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CHAPTER FIVE:

Private School Choice: Milwaukee

The nation's most aggressive choice advocates <sup>insist</sup> argue that private schools should be included in the program. Such a strategy, often called a "voucher plan," would, they <sup>57</sup> insist, extend educational opportunities to all parents, not just the rich. Further, involving <sup>remains non public</sup> public or private schools in choice programs would, says Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander, "unleash marketplace forces that would help make all schools better."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>7, date</sup> Milwaukee, Wisconsin, is the only city <sup>which</sup> to date <sup>has</sup> a private school choice plan. It has become, according to Secretary Alexander, "America's pioneer in giving middle- and low-income parents consumer power—dollars to use at the schools of their choice. This consumer power is the muscle that parents need to create the best schools in the world for their children. This is exactly the kind of revolution that President Bush believes is necessary to change our schools."<sup>2</sup>

President Bush <sup>to the public</sup> insists that choice plans should include "all schools that serve the public and are accountable to public authority, regardless of who runs them." And Chester L. Finn Jr., former Assistant U.S. Secretary of Education, takes the position that those who balk at private school choice probably aren't serious about fundamental reform. The word "public," Finn commented recently, "is no more sacred when attached to the word 'education' than when used as a prefix to, say, 'hospitals,' 'housing,' or 'restrooms.'"<sup>3</sup>

The <sup>current</sup> rise in prominence of the voucher concept follows previous efforts by the Reagan administration to grant tax breaks to parents whose children attend private schools. Vouchers have more appeal than tax credits because they are potentially accessible all citizens, regardless of income. In the past, opponents had

successfully painted private school choice as a "Catholic" issue, a thinly veiled handout to parochial schools. But voucher plans increasingly are attracting the support of inner city parents and politicians from the minority community.

Surveys present a mixed picture of just where Americans stand on vouchers. In our national poll we asked if parents should be given a voucher to enroll their child in a private school at public expense. Sixty-two percent opposed the idea, 32 percent supported it, and 6 percent said they didn't know. Other surveys, however, have found strong support among blacks, other minorities, and inner city dwellers. A 1991 Gallup Poll, for instance, found that 57 percent of those individuals favored vouchers.

**TABLE I**

Some People Think That Parents Should Be Given a Voucher Which They Could Use Toward Enrolling Their Child at a Private School at Public Expense.

Do You Support or Oppose This Idea?

Support	32%
Oppose	62%
Don't Know	6%

*about vouchers*  
 Opinions may vary. What is indisputable, however, is that in less than five years, ~~private school vouchers have~~ moved from the edge of the school reform debate to center stage. ~~Proposals aimed at including private schools in choice programs have~~ surfaced in legislatures in at least thirteen states, according to our survey of chief state school officers. ~~None has as yet been approved, either by the legislature or popular referendum.~~ In the most serious electoral test so far, Oregon voters rejected, by a wide margin, a statewide voucher initiative in 1990. A similar initiative is to appear again on Oregon ballots in 1994.)

Pro-voucher groups failed to get the signatures needed to put a similar measure before California voters in November of 1992. ~~But~~ the voucher cause has advanced on

other fronts. In Colorado, a citizen initiative facing voters in November 1992 would, if approved, provide up to \$2,500 in public funds to parents who send their children to private or parochial school or who educate their children at home. In Los Angeles and Chicago, poor parents sued their respective school districts in June 1992, demanding the right to send their children to private schools at public expense.<sup>4</sup> In Indianapolis, the Golden Rule Insurance Co. created an "Educational Choice Charitable Trust" which promises to pay up to \$800 to help families send elementary children to non-public schools. "We intend this as a direct challenge to the Indianapolis Public Schools: improve or lose students," said J. Patrick Rooney, chairman of the company.

In San Antonio, a group of business and foundation leaders set up in 1992 a \$1.5 million voucher fund for up to 750 children. More than thirteen hundred applications were received within two weeks. And in Milwaukee, a private group called "PAVE," or Partners Advancing Values in Education, began a voucher plan in the fall of 1992 financed by the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, designed to send poor children to private and parochial schools. Other privately financed projects are in various stages of development in Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Michigan, and Tennessee.

