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**Fixing the
Milwaukee
Public Schools**

*The Limits of Parent-Driven
Reform*

REPORT FROM THE SENIOR FELLOW:

The report you are reading did not yield the results we had hoped to find. We had expected to find a wellspring of hope that increased parental involvement in the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) would be the key ingredient in improving student performance.

The disappointing performance of MPS students has been documented by the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute and others. Reading, math, and science are well below the performance of students in other Wisconsin communities.

An unfortunate fact of life in urban America is that the historical decline of student performance coincided with the ebbing of parental involvement. The very definition of family has changed and what it means to be a parent is not what it once was.

Policy makers and policy analysts, including WPRI, have pinned high expectations on increased parental choice and parental involvement. It was thought that by giving urban parents more tools, they would be able to bring pressure to reform the educational marketplace.

We asked David Dodenhoff, Ph.D., to review the impact of parental involvement in reforming MPS. Dr. Dodenhoff has conducted a number of studies analyzing Milwaukee's disadvantaged population.

What Dr. Dodenhoff details in this report is a dose of reality that has been missing from the discussion of education reform in Milwaukee. He discovered that there are realistic limits on the degree to which parental involvement can drive market-based reform in Milwaukee. There are simply limits on how much Milwaukee parents will use the tools that have been made available to them. While many parents have taken full advantage of choosing either an MPS or another school for their children, only 10 percent have been the active consumers that would exert market-based influence to the school system.

As to parental involvement at the school site and at home, Dr. Dodenhoff found a declining amount of parental involvement as children get older. For children ages fourteen to seventeen, only 11 percent of MPS parents are actively involved both in the school setting and at home.

The message from this study is that educational leaders and policy makers must continue to strive to increase parental choice and parental involvement. However, we must all have realistic expectations about the impact on MPS. Focusing on parental choice and parental involvement cannot be seen as a substitute for substantive reforms in the hierarchy of MPS and in the classrooms throughout Milwaukee.



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FIXING THE MILWAUKEE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The Limits of Parent-Driven Reform

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) district, like many of its big-city counterparts in other states, continues to suffer from poor student performance. Student test scores and dropout rates are at deplorable levels, both in absolute terms and in comparison with the rest of Wisconsin. This fact has led to a veritable cottage industry dedicated to improving educational outcomes in Milwaukee. The district itself has embraced two reforms in particular: public school choice and parental involvement.

Advocates of public school choice claim that by permitting parents to choose among a variety of public school options within the district, competition for students will ensue. This should improve school effectiveness and efficiency, and ultimately lead to better student outcomes.

Proponents of parental involvement argue that even first-rate schools are limited in their effectiveness unless parents are also committed to their children's education. Thus, the parental involvement movement seeks to engage parents as partners in learning activities, both on-site and at home. Research has shown that such engagement can produce higher levels of student performance, other things being equal.

Research has also shown, however, that both reforms can be stifled in districts like MPS, with relatively large percentages of poor, minority, single-parent families, and families of otherwise low socioeconomic status. With regard to public school choice, many of these families:

1. may fail to exercise choice altogether; or
2. may exercise choice, but do so with inadequate or inaccurate information; and/or
3. may choose schools largely on the basis of non-academic criteria.

As for parental involvement, disadvantaged parents may withdraw from participation in their child's education because of lack of time, energy, understanding, or confidence.

This study offers estimates of the extent and nature of public school choice and parental involvement within the MPS district. The basic approach is to identify the frequency and determinants of parental choice and parental involvement using a national data set, and extrapolate those results to Milwaukee, relying on the particular demographics of the MPS district.

This approach leads to the following estimates of parental choice behavior within MPS:

- estimate of MPS parents actively choosing a school for their child: *33.6 percent*
- estimate of MPS choice parents choosing from among two or more schools: *44.4 percent*
- estimate of MPS two-choice parents considering academic factors when choosing: *64.8 percent*

Taken together, these three estimates allow one to perform calculations regarding a hypothetical "ideal consumer" in a public school choice system. This consumer would maximize the marketplace pressures on schools, thereby creating the greatest prospects for school reform and student achievement. Such a consumer would:

- exercise choice, rather than simply enrolling his or her child in the local neighborhood school;
- consider at least two schools in the choice process, rather than simply choosing a school without assessing the potential costs and benefits of alternatives; and
- bring performance-based/academic criteria to bear in the choice process.

The estimate of MPS parents meeting all three criteria is just 10 percent. Given this number, it seems unlikely that MPS schools are feeling the pressure of a genuine educational marketplace.

As for parental involvement, this can be broken into two types: on-site involvement (at the child's school), and at-home involvement. Considering on-site involvement first, an estimated 34 percent of MPS parents can be considered "highly involved" at their child's school. (Given the comparatively limited impact of on-site involvement on student achievement, only high levels of parental involvement are worth considering.)

Estimates of at-home parental involvement were derived separately for three different groups of students. Those groups are listed below, along with the estimates of the percentage of parents in each group that are moderately or highly involved in their child's educational experience at home:

- students nine years old or younger: *49.2 percent moderately or highly involved,*
- students ranging in age from 10 to 13: *42.5 percent moderately or highly involved,* and
- students from 14 to 17 years old: *39.7 percent moderately or highly involved.*

The numbers above can be combined to estimate the percentage of MPS parents who are highly involved at the school site and moderately to highly involved in their children's learning at home. The children of these parents would expect to enjoy the most significant boost from parental involvement. The estimates for each age group are as follows:

- Students nine years old or younger: *24.6 percent*
- Students from ages 10 through 13: *17.7 percent*
- Students from ages 14 through 17: *11.2 percent*

Taken as a whole, these numbers indicate significant limits on the capacity of public school choice and parental involvement to improve school quality and student performance within MPS. Parents simply do not appear sufficiently engaged in available choice opportunities or their children's educational activities to ensure the desired outcomes.

This may be just as well. Relying on public school choice and parental involvement to reclaim MPS may be a distraction from the hard work of fixing the district's schools. Recognizing this, the question is whether the district, its schools, and its supporters in Madison are prepared to embrace more radical reforms. Given the high stakes involved, district parents should insist on nothing less.

