federal poverty level.*

***Eligibility limited to families with income at or below 220 percent of the federal poverty level.*

Attachment D — Methodology for Choice vs Public Comparisons

This explains the source and method used to determine Report Card scores in Table 2.

PSCP schools. The DPI posts Report Card scores for individual PSCP schools. It does not aggregate the individual scores to arrive at program-level scores, i.e., scores for the MPCP, RPCP, and WPCP. Using DPI data for individual schools, this report provides the program-level scores in Table 2. For those who wish to replicate those scores the methodology is described below.

MPS. The score in Table 2 is the score for traditional public schools in MPS. It is slightly lower than the published DPI score because it excludes MPS charters.

RUSD. The score we calculate (using the DPI link below) in Table 2 is higher than the published DPI score for RUSD. We don't have an explanation for the difference. It means that this report understates the productivity of RPCP schools.

Statewide Public (excluding Milwaukee and Racine). The score in Table 2 is calculated using DPI data for traditional public schools (excluding district charter schools).

- DPI report card data are at **https://apps2.dpi.wi.gov/reportcards/**
- We used the "School Report Card Data Download File" for the 2023-24 school year.
- Click the "School Report Card Data Download File" under the 2023-24 school year, download, and open the file.
- Click on the "Enable Editing" button that is in the yellow ribbon under the functions ribbons.
- On the bottom of the resulting sheet, there are four tabs: "Disclaimer", "About the Data", "Field Description", and "Data". Click on the "Data" tab.
- Data used for our comparisons can be found in:
  - Column F (District Name), Column G (School Name), Column I (Overall Accountability Score), Column N (Report Card Type), Column Q (School Enrollment), Column AE (Achievement Score), Column AF (ELA Achievement Score), Column AG (Mathematics Achievement Score), Column AH (Growth Score), Column AI (ELA Growth Score), Column AJ (Mathematics Growth Score), Column DW (City), and Column DX (Charter School Indicator)
- Below are the groupings we use in our comparisons:
  - **MPCP vs. MPS**
    - **MPCP:** Select (Private – Choice Students) from the column titled (Report Card Type) and select (Milwaukee) only in the column titled (City)
    - **MPS:** Select (Public – All Students) from the column titled (Report Card Type) and select (Milwaukee) from the column titled (District Name), and select (No) from the column titled (Charter School Indicator)
  - **RUSD vs. RUSD**
    - **RPCP:** Select (Private – Choice Students) from the column titled (Report Card Type) and select (Caledonia, Mount Pleasant, Racine, and Sturtevant) only in the column titled (City)
    - **RUSD:** Select (Public – All Students) from the column titled (Report Card Type), select (Racine Unified) from the column titled (District Name), and elect (No) from the column titled (Charter School Indicator)
  - **WPCP vs. Statewide**
    - **WPCP:** Select (Private – Choice Students) from the column titled (Report Card Type) and select all cites but remove (Caledonia, Milwaukee, Mount Pleasant, Racine, and Sturtevant) only in the column titled (City)
    - **Statewide**: Select (Public – All Students) from the column titled (Report Card Type), select all districts but remove (Milwaukee and Racine Unified) from the column titled (District Name), and select (No) from the column titled (Charter School Indicator)

- Example of how MPCP score was determined:
  - Go to the column titled (Report Card Type) and select (Private – Choice Students)
  - Go to the column titled (City) and select (Milwaukee) only
  - Go to the column titled (Overall Accountability Score) and remove any scores that are titled (NA)
  - Go to the column titled (School Enrollment) and total the column. If school has (NA) in that column, use the following link **https://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/parental-education-options/Choice/Data_and_Reports/2023-24/2023-24_summary_mpcp_wpcp_rpcp_snsp.pdf** , and input the Third Friday in September headcount number for the school.
  - Once you have the total enrollment number of the schools, create a new column next to the (School Enrollment) column and title it (Total Enrollment), put the total enrollment in the fields next to the (School Enrollment) fields.
  - Create another column next to the (Total Enrollment) column and title it (Weight), use the formula = (School Enrollment) / (Total Enrollment) to create the weight for each school.
  - Then select which date field you are looking to compare:
    - (Overall Accountability Score), Column AE (Achievement Score), Column AF (ELA Achievement Score), Column AG (Mathematics Achievement Score), Column AH (Growth Score), Column AI (ELA Growth Score), and Column AJ (Mathematics Growth Score)
  - For this demonstration, we will use (Overall Accountability Score)
  - Create two columns next to the (Overall Accountability Score) column
    - The first one titled (Overall Accountability Score Weight)
    - The second one titled (New Overall Accountability Score)
  - In the first column use the formula = (Overall Accountability Score) x (Weight) and use that on all fields in the column
  - Next in the (New Overall Accountability Score) column you will use the formula = (Overall Accountability Score) + (Overall Accountability Score Weight). You will run that formula down the column to all the school fields.
  - Once all the fields in the (New Overall Accountability Score) are filled, you will average all those numbers to produce the overall Accountability Score that has been weighted.
  - This is the number we use to represent the MPCP Score.
  - This process will be reproduced to get all the new scores for the RPCP, WPCP, MPS, RUSD, Statewide minus (MPCP & RPCP) for the overall Achievement and Growth scores and those with respect to those breakdowns in ELA and Math.