



Please find background information on the four programs attached. Members of the media with questions are invited to contact Carol Shires, Vice President of Operations of School Choice Wisconsin.

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School Choice

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School Choice Wisconsin's Guiding Principles

Educational choice for all families.

Public support is now provided to *all Wisconsin families* who choose charter schools, traditional public schools, or private schools in Wisconsin's Special Needs Scholarship Program. Only the Milwaukee, Racine and statewide parent choice programs limit eligibility based on income. We estimate approximately half of parents statewide are ineligible to participate.

Freedom for educators to make decisions on educational programming.

The goal of educational choice is to provide families a wide range of choices that enable them to choose options that align with their family's values and faith as well as with their children's passions and learning styles. To ensure that private schools are free to be as diverse as the children and families they serve, they require autonomy in the areas of curriculum and instruction, staffing, religion and religious practices, schedule, family and staff policies, and other core elements of educational programming.

Student-based funding.

Per-pupil funding varies based on the type of schooling a family chooses. Private schools in the Milwaukee, Racine, and Wisconsin (statewide) programs receive substantially less than traditional public schools. The same is true for independent charter schools. Funding should follow students equally regardless of the sector a family selects.

Simplification of private school choice programs.

The programs differ from each other and are encumbered with unnecessary regulation. This diverts resources from educating students and discourages high-performing schools from joining.

Removal of barriers that limit family access to private school choice, charter, and open enrollment options.

Measurement of School Success.

There is no one-size-fits-all student and therefore no single educational solution or definition of success that applies to all students and families. Families value many factors when considering the educational environment best for their children (faith/values alignment, safety, flexibility, educational philosophy, location, academic outcomes, educational style, etc.). We oppose using test scores or similar measures as



Educational Freedom: Your Child, Your Choice

conditions for participation in state school choice programs. We support using measures of academic achievement only used for transparent data sharing to inform families and not to make centrally driven decisions such as whether a school may participate in the choice program. Finally, we support focusing more on measures of academic growth than on measures of academic attainment to level out the playing field for all students and educators and ensure we are not penalizing schools and educators who are serving children with the least amount of resources and who are starting the furthest behind.

Chronology

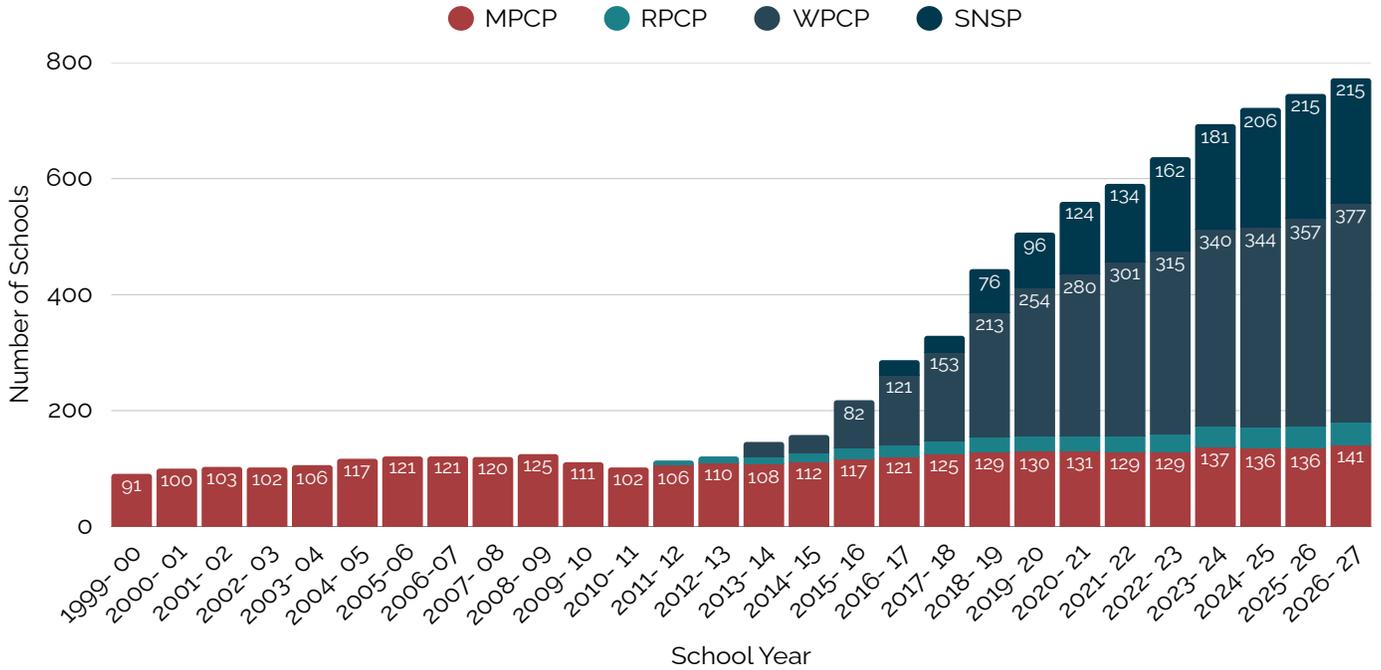
- 1990** Enactment of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP)
- 1992** Wisconsin Supreme Court upholds the program.
Davis v. Grover, 166Wis.2d501, 540(1992)
- 1995** Expansion of the MPCP to include sectarian schools.
- 1998** Wisconsin Supreme Court upholds the expanded program.
Jackson v. Benson, 218 Wis.2d835, 854(1998)
- 2005** Expansion of MPCP
- 2009** Enactment of expanded MPCP accountability provisions.
- 2011** Expansion of MPCP & Enactment of the Racine Parental Choice Program (RPCP).
- 2013** Enactment of the Wisconsin Parental Choice Program (WPCP) for students outside of Milwaukee and Racine.
- 2015** Expansion of the WPCP & Enactment of the Special Needs Scholarship Program (SNSP).
- 2023** Historic Increases to voucher payments were enacted, benefiting students across all programs.