INTRODUCTION

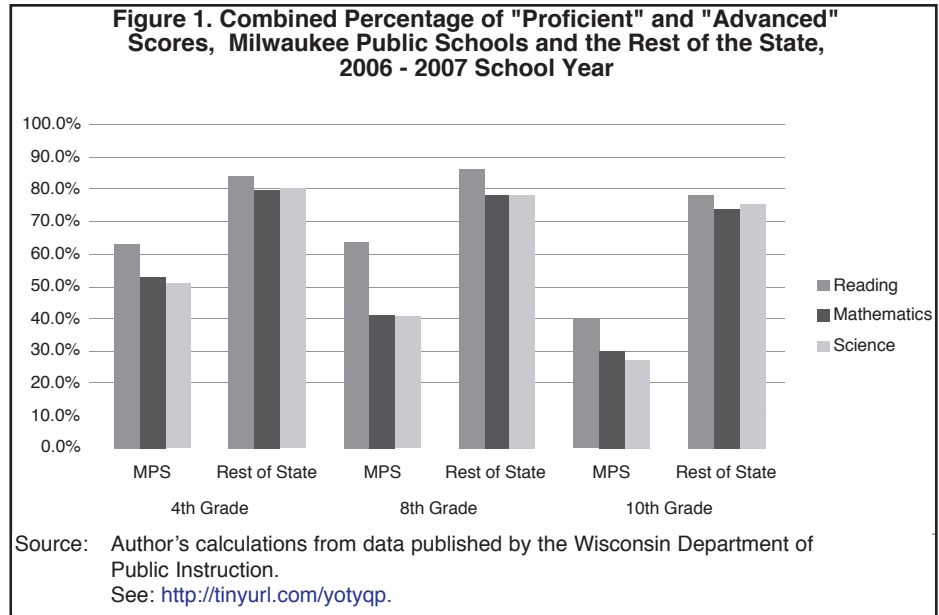
The Milwaukee Public School (MPS) district, like many of its big-city counterparts in other states, continues to suffer from poor student performance. Test results released in May of 2007 serve to illustrate.

Figure 1 presents reading, math, and science proficiency levels for MPS students and students in the rest of the state, respectively, at the fourth, eighth, and tenth grade levels. At the fourth grade level, only about half of MPS students achieved a level of “proficient” or “advanced” on the mathematics and science portions of the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concept Examination (WKCE) or the Wisconsin Alternate Assessments (WAA). Their counterparts in the rest of the state had combined proficient and advanced levels of about

80 percent. MPS fourth graders performed somewhat better at reading, achieving proficient/advanced levels in the low 60s. Students in other parts of the state also did better, however, scoring in the low 80s.

Over time, these differences become more pronounced. Figure 1 indicates that between fourth grade and eighth grade, the combined proficient/advanced levels for students outside of Milwaukee more or less hold steady. MPS student performance, though, drops considerably. This trend continues through the tenth grade. By that point, just 40 percent of MPS students are at the proficient or advanced level in reading; 30 percent in mathematics; and 27 percent in science.

Given the poor performance of MPS tenth graders, one would not be surprised to find that many of them do not make it to graduation. The most recent data available confirm these suspicions. Only 68 percent of MPS high school students avoided dropping out and successfully earned their diploma. The comparable figure for the rest of the state was 91 percent.¹



TWO THEORIES OF EDUCATION REFORM

Results like these have led to a veritable cottage industry dedicated to improving educational outcomes in Milwaukee. This paper will discuss the theory and practice of two important reforms in particular: public school choice and parental involvement.

Public school choice

“Public school choice” refers to a variety of measures designed to put parents in the role of educational consumers, shopping for the best product for their child from among a variety of public schooling options. These options include:

- intra-district choice — a system allowing parents to choose among multiple schools in their home district;
- inter-district choice — a system allowing parents to choose among schools in multiple districts;

- magnet schools — public schools offering specialized courses or curricula, and often drawing on students from across multiple districts; and
- charter schools — public schools that are exempt from select state and local requirements that govern more traditional public schools.²

As an educational reform, public school choice follows a market model. Advocates argue that if parents are limited to an assigned school in their home district, schools have no incentive to perform, to improve, and to build educational programs to meet the unique needs of their students and community. Schools are, in effect, granted a monopoly, and behave like monopoly operators who do not have to work to keep their customers.

By way of contrast,

...a system of school choice will create competition among schools for student enrollment, resulting in schools being more responsive to the needs and interests of parents and students by providing different types of programmes for different types of families. Competition will result in improved school effectiveness, productivity, and service, leading to higher quality education.³

Though “school choice” is often used as short-hand for “vouchers” — that is, programs that provide public funding for students to attend private schools — the logic of the educational marketplace applies just as well (in theory) to choice among public schools.

Parental involvement

Advocates of parental involvement argue that choosing an appropriate school for a child is not enough. Once the choice is made, parents must then become actively engaged in the child’s education, both at home and at school. This engagement can take a variety of forms, including:

- attending general school meetings;
- attending parent-teacher conferences;
- attending a school or class event;
- serving on a district governing board;
- participating in a parent-teacher association or school council;
- volunteering at school events or in the classroom;
- designating a specific time and space for study at home;
- helping the child with homework, or checking to make sure that homework has been completed;
- discussing school issues with the child; and
- reading to, or with, the child.

Other things being equal, parents who are actively engaged in the support of their children’s education through such activities are likely to see them earn higher grades, score better on standardized tests, attend school more regularly, and progress further in their education.⁴

There is some disagreement in the literature as to which forms of parental involvement produce the most meaningful results. There is, however, a consensus around the idea that at-home involvement is considerably more productive than on-site involvement at the child’s school.⁵ Similarly, the mechanism(s) whereby parental involvement produces beneficial results are not entirely settled in the literature, though the likely avenues are fairly intuitive. By interacting with children in the educational process at home, parents impart skills to their children, communicate to them the value of education, help cultivate their interest in learning, and create an expectation of attention to schoolwork. Thus, children with involved parents have a head start in terms of basic skills, motivation to learn, and the value they ascribe to education. When parents follow up their at-home involvement with involvement at school, they reinforce for the child their commitment to and belief in the importance of his or her education. They also serve as a conduit for important information from home to school and school to home, which can also improve learning outcomes.⁶

As with all theories of educational reform, the primary appeal of these two theories — public school choice, and parental involvement — is the promise of improved student performance. Beyond this, though, they have a less advertised, and less obvious, political appeal to supporters of traditional public education.