① → Milwaukee, Wisconsin is the first and only choice program in the country where public school students can attend private schools at tax payer expense. Here is a school system where 60 percent of the children are living below the poverty line, 28 percent of minority families are unemployed, the teen pregnancy rate is double the national average, twenty-five hundred children are homeless, the student mobility rate is as high as 70 percent in some schools, the dropout rate is 40 percent, and students are allowed to graduate with grade-point averages below 2.0. Milwaukee's mayor, John O. Norquist, wrote that urban public school systems should "ultimately be scrapped" in favor of "a choice or voucher system."

There are, of course, pockets of strength. Milwaukee's public school district has, for years, operated an extensive magnet school program as part of its

desegregation efforts. The recently opened Brown Academy offers extended day programs for elementary school youngsters. There are Montessori schools, gifted and talented magnets, and a number of well-regarded neighborhood public schools such as Lee Avenue School, Garfield School, Lloyd Street School, and Rufus King High School.

State funding for Milwaukee's 97,000-pupil school district nearly tripled during the 1980s, from \$129 million in 1980-81 to \$310 million in 1991-92. Two state commissions during the 1980s documented Milwaukee's problems and laid out solutions. A 1988 report proposed a "Marshall Plan" for the city's troubled schools. But few proposals were ever implemented, according to Tom Fonfara, a senior policy analyst to Wisconsin Governor Tommy Thompson and innovation notwithstanding, state officials and many community leaders say that private school choice was passed only after largely vain efforts at reform. Even teacher leaders and school board members concede that internal politics and troubled labor relations have hobbled reform efforts.

That dismal perception was resoundingly reinforced in a concurring opinion by Wisconsin Supreme Court Justice Louis J. Ceci in the March 3, 1992 ruling that upheld the Milwaukee choice plan by a 4-3 vote: "The Wisconsin legislature," Ceci wrote, "has attempted to throw a life preserver to those Milwaukee children caught in the cruel riptide of a school system floundering upon the shoals of poverty, status quo thinking, and despair."

For years, Milwaukee's schoolchildren were involved in a range of desegregation programs. Today, some sixty-three hundred are bused daily to white suburbs under the state-sponsored "Chapter 220" integration plan, while another nineteen thousand elementary school children are bused outside their neighborhood because their own schools are so overcrowded.

It was against this discouraging backdrop that a group of black legislators and community leaders including State Representative Annette "Polly" Williams, and in

1987 promoted the idea of an all-black school district within the Milwaukee district. For years, Williams and others were angered not only by chronic school problems but also by the fact that black children were taking long bus rides in search of the quality education. "Polly never liked Section 220, and she's right about this," said Herbert J. Grover, Wisconsin's state school superintendent and a leading critic of Milwaukee's choice plan. "How would you like your third grader bused every day?"

Unable to attract enough support for a separate black district, Williams teamed with Governor Thompson to promote private school choice. Williams had many friends in Milwaukee's private school community. She had sent her own children to one, Urban Day School. Private school choice, she believed, would put quality schools within the reach of poor families. Thompson, for his part, was a long-time choice advocate and had campaigned unsuccessfully for far-reaching statewide plans that included parochial schools. Ultimately, the governor settled for the more limited Milwaukee plan.

The resulting "Milwaukee Parental Choice Plan" is open only to students from families with incomes less than 1.75 times the poverty level (about \$22,000 for a family of four). Students selected from that pool may attend participating nonsectarian private schools in the city at public expense. Each participating school receives slightly under \$2,500 per student—the average paid by the state to the Milwaukee Public Schools. The receiving schools must either provide busing, for which they are reimbursed by the state, or parents provide the transportation. Those who do are reimbursed at the end of the school year.

Further, the Milwaukee plan limits participation to a maximum of one percent of the total student population in the city's public schools—or just under one thousand students. During the first year, the numbers of participating students totaled 341, all but 6 percent of whom were nonwhite. In 1991, enrollment increased to 562. It rose again the following year to 632.

Students are randomly selected, but sibling preference is allowed, and private schools must comply with federal and state non-discrimination laws. However, a former U.S. Undersecretary of Education Ted Sanders ruled in 1990 that Milwaukee's private schools did not have to accept handicapped youngsters—thus exempting those schools from a federal mandate. In the first year of the program only nine of the participating students had disabilities.