Legal History

The MPCP has been the subject of unsuccessful legal challenges. [This Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty provides a history here:](#)



Enrollment Growth



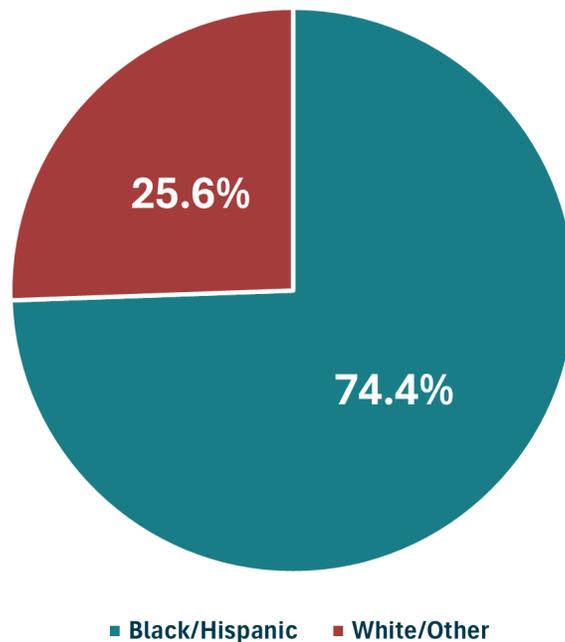
Who Chooses?

Choice program eligibility is limited to low-income and working class families.

Students enrolled in the choice programs are three times more likely to be from Black and Hispanic families than are Wisconsin public school students. Their families are 65% more likely to be economically disadvantaged.

The Milwaukee and Racine programs enroll over 55% of students participating in Wisconsin choice programs. The chart below shows the racial and ethnic makeup of the students.