First, public school choice presents a clear alternative to the favorite education reform of political conservatives — private school choice. If extending market principles to education works in the context of private choice initiatives such as Milwaukee’s Parental Choice Program (MPCP), public school defenders ask, why should it not work equally well in an exclusively public school context? While this is a serious, legitimate question, it is also intended to raise a another question, one with more explicit political implications: if parents have public school choice, why do they need private school choice as well?

As for parental involvement, it is supported by both liberals and conservatives. The logic of that support, however, is different for the two groups. For conservatives, parental involvement is consistent with a philosophy of individual responsibility and accountability, with the investment of authority in individuals and families, and with the divestment of authority from the government. (Though one may not often think of public schools as “the government,” they are in fact just that.)

For liberals, parental involvement serves different political purposes. Pointing to the importance of parental engagement is a way for the education establishment to downplay schools’ need for self-assessment and continuous improvement. If public schools have performance problems, the argument goes, they can hardly be blamed. The burden for producing desirable educational outcomes really lies with parents, who are responsible for preparing their children to succeed at school. If and when parents are sufficiently engaged with their children’s education to produce success, only then will public schools deliver the results we expect of them.

That, in any case, is an argument one hears among advocates of public education.

Public school choice and parental involvement within MPS

A story in the *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel* recently noted that “parents might have more choices in publicly funded education in Milwaukee than anywhere else in the United States.”⁷ This claim applies to both private school choice — that is, the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program — and public school choice. As for the latter, MPS has an intra-district choice program through which parents may list up to three schools they would like their children to attend. Nearly 17,000 parents took advantage of this option in 2006, and almost 95 percent received their first choice assignment.⁸ Milwaukee parents also have a variety of different school options from which to choose. The district is home to 38 charter schools (out of 218 schools total), neighborhood and city-wide specialty schools (which operate similarly to magnet schools), small high schools, schools for at-risk or otherwise challenged students, and traditional neighborhood schools.⁹

Turning to parental involvement, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) created a number of new parental involvement requirements for school districts and individual schools. To begin with, each district and school receiving federal Title I funds must have a written parental involvement policy in place. The stated purpose of this requirement is to create avenues for active, sustained parental involvement in children’s education, particularly types of involvement associated with student achievement and school improvement.

At the district level, officials are expected to facilitate parental participation in the development of improvement plans for both the district as a whole and individual schools. The district is also required to provide technical assistance to individual schools in order to enhance their parental involvement programs. Finally, the district must review its parental involvement policy with parents once a year, identifying areas for improvement and strategies for more effective parental engagement.

Individual schools receiving Title I funds must convene an annual meeting to inform parents of the various avenues available for their involvement, and must invite them to participate. Thereafter, schools are expected to involve parents, on an ongoing basis, in the planning, review, and revision of school policies and programs. This includes the provision of timely information to parents on school programs and curricula, and on the schools’ processes for setting and measuring student achievement levels. Schools receiving Title I funds must also develop a school-parent compact that outlines schools’ and parents’ respective roles in helping to improve student academic performance. Finally, Title I schools must provide instruction, training, and materials to parents to help improve the level and quality of their involvement in their children’s education.¹⁰

Because of its receipt of Title I funds, the Milwaukee Public School district must meet the foregoing parental involvement requirements, as must approximately 75 percent of MPS schools, accounting for almost 95 percent of MPS enrollment.¹¹ This means that parental involvement programs are nearly universal throughout MPS.

Limits to the two theories of reform

The commitment to parental choice in MPS and the pervasiveness of parental involvement programs there ought to be grounds for optimism. Unfortunately, these reforms do not always work as advertised. The efficacy of the two reforms can sometimes break along lines of race, class, educational attainment, family composition, income, and ethnicity (or some mix of these, due to the often strong inter-correlations between them).

The obstacles to effective parental involvement are more easily explained than those to public school choice, and so will be addressed first. A key finding in the parental involvement literature is as follows:

...minority or low-income parents are often underrepresented among the ranks of parents involved with the schools. There are numerous reasons for this: lack of time or energy (due to long hours of heavy physical labor, for example), embarrassment or shyness about one's own educational level or linguistic abilities, lack of understanding or information about the structure of the school and accepted communication channels, perceived lack of welcome by teachers and administrators, and teachers' and administrators' assumptions of parents' disinterest or inability to help with children's schooling.¹²

In simpler terms, the more disadvantaged the parent, the less likely he or she is to be involved in a child's education, other things being equal.

In a district with the demographics of MPS, this should be cause for concern. Table 1 presents some of the relevant data on this point:

TABLE 1 DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MPS AND U.S. POPULATIONS¹³

	MPS	United States
Non-white residents	55 percent	25 percent
Families with children under 18 living below poverty line	18.5 percent	16 percent
Households receiving cash public assistance or food stamps	15 percent	9 percent
Residents speaking languages other than English	19 percent	19 percent
Families with children under 18 and only one parent present	58 percent	29 percent
Adults with less than a high school diploma	20 percent	16 percent

In most of the categories potentially related to levels of parental involvement, the MPS numbers are substantially less favorable than those in the U.S. at large. The percentages of non-white residents, of households receiving public assistance, and of single-parent families in particular suggest some of the possible demographic challenges to achievement of desired levels of parental engagement in MPS.

There is, however, one bit of good news. The research has not established definitive links between socioeconomic variables and parental involvement at home. That is, the evidence is mixed on the question of whether parents with lower income, lower levels of educational attainment, and other disadvantages are less involved in at-home activities such as reading to children, helping them with their homework, etc. Thus, the primary area of concern relevant to parental involvement in MPS would appear to be in the school setting.