Milwaukee has eighteen nonsectarian private schools. However, as of 1991 only six participated into the plan. Four were elementary and middle schools, and they enrolled some 90 percent of the children: Bruce-Guadalupe Bilingual Community School, Harambee Community School, Urban Day School, and Woodlands School. The other two were Lakeshore Montessori School and an alternative high school called SER-Jobs for Progress. Four additional schools joined the program in the fall of 1992. The rest have stayed out, according to University of Wisconsin Professor John L. Witte, because the \$2,500 voucher doesn't cover costs, and because the program might curb their independence with a web of regulations.

Early signs are that parents and students are happy with the way the Milwaukee plan is working. According to a well documented first-year report a majority of students felt safe. Practically none reported drug or alcohol problems in their new schools. More than 80 percent of the participants believed they were getting a good education.<sup>5</sup> Eighty-four percent of the parents graded their private schools "A" or "B;" only 32 percent felt that way about the public schools they'd left.<sup>6</sup>

Given such high levels of satisfaction, why do so many educators object to this seemingly modest local experiment, which involves only several hundred thousand tax dollars and served hundreds students? The reasons become clearer when the plan is described in less benign terms: what the state of Wisconsin has done, one critic charges, is to direct state tax dollars formerly used to support a large city public

school district to a "duplicate, competitive private system of schools" that operates largely free of state accountability or regulation.<sup>7</sup>

In fact, one of the more troublesome features of the Milwaukee plan involves accountability. The program was devised to put the least possible state regulation on private schools. After all, the reasoning went, if the choice program fettered private schools with regulation, they'd soon resemble the bureaucracy-laden public schools. Further, the private schools made it clear that they would resist any plan with onerous regulatory strings.

As a result, requirements in the Milwaukee plan are hardly burdensome.

Participating schools must meet only *one* of four standards: First, at least 70 percent of choice students <sup>at the school</sup> must advance one grade level each year; second, average <sup>tu</sup> attendance <sup>must</sup> be at least 90 percent; third, at least 80 percent of <sup>all particip</sup> the students must demonstrate "significant" academic progress; *or*, fourth, at least 70 percent of the families of choice pupils must meet the parental involvement criteria set by the private school.

In the first year, three out of six <sup>the</sup> ~~participating~~ <sup>participating</sup> private schools <sup>in the Milwaukee program</sup> fulfilled their <sup>requirement</sup> ~~regulatory obligations~~ by submitting attendance records. Two schools ~~said they had~~ met the parental involvement criteria. Only one—SER-Jobs for Progress—submitted evidence of <sup>the</sup> ~~academic progress~~ <sup>of students</sup>. According to Julie Underwood, co-director of the University of Wisconsin's Center for Educational Policy, the state has thus allowed participating private schools to be "self-declared effective without adequate credibility."

The dangers of this regulatory vacuum became apparent in the case of Juanita Virgil Academy, a private school that took part in the Milwaukee program. The school had sixty-three choice students in the first year but shut down in the middle of the school year amid charges of mismanagement, lack of books and supplies, overcrowding, and poor discipline. The Juanita Virgil fiasco confronted Milwaukee

with the harsh reality that when marketplace ideas fail, it's children, often poor ones, whose lives were disrupted.

Professor Witte, a self-described choice advocate, wrote in his "First Year Report" on the Milwaukee plan: "There are those who would argue that the failure of (Juanita Virgil) is to be expected in a market system of education. Whether one believes that expectation outweighs the fact that approximately 150 children essentially lost a year's education is a value issue that we cannot resolve. Whatever one's values are, the price was high for those families involved."

Witte has urged the Wisconsin legislature to tighten the Milwaukee plan. The plan, he insists, should require participant schools to submit financial audits, demonstrate sound governance structures, and meet state outcome requirements including standardized tests and dropout reporting. Not surprisingly, private schools in the city oppose such fetters on their freedom. Thus far, the Milwaukee legislature has failed to act.

Parent information is another weak feature of the Milwaukee plan. Beyond terse press releases from the state Department of Public Instruction, Milwaukee parents have been given little objective information about details of the choice plan<sup>7</sup> or ~~about~~ the characteristics of participating schools. "I don't think any of this was adequately thought through, especially parent information," admitted one state official. Professor Witte added, "We know that over half the parents in Milwaukee don't even know about the choice program."

Still, the need to confront the crisis in Milwaukee's public schools cannot be denied. Indeed, eighty-three percent of parents taking part in the first year said that "frustration with public schools" was "very important" or "important" in their decision to enroll their children in the choice program.<sup>8</sup> Much harder to assess, however, is whether children have benefitted by switching to private schools, and if so, how.

