

Milwaukee's Voucher Graduates

President Obama's fiscal 2011 budget calls for a 9% increase in federal education spending, and he has famously said that the money should go to "what works" in education. So he ought to take another look at Milwaukee, where the nation's oldest and largest publicly funded school voucher program is showing academic gains.

A report released last week by School Choice Wisconsin, an advocacy group, finds that between 2003 and 2008 students in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program had a significantly higher graduation rate than students in Milwaukee Public Schools.

"Had MPS graduation rates equalled those for MPCP students in the classes of 2003 through 2008, the number of MPS graduates would have been about 18 percent higher," writes John Robert Warren of the University of Minnesota. "That higher rate would have resulted in 3,352 more MPS graduates during the 2003-2008 years."

In 2008 the graduation rate for voucher students was 77% versus 65% for the nonvoucher students, though the latter receives \$14,000 per pupil in taxpayer support, or more than double the \$6,400 per pupil that voucher students receive in public funding.

The Milwaukee voucher program serves more than 21,000 children in 111 private schools, so nearly 20% more graduates mean a lot fewer kids destined for failure without the credential of a high school diploma. The finding is all the more significant because students who receive vouchers must, by law, come from low-income families, while their counterparts in public schools come from a broader range of economic backgrounds.

Vouchers are of course taboo among most Democrats, and Mr. Obama has done nothing to stop Congress from killing the small but successful voucher program for poor families in Washington, D.C. The Milwaukee program has survived for 20 years despite ferocious political opposition, and it would have died long ago if parents didn't believe their children were better off for it.

(Wall Street Journal Editorial, February 9, 2010)