Turning to public school choice, many of its potential problems are also linked to parents' socioeconomic status. Disadvantaged parents may not have the time, energy, information, understanding, or confidence to become active, effective public school consumers. Consider this summary of the requirements parents must meet if the public school choice model is to work ideally. Parents must:

- have a set of preferences about education and schooling;
- gather information about the set of schools available to their children;
- make trade-offs between the attributes of these schools;
- choose the school that best fits their preferences;
- monitor the performance of the school to make sure their choice was in fact a good one; and
- seek a different school for their children if the choice was not correct.¹⁴

For many parents — but particularly those of lower socioeconomic status, with English language deficiencies, and so on — this can be a daunting process. It can be so daunting, in fact, that some families choose *not* to choose. This reality is presented insightfully in a discussion of school choice in Britain. The most disadvantaged group of choosers are referred to as “disconnected”:

They are disconnected from the market in the sense that they are not inclined to engage with it. It is not that these parents have no views about education, or no concerns about schools and their children’s experiences and achievement. They do, but they do not see their children’s enjoyment of school or their educational success as being facilitated in any way by a consumerist approach to school choice.¹⁵

Not surprisingly, these attitudes have an impact on parents’ participation in the process of choosing a school:

There is little or no attempt to collect information about other schools and little awareness of other schools apart from those within the locality. Choice here means something different from the process gone through by the privileged or the semi-skilled. Choice for these parents typically seems more or less predetermined, often a process of confirmation rather than comparison.¹⁶

Of course, many lower-income, lower socioeconomic status parents *do* engage in school choice, despite the challenges they may face. For these parents, though, the concern becomes the sufficiency and accuracy of the information they are able to acquire. This is not an indictment of these parents; as noted above, effectively choosing the best school for one’s child can be a difficult task even for parents with abundant resources. But disadvantaged parents may have less access to quality information, and less experience in evaluating it, than their better educated, more socially-connected counterparts. A few illustrative excerpts from the research literature follow:

When it comes to making use of information about schools. . . education matters a great deal. As parents’ levels of education increase, they rely more on their highly educated friends to supply them with information about schools. Less educated parents (who are often non-white) are less able to tap into rich, informal information sources.¹⁷

It may simply be too difficult for low-income, largely single urban parents (many with limited English proficiency) to learn specific details about their children’s schools, even given the added incentive of choice. The lack of easy information availability may overwhelm most other factors, whether related to individual ability or to changed motivation from the incentives of choice.¹⁸

It is clear that, although many of the families in this sample attempted to adopt a search strategy which would be most appropriate to their needs, and to employ the information in a manner congruent with a rational choice model, they were not always sufficiently well informed to do this.¹⁹

Yet another concern has to do with the criteria that disadvantaged parents apply when considering schooling options for their children. Even if parents have easy access to information, they may base their choice on factors other than school quality, academic rigor, and the presence of experienced, effective teachers. Again, a few excerpts from the relevant literature serve to illustrate:

There is growing empirical evidence that parental preferences are very heterogeneous and that low-income parents place lower values on academic characteristics when choosing schools. . . . (T)hese lower preferences for academics have a negative impact on both marginal student outcomes and the pressure for school quality improvement. . .²⁰

Working class patterns of educational choice are characterized by ambivalence, and appear to be as much about the avoidance of anxiety, failure and rejection as they are about “choosing a good school for my child.”²¹

Factors such as facilities, distance, and convenience may be of prime concern to the disconnected chooser. In contrast to the issues of child personality, school policy, and teaching methods important to privileged/skilled parents, disconnected parents must address material matters. They are more confident choosing on the basis of the realities of school physical plant and facilities.²²

These conclusions are by no means universal in the research literature. Indeed, there are highly credible dissenting voices. However, the prevalence of findings such as the ones above should give advocates of public school choice some pause. If in certain circumstances: (1) parents fail to exercise choice altogether; or (2) parents exercise choice, but do so with insufficient or inaccurate information; and/or (3) parents choose schools largely on the basis of non-academic criteria, then public school choice as a tool for boosting school quality and student achievement may very well be a chimera.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data sources and methods

This section offers estimates of the extent and nature of public school choice and parental involvement within the Milwaukee Public Schools district. The basic approach was to identify the determinants and frequency of parental choice and parental involvement using a national data set, and extrapolate those results to Milwaukee, relying on the particular demographics of the MPS district. The national data set is the U.S. Department of Education's 2003 Parent and Family Involvement in Education survey, part of the National Household Education Surveys (NHES) program. The source for MPS demographics is the U.S. Census Bureau's 2005 American Community Survey. The specific demographic variables used to extrapolate from the national survey to MPS were as follows:

- educational attainment of parents,
- race and ethnicity of students,
- household composition (single-parent vs. two-parent), and
- mother's employment status.

For each estimate given below, the analysis was limited to students enrolled in public schools (rather than private schools, or home-schooling arrangements) in grades one through twelve. The methods used to make the extrapolations and arrive at the specific estimates are explained in detail in the Methodology Appendix.

Public school choice

As noted above, for parents who have a choice among two or more public schools, the threshold decision is whether or not to make a choice. In theory, the more parents who exercise their option to choose, the more the education system will operate like a marketplace, and the greater the impact on school improvement and student achievement will be.

The first estimate is as follows:

Estimate of MPS parents actively choosing a school for their child: 33.6%²³

Based on the data and methods described above and in the Methodology Appendix, it is estimated that just under 35 percent of MPS parents actively choose a school for their child, rather than simply opting for the default neighborhood school. For the sake of simplicity, this group will be referred to as "choice parents" below.