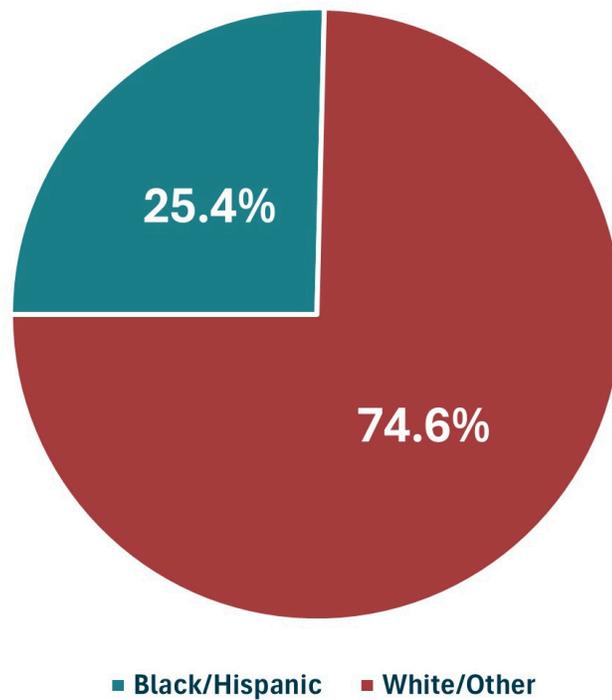
Milwaukee & Racine Choice School Demographic Breakdown



*per the Department of Public Instructions website "a member of a household that meets the income eligibility guidelines for free or reduced-price meals (less than or equal to 185 percent of Federal Poverty Guidelines) under the National School Lunch Program (NSLP)." <https://dpi.wi.gov/wise/data-elements/econ-status>

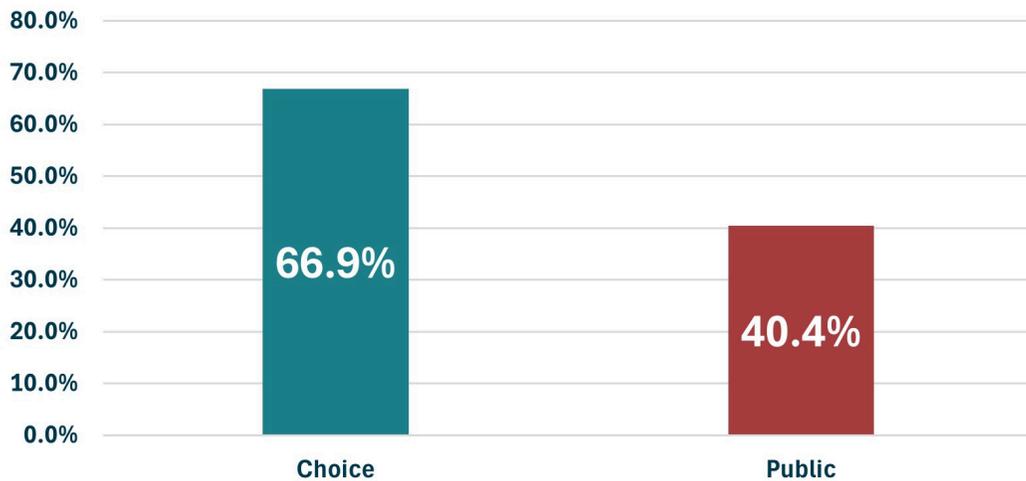
The next chart shows the statewide racial and ethnic composition of the MPCP, RPCP, WPCP, and SNSP programs.

Wisconsin School Choice Demographic Breakdown



The next chart compares the percentage of students from economically disadvantaged families enrolled in Wisconsin's four choice programs versus the public schools.

Economically Disadvantaged Students Breakdown



Overview of Four Programs

	Milwaukee	Racine	State (Outside Milwaukee and Racine)	Special Needs
Enacted	1990	2011	2013	2015
Enrollment 2025-26	29,949	4,170	23,417	3,436
Participating Schools*	136	38	357	215
Eligibility 2025-26	Income at/under \$100,600 (Married Family of 4)	Income at/under \$100,600 (Married Family of 4)	Income at/under \$75,640 (Married Family of 4)	No Income Limit
Enrollment Caps	None	None	None after 2025– 26	None
Value of Voucher (2025-26)**	\$11,488	\$11,488	\$11,488	\$16,049
Public School Funding Per Pupil (2023-24)***	\$24,682	\$18,661	\$18,592	n/a

*Some schools participate in more than one of the choice programs. The total number of participating schools in 2025-26 was 415.