The nature of parent choice, too, can have a potential impact on school performance. If parents engage in an extensive search among many schools, and emphasize criteria clearly related to school and student performance, one would expect schools to feel more pressure to perform. On the other hand, if parents choose after considering only one school, or choose on the basis of non-academic criteria such as proximity to home or the school's racial mix, schools might feel less compelled to produce results. The second estimate, then, is of the percentage of choice parents who consider more than one school in making their choice:

Estimate of MPS choice parents choosing from among two or more schools: 44.4%

That is, about 45 percent of parents who actively choose a school for their child are estimated to do so after considering at least two schools. Among these “two-choice parents,” the following estimate represents the percentage who explicitly seek information on school performance, such as test scores, dropout rates, and so on:

Estimate of MPS two-choice parents considering academic factors when choosing: 64.8%

Taken together, these three estimates allow one to do some calculations regarding a hypothetical “ideal consumer” in a public school choice system. This is the consumer who would maximize the marketplace pressures on schools, thereby creating the greatest prospects for school reform and student achievement. Such a consumer would:

- exercise choice, rather than simply enrolling his or her child in the local neighborhood school;
- consider at least two schools in the choice process, rather than simply choosing a school without assessing the potential costs and benefits of alternatives; and
- bring performance-based/academic criteria to bear in the choice process.

Based on the figures above, the estimate of MPS parents meeting all three criteria is roughly 10 percent.

(This is derived by multiplying: $.336 \times .444 \times .648$.)

Parent involvement

Using similar methods, this section presents estimates of various kinds of parental involvement within the MPS system. These can be broken into two primary types: on-site involvement (at the child’s school), and at-home involvement.

The first task in this section is to construct a measure indicating high levels of on-site parental involvement. (Given the comparatively limited impact of on-site involvement on student achievement, only high levels of parental involvement are worth considering.) At a bare minimum, a highly involved parent would be expected to:

- attend a regularly scheduled parent-teacher conference for their child, and
- attend a school or class event (such as a play or a sporting event) to support their child.

Considering that participation in just these two activities might require as little as two or three hours per year, a parent who participated in *only* these activities could not be considered highly involved at the school. The NHES survey, however, asked two other questions pertaining to on-site involvement. These addressed: a) parental attendance at general school meetings, and b) parental service as a volunteer at the school.

Similar to the two activities above, attending a general school meeting is a relatively low-cost form of involvement. One might not be comfortable classifying a parent as highly involved if he or she did nothing more than attend a general meeting, attend an event in support of his or her child, and attend a parent-teacher conference. Again, over the course of a school year, this might require no more than three or four hours. On the other hand, requiring that a parent serve as a school volunteer in order to be classified as highly involved seems too restrictive. For purposes of the estimate below, then, a parent is considered highly involved at the school site if he or she:

- attends a regularly scheduled parent-teacher conference for his or her child,
- attends a school or class event (such as a play or a sporting event) to support his or her child, and
- participates in a hypothetical, on-site activity requiring an investment of time somewhere between the time investment required to attend a general meeting on the one hand, and to volunteer at the school on the other.

(The interpolation of the frequency of this third, hypothetical activity is explained in the Methodology Appendix.)

Based on the foregoing criteria, one arrives at the following estimate:

An estimated 34 percent of MPS parents can be considered “highly involved” at their child’s school site.

Estimating levels of at-home parental involvement is somewhat more complicated, in that the nature of meaningful involvement differs among children of different ages. Accordingly, estimates of parental involvement are presented separately for three different groups of students:

1. those nine years old or younger,
2. those ranging in age from 10 to 13, and
3. those from 14 to 17 years old.²⁴

For each of these groups, a set of activities was identified that, if engaged in by parents, would constitute moderate to high levels of at-home involvement. The specific activities were determined by a review of the relevant research literature and, of course, by the availability of questions addressing specific parental activities in the NHES data.²⁵

For the youngest group (students nine years old or younger), parents were considered moderately to highly involved in their child's education at home if the parent:

- established rules regarding television viewing and appropriate bed times on school nights;
- discussed with the child his or her experiences at school "often" (as opposed to "sometimes" or "never");
- participated in at least one of a series of activities with the child in the preceding week;²⁶ and
- read to the child three or more times in the preceding week.

An estimated 49.2 percent of MPS parents with children under age 10 meet all four of these criteria, and therefore can be considered moderately to highly involved at home.

For students ages 10 to 13, parents were considered moderately to highly involved in their child's education at home if the parent:

- established rules regarding television viewing and completion of homework;
- discussed with the child his or her experiences at school "often" (as opposed to "sometimes" or "never");
- participated in at least one of a series of activities with the child in the preceding month;²⁷
- regularly checked to see if the student had completed his or her homework; and
- assisted with homework at least one or two days per week.

An estimated 42.5 percent of MPS parents with children from age 10 to age 13 meet all five of these criteria, and therefore can be considered moderately to highly involved at home.

Finally, for students ages 14 through 17, parents were considered moderately to highly involved in their child's education at home if the parent:

- established rules regarding the time at which the student was expected home at night;
- discussed time management with the student in the previous week;
- discussed with the student his or her experiences at school "often" (as opposed to "sometimes" or "never");
- participated in at least one of a series of activities with the student in the preceding month;²⁸ and
- discussed at least two of the following topics with the student at least "sometimes" in the preceding month:
 - o the student's friends,
 - o things that are troubling the student, and
 - o the subject of drugs or alcohol.

An estimated 39.7 percent of MPS parents with children from age 14 to age 17 meet all five of these criteria, and therefore can be considered moderately to highly involved at home.

The numbers above can be combined to estimate the percentage of MPS parents who are highly involved at the school site *and* moderately to highly involved in their children's learning at home.²⁹ The children of these parents would expect to enjoy the most significant boost from parental involvement. The estimates for each age group are as follows:

- Students nine years old or younger: 24.6 percent
- Students from ages 10 through 13: 17.7 percent
- Students from ages 14 through 17: 11.2 percent.

A NOTE ON SOCIAL DESIRABILITY BIAS

The estimates in this study were derived in large part from survey data. Unfortunately, survey questions of the sort used here are notoriously prone to what is known as "social desirability bias." This kind of bias can enter a sur-

vey when certain questions have a “right,” or socially desirable, answer that respondents may give even when it is not accurate.

Imagine, for example, a survey of political attitudes and participation. After a standard battery of questions on party affiliation, news sources, and opinions on Congress and the president, the interviewer might ask, “Did you vote in the last election?” There is clearly a socially desirable answer to this question — “yes.” Voting is what all good citizens do. Recognizing this, many people tell survey interviewers that they voted in the most recent election, even when they did not. In the 2002 mid-term election, for example, about 40 percent of eligible voters cast a ballot. In the National Election Study survey for 2002, however, 64.9 percent reported having done so.³⁰ This over-reporting by a margin of nearly 25 points is an example of social desirability bias.

Questions about parental involvement in education also have a “right,” or socially desirable, answer. Responsible parents are supposed to go to school meetings, attend parent-teacher conferences, help their child do his or her homework, and so on. Because parents may be uncomfortable acknowledging that they have fallen short of these standards, some simply might *not* acknowledge it. In other words, they might say that they engaged in a particular activity related to their child’s education when in fact they did not.

Unfortunately, there are few ways of quantifying social desirability bias in a survey, unless researchers have deliberately built the necessary metrics into the survey itself. In the case of the NHES survey used in this study, they did not. There are two questions within the survey, however, that help illustrate even well-meaning parents’ capacity for exaggeration and wishful thinking. When parents in the survey were asked what kind of grades their children were earning, 77 percent said A’s or B’s. These results would make the citizens of Lake Wobegone proud. Similarly, when parents were asked how far they expected their children to go in their education, more than 70 percent said that they would finish at least a four-year degree. This is highly unlikely, considering that even among recent cohorts, college completion rates level off at about 25 percent.³¹

To give some sense of the potential magnitude of social desirability bias on questions having to do with parental involvement, consider the results from an earlier study in which parents: a) were asked how often they read to their young children, and b) were asked to keep a “time diary” of their children’s activities during the course of randomly-chosen days. In the survey portion of the study, 47 percent of parents reported reading to their children every day. When researchers examined a random time diary day, however, they found that only 28 percent of parents had recorded that a portion of the child’s day was spent reading with parents. If parents’ survey responses had been accurate, the time diaries should have shown roughly 47 percent of children being read to on the randomly chosen day. Thus, parents may have exaggerated the frequency of daily reading with children by as much as 20 percentage points.³²

What are the implications of social desirability bias for the results in this study? Even the relatively low estimated levels of parental involvement reported above may be exaggerated — perhaps significantly. Accordingly, the numbers reported here should be considered upper limits on parental involvement, not averages around which real-world behavior may fluctuate up or down. In fact, one would not be surprised to find actual levels of parental involvement within MPS to be 10 to 20 percentage points lower than indicated by the estimates presented above.

DISCUSSION

The results presented in the foregoing pages paint a discouraging picture. As noted, an estimated 34 percent of MPS parents actively choose a school for their child(ren), rather than simply settling for the closest option in their neighborhood. This means, of course, that an estimated two-thirds of MPS parents do not participate in the choice system at all. Beyond this, fewer than half of parents who do choose make a choice from among two or more schools (as opposed to considering only one). Of those, about two-thirds consider academic/performance criteria in making their choice.

By the time one arrives at this third cut at the data, only 10 percent of parents remain — that is, only 10 percent of parents consciously choose a school for their child, do so from at least two options, and consider academic/performance criteria in the process. Under the circumstances — with roughly 90 percent of parents either not choosing at all, or choosing but not applying particularly rigorous criteria — it seems unlikely that MPS schools are feeling the pressure of a genuine educational marketplace as a result of public school choice. Their performance certainly suggests not.

The data on parental involvement are equally discouraging. According to the estimates given above, only about one-third of parents are highly involved in their children's education at the school site. With respect to at-home involvement, the figures vary between roughly 40 and 50 percent, depending on the student's age. But parents who are at least moderately involved at home and highly involved at school are scarce indeed, constituting no more than one quarter of the parent population, and perhaps as little as 10 percent (again, depending on student age). The reader should recall, too, that these estimates almost certainly overstate the extent of parental involvement within MPS — perhaps dramatically — because of social desirability bias.

None of this is to suggest that MPS should abandon efforts at promoting public school choice and parental involvement. Regardless of their impact on student performance, these two reforms are worthy undertakings. Public school choice helps level the playing field between parents and schools, creates incentives for parents to become more engaged consumers of education, and creates the opportunity to find a better match between student and school than may be available in systems that do not offer choice. Parental involvement explicitly identifies parents as partners in the education enterprise, and makes clear the responsibilities they bear in ensuring that children get a good education. In short, both reforms reject the idea of parents as passive observers of the public education system. These reforms encourage parental empowerment, engagement, and even accountability.

The real appeal of these initiatives, however, lies in their potential to improve student outcomes and the quality of schools. In the MPS system, however, that potential appears not to have been realized. When it comes to public school choice, the estimates presented above indicate that few parents are sufficiently invested in the choice process to create the kind of serious pressure on individual schools that would result in necessary, dramatic improvements. With respect to parental involvement, too, estimated levels of parental engagement within MPS are almost certainly inadequate to have a meaningful impact on student performance. In both cases, then, one sees clear limits to the leverage that parent-oriented reforms can exert over educational outcomes within MPS.

This may be just as well. Relying on public school choice and parental involvement to reclaim MPS may be a distraction from the hard work of fixing the district's schools. In fact, both theories of reform *assume* the existence of a sizeable core of good schools from which parents can choose, and on which parents can believe that their time and effort are not being wasted. There is no shortage of ideas for developing such a core of schools, even in a district the size of MPS, even in a major urban center with all of its challenges.³³ The question is whether the district, its schools, and its supporters in Madison are prepared to embrace reforms more radical than public school choice and parental involvement. Given the high stakes involved, district parents should insist on nothing less.

METHODOLOGY APPENDIX

The data analysis in this study was based on two sources: the Census Bureau's 2005 American Community Survey (ACS), and the 2003 Parent and Family Involvement in Education survey, which is part of the National Household Education Surveys Program (NHES) funded by the United States Department of Education. The ACS was the source for the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) demographic data used in the study. The NHES survey was the source for national data on parental choice and parental involvement in education for children in grades kindergarten through eight.