**\$11,488 is an average based on the FTEs in each program and \$10,877 for grades K–8 and \$13,371 for grades 9–12.

***Per Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction's Total Comparative Revenue Data. The latest year available is 2023-24.

Public Opinion

Multiple polls show a substantial majority of Wisconsin voters support current choice programs.

Fifty-eight percent support expanding Wisconsin choice programs to all parents.

(Source: <https://www.wispolitics.com/2022/afc-marquette-university-law-school-poll-finds-majority-of-wisconsin-voters-support-school-choice-expansion/>)



Seventy-four percent of voters *across the political spectrum* oppose efforts to strike down the choice programs in court. Ninety percent of Republicans, 77 percent of Independents, and 59 percent of Democrats oppose the state Supreme Court making school choice illegal.

(Source: <https://www.wmcfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/05.18.23-WMC-Foundation-Poll-Memo-Education-Reform.pdf>)



Non-Discrimination

Admission to Wisconsin's parental choice programs is open to all students in families that meet program income eligibility criteria. Private schools in the program may not screen based on academic or behavioral records or based on learning disability. If the number of applicants exceeds available space students are admitted based on a random lottery.

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. Their reports reaffirmed Witte's and Wolf's earlier work. As is the case with individual public schools, the ability of schools in the private choice programs to serve all students with disabilities varies. Ultimately, the decision on whether a private choice school is able to meet a student's needs is up to the parents after consultation with the school.

The Special Needs Scholarship Program, enacted in 2015, has grown to include 215 schools serving 3,436 students. Some online media commentaries wrongly claim that private schools in the choice programs discriminate against and even expel students with disability status. A multi-year federal investigation found no evidence to support that claim. Separately, since 2019 a total of six complaints reviewed by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction resulted in no finding of discrimination.

Sources:

1. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2107763
2. <https://schoolchoicewi.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Serving-All-%E2%80%93-Students-with-Disabilities-in-Wisconsins-Parental-Choice-Programs.pdf>
3. https://schoolchoicewi.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/2025_Disabilities_Research_Report.pdf
4. <https://will-law.org/will-press-release-us-doj-ends-4-year-investigation-into-school-choice-forced-to-conclude-no-wrongdoing>



Accountability

Private schools in the choice programs must administer the same state assessments used by public schools.

Financial transparency is required through independent GAAP and other audits. Before joining any of the programs, schools must submit detailed budgets, prove financial viability, and attend fiscal training sessions. Strict guidelines also are in place for “start-up” schools that seek to participate in the program.

Schools participating in the programs 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.

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.

Results

College-readiness ACT Test

On average, private school choice students from low-income and working class families outscore public school students from all income levels.

Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction –
<https://wisedash.dpi.wi.gov/Dashboard/dashboard/19839>



State standardized tests

Private school students from working class Milwaukee and Racine families outscore public school students from all income levels in Milwaukee and Racine. In the statewide program (outside Milwaukee and Racine), low-income private school choice students outscore low-income public school students and have similar scores when compared to all public school students.

Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction –
<https://wisedash.dpi.wi.gov/Dashboard/dashboard/19861>



State Report Cards

The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction issues annual Report Cards for public schools and private schools in the school choice programs. Per DPI, the scores reflect “data on multiple indicators for multiple years across four Priority Areas (Achievement, Growth, Target Group Outcomes, and On-track to Graduation).”

DPI Report Card scores are substantially higher for Milwaukee and Racine private schools in the choice programs when compared to Milwaukee and Racine public schools. Scores for low-income students in the statewide program are similar to scores for public schools enrolling students of all income levels.

Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction – <https://apps2.dpi.wi.gov/reportcards/>



Research

High-quality studies have examined the prospects after high school for Milwaukee choice students.

1. A study for the Annenberg Institute at 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.” See this [link](#).



2. A study published in the Journal of Private Enterprise examined “the effects of Milwaukee’s school voucher program on adult criminal activity and paternity suits ... We find 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.” See this [link](#).



The Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty issues annual reports on the academic performance of K-12 Wisconsin students attending traditional public schools, charter schools, and private schools in the state’s parent choice programs. The fifth edition of its *Apples to Apples* report is here <https://will-law.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/ApplestoApples202553.pdf>.