As noted in the text, previous research has shown a variety of demographic variables to be correlated with important aspects of both parental choice and parent involvement in education. The intent of this study was to explore the impact of those variables on choice and involvement in a specific education context — the MPS system. The particular demographic variables considered in the study were:

- educational attainment of parents,
- race and ethnicity of students,
- household composition (single-parent vs. two-parent), and
- mother's employment status.

These variables were found to be particularly influential determinants of parental involvement in a U.S. Department of Education study using the same survey questions relied upon in developing the estimates in this paper. (See Christine Winqvist Nord and Jerry West, *Fathers' and Mothers' Involvement in Their Children's Schools by Family Type and Resident Status*, United States Department of Education, Office of Education Research and Improvement, NCES 2001-032, May 2001, Table B1, p.83.) Furthermore, the values for these variables within MPS differ significantly from those within the national dataset, meaning that failure to adjust for them in the estimation process could result in significantly biased estimates.

The basic methodological approach of the study was to weight the national data set (the NHES survey) such that its demographic profile on the four variables just identified matched that of the MPS district. The estimates in the text were then derived by performing straight frequency calculations on the variables of interest in the weighted data set.

The weights were calculated using 2005 American Community Survey Public Use Micro Data for the city of Milwaukee. The micro data were filtered to ensure inclusion only of households with related children enrolled in grades one through twelve. Then, each child case in the dataset was classified according to whether or not:

- the parent or guardian had completed a college education,
- the child was white and non-Hispanic,
- the child's household had two parents/guardians present, and
- the child's mother, if present, was in the labor force (either employed or looking for work).

This classification scheme resulted in a total of 16 possible demographic categories for each child case. Weights were determined by comparing the frequency of each of the 16 categories within Milwaukee to the frequency of the same categories within the NHES dataset. Each case within the survey dataset was then weighted, using one of the 16 category weights. Once this weighting process was complete, the demographics of the weighted NHES data matched the actual demographics within MPS on the four variables given above. The estimates generated from the weighted data set, then, can be considered a reasonable approximation of those that would be generated using actual MPS data.

The discussion of on-site parental involvement in the text required interpolation of parent participation in an activity with frequency levels somewhere between parental frequency of: a) attendance at a general school meeting, and b) volunteering at the child's school. The actual weighted frequency of the former in the NHES data is 83 percent; of the latter, 30 percent. Splitting the difference between these two numbers, one can assume that roughly 55 percent of parents would engage in an activity requiring a level of effort greater than attending a general meeting but less than volunteering at school.

The question, then, becomes how many of these parents would *also*: a) attend a parent-teacher conference, and b) attend a school event in support of their child. Parents engaged in all three would be classified in the text as “highly involved.”

The NHES data indicate that 58 percent of parents who attend general school meetings also attend parent-teacher conferences and school events in support of their child. Furthermore, 75 percent of parents who volunteer at their child’s school also attend parent-teacher conferences and school events. (This lends support to the idea that parents who volunteer at school are more highly involved overall than parents who attend general school meetings, other things being equal.) Splitting the difference again, one can assume that roughly 65 percent of parents who would engage in a hypothetical activity requiring effort levels halfway between attending a general school meeting and volunteering at the school would also: a) attend a parent-teacher conference, and b) attend a school event in support of their child.

With this number — 65 percent (66.5 percent, to be exact) — the estimate in the text can finally be derived. This is done by noting that 51 percent of parents in the NHES dataset attended parent-teacher conferences *and* attended school events on behalf of their child. If 66.5 percent of these parents *also* engaged in the hypothetical third activity described above, then:

$$.51 * .665 = .339 = 33.9 \text{ percent}$$

of parents would be estimated to engage in all three activities. This, therefore, was the estimate used in the text for the proportion of parents who could be considered highly involved at the school site.

The question of *which* parents would engage in a hypothetical third activity (above and beyond attending a parent-teacher conference and a school event) becomes relevant when one attempts to calculate the percentage of parents who are highly involved at school *and* moderately to highly involved at home. This calculation requires one to sort parents into two groups — those who are highly involved at school, and those who are moderately to highly involved at home — and determine the extent to which the groups overlap. Establishing the size of the latter group is simple; it can be determined based on parents’ survey responses in the NHES data. Establishing the size of the former group is problematic, however; obviously, parents did not respond to a question about whether or not they had participated in the hypothetical activity postulated in this study.

In order to address this issue, participation in the hypothetical activity was assigned at random to exactly 66.5 percent of parents who reported having attended a parent-teacher conference and having attended a school event in support of their child. This random assignment allowed for an unbiased (albeit crude) designation of all parents in the data set as members of one of two groups — those who exhibit high involvement at school, and those who do not. With the size of the former group estimated in this manner, it became possible to estimate the size of the parent population exhibiting high levels of involvement at school *and* moderate to high levels of involvement at home.

NOTES

1. Source: author's calculation from 2005/2006 data published by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. See: <http://tinyurl.com/2fvrmx>.
2. Derived from edweek.org, Research Center, "Choice," available on-line at: <http://tinyurl.com/2bo8nm>, accessed on July 24, 2007.
3. Lynn Bosetti, "Determinants of school choice: understanding how parents choose elementary schools in Alberta," *Journal of Education Policy*, Vol.19, No.4, July 2004, pp.387, 8.
4. A number of literature reviews attest to these effects. See, for example, Professor Charles Desforges (with Alberto Abouchaar), "The Impact of Parental Involvement, Parental Support and Family Education on Pupil Achievements and Adjustment: A Literature Review," Research Report RR433, Department for Children, Schools and Families, Government of the United Kingdom, June 2003; Anne T. Henderson and Karen L. Mapp, "A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement," Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, Annual Synthesis 2002; and Bonnie Stelmack, "Parental Involvement: A Research Brief for Practitioners," Alberta Initiative for School Improvement, 2005.
5. See, for example, Kathleen Cotton and Karen Reed Wikelund, "Parent Involvement in Education," Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, May 1989; Desforges, "The Impact of Parental Involvement," op. cit., and Stelmack, "Parental Involvement," op. cit.
6. This overview is derived from Desforges, "The Impact of Parental Involvement," op. cit., Chapters 6 and 7.
7. Alan J. Borsuk, "School choices satisfy, study says," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, January 8, 2007, available on-line at: <http://tinyurl.com/2ceq5v>.
8. Ibid.
9. Source: The 2005-2006 MPS District Report Card, "MPS District Data for the 2005-06 School Year," December 2006, p.7, Chart 7; and "Types of Schools within MPS," available on-line at: <http://tinyurl.com/24fvoe>, accessed on July 25, 2007.
10. This discussion was derived from several sources, including the text of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (Public Law 107-110), January 8, 2002, especially Section 1118; National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education, No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) Bulletins, Volume I, Issue 2, "Parent Involvement Policy Statements," date not given, available on-line at: <http://tinyurl.com/283fty>; and State of Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, "ESEA Information Update," Bulletin No. 03.04, August 12, 2003, available on-line at: <http://tinyurl.com/yw5yns>.
11. United States Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, "Characteristics of the 100 Largest Public Elementary and Secondary School Districts in the United States: 2003-04," NCES 2006-329, September 2006, Table A-6, p.A-14.
12. Cotton and Wikelund, "Parent Involvement in Education," op. cit.
13. Source: author's calculations from the 2005 American Community Survey.
14. These bullet points are taken verbatim from Mark Schneider, Paul Teske, and Melissa Marschall, *Choosing Schools* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), p.87.
15. Sharon Gewirtz, Stephen J. Ball and Richard Bowe, *Markets, Choice and Equity in Education* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1995), p.45.
16. Ibid., pp.45, 6.
17. Michael Mintrom, "Book Review: Choice Words," *Education Next*, 2001 No. 4, on-line version available at: <http://tinyurl.com/22pt75>.
18. Schneider, Teske, and Marschall, *Choosing Schools*, op. cit., p.163.
19. Stuart Martin, "Choosing a Secondary School: Can Parents' Behaviour Be Described as Rational?," paper presented at British Educational Research Association Annual Conference, Bath, 1995, p.13.
20. Justine S. Hastings, Richard Van Weelden, and Jeffrey Weinstein, "Preferences, Information, and Parental Choice Behavior in Public School Choice," NBER Working Paper Series, Working Paper 12995, National Bureau of Economic Research, March 2007, p. 3.
21. Diane Reay and Stephen J. Ball, "'Spoil for choice': The working classes and educational markets," *Oxford Review of Education*, March 1997, Volume 23, Issue 1. Citation drawn from alternate format version of article; page citation not available.

22. Clark Robenstein, "Public schooling, the market metaphor, and parental choice," *Educational Forum*, Vol. 65, Number 3, Spring 2001; citation drawn from p.7 of the on-line version of the article, available at: <http://tinyurl.com/yt7vhh>.
23. Based on the actual structure of the NHES dataset, the technically correct reading of the data is that an estimated 33.6 percent of MPS students have one or more parents who actively choose a school for them – not that 33.6 percent of MPS parents actively choose a school for their child (which is how the result is presented in the text). Though this distinction is more than purely semantic, the data will be presented in the text in terms of frequency of parent participation. This helps keep the discussion as clear and accessible as possible.
24. The American Community Survey data classify households by, among other criteria, the presence or absence of related children under 18 years of age. For this reason, the analysis in the text was not extended to children older than 17 years.
25. The research literature consulted for this portion of the study included Chandra Muller, "Parents and Schools," *Discovery Magazine*, University of Texas, Vol. 14, No.3, pp.31 – 35; Douglas Downey, "Parental and Family Involvement in Education," Chapter 6 in *School Reform Proposals: The Research Evidence* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2002), edited by Alex Molnar; State of Michigan Department of Education, "What Research Says About Parent Involvement in Children's Education," March 2002, available on-line at: <http://tinyurl.com/9p9jj>; Chad Nye, Herbert Turner, and Jamie Schwartz, *Approaches to parental involvement for improving the academic performance of elementary school children in grades K-6* (London: The Campbell Collaboration, 2006), available on-line at: <http://tinyurl.com/ywbbp6>; William H. Jaynes, Research Digest: Parental Involvement and Student Achievement: A Meta-Analysis, FINE Network: Harvard Family Research Project, December 2005, available on-line at: <http://tinyurl.com/2hay8g>; and Desforges, "The Impact of Parental Involvement," op. cit.
26. The specific activities were: telling the child a story; doing arts and crafts with the child; involving the child in household chores; working on a project with the child; and playing board games or puzzles with the child.
27. The specific activities were: visiting a library; going to a play, concert, or other live show; visiting an art gallery, museum, or other historical site; and visiting a zoo or aquarium.
28. The specific activities were: going to a play, concert, or other live show; visiting an art gallery, museum, or other historical site; attending an event sponsored by a community or ethnic group; and attending an athletic or sporting event outside of school in which the student was not a participant.
29. The derivation of this final set of estimates is described in the Methodology Appendix.
30. Brian Duff, Michael J. Hanmer, Won-Ho Park and Ismail K. White, "Good Excuses: Understanding Who Votes with an Improved Turnout Question," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 71, Number 1, 2007, p.69.
31. See the 2005 American Community Survey for the United States as a whole, Table B15001, B15001. SEX BY AGE BY EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT FOR THE POPULATION 18 YEARS AND OVER.
32. See Sandra L. Hofferth, "Response Bias in a Popular Indicator of Reading to Children," *Sociological Methodology* 36 (1), December 2006, pp.310-315.
33. See, for example, Samuel Casey Carter, *No Excuses: Lessons from 21 High-Performing, High-Poverty Schools* (Washington, D.C. Heritage Foundation, 2001); Sammis White, "The Achievement Gap in Milwaukee Public Schools," Wisconsin Policy Research Institute; and Alan M. Blankstein, *Failure is not an Option* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2004).

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