To explore this essential issue, we visited several of the city's private "choice" schools. While most ~~were solid and~~ provided basic skill instruction, many appeared limited in their ability to match the variety of course offerings in public schools, particularly in the upper grades. Some private schools did have strong music, dance, and foreign language programs, but there seemed to be less emphasis <sup>on the gifted</sup> ~~students~~, and science equipment was often sparse. On the other hand, private school officials reported that well over 90 percent of their graduates pursue post-high school education.

Vanessa, an eighth-grade choice student, said her grades rose from C's and D's in her former public school to B's in her new private school: "As soon as I came here it was a big change. Here, teachers care about you. My grades are higher." One seventh grader we met told us that she had, for years, attended Milwaukee Public Schools, "but not very happily." By her account: "If you were stuck with a subject like math, the teachers were too busy to help." Worst of all were the fights: "You really can't avoid it. They'll think you're scared."

For the past two years, this student has attended Woodlands School, a tidy but unprepossessing private school in a working class Polish and German neighborhood on the south side of Milwaukee. Here, she enjoys classes of twenty-five pupils or less, each with a teacher and aide, compared with thirty-five or more in Milwaukee schools: "If you don't understand something, the teachers take the time, and they care. You don't have to read out of texts all the time. And you don't get pressured into fights." Students interviewed at other private schools echoed these same thoughts.

At Woodlands, a former parochial school with thirty-one choice children, all students are required to take French beginning in kindergarten. Teacher Jodie Schneider's kindergarten class begins each day with French songs on tape, including the French national anthem. Many classes seem creative and stimulating. A fourth-grade class writes to Irish pen pals. A fourth- and fifth-grade science class has a little

incubator for hatching quail eggs. In a seventh- and eighth-grade social studies class students are discussing differences between constitutional government and dictatorship, the teacher takes the opportunity to put in a plug for choice: "In a democracy you have the right to choose a private school," she tells her class, "but under a dictatorship you couldn't."

By contrast, the emphasis at Harambee Community School seems to be on skill building and discipline. The school is located in a predominantly black north Milwaukee neighborhood where a large percentage of students—159 out of 425—are enrolled under the choice program. In this school students who commit minor infractions, like forgetting an assignment or chewing gum, risk banishment to a small room in the basement called the "Resource Center." Starting next year, the school will require uniforms. Fights, drugs, or alcohol use can mean automatic suspension or expulsion. "Our discipline is very, very strict," says principal Dennis Alexander. But before we punish, they see we care. Still, if you violate the policies here, you're gone."

Harambee requires remedial classes for all children who test low in basic skills. In this program students must attend classes devoted to single skill areas such as division or multiplication until they "test out." "I brought back basics," says Alexander. "I found that a lot of our choice kids and regular students were lacking them."

The overall climate at these schools is, we found, encouraging, and student satisfaction seems to be high. Children and parents alike are clearly happy with the safe, clean, caring and intimate environments. Still, on the central issue, educational achievement, standardized test data fail to demonstrate that ~~public school~~ pupils are doing any better academically at private schools. Most choice students were, on average, low achievers, even by Milwaukee public school standards. But a year at private school hasn't produced impressive gains: ~~Choice students improved~~ from the

*choice*  
*the number made up*  
*did*

thirtieth to thirty-fourth percentile in nationally normed reading tests in 1991, <sup>On</sup> ~~but~~ <sup>the</sup> ~~median scores were~~ <sup>other hand,</sup> down from the thirty-third to thirtieth percentile in math.<sup>9</sup>

When asked about the <sup>is</sup> lack of progress, Milwaukee's private school officials offered explanations that sounded remarkably like those typically heard from their contemporaries in public school. "I'm not surprised," said one principal. "We're dealing with issues far beyond the walls of schools. Kids live in places where they don't even have a place to do their homework." Said another: "It doesn't bother me that those tests didn't increase in one year. If the kids stay in the program, I'm confident they'll improve steadily." Still another told us: "Test scores? Nothing should be made of it. Choice students come from economically deprived families. They have discipline problems. They are not already good citizens. They are hard core."

Meanwhile, the oft-stated claim that private schools can educate students for half the \$5,000 spent by public schools turns out to be not that simple. Principals at several of Milwaukee's private schools put their "true cost" per pupil not at the voucher price of \$2,500, but at \$3,000 to \$3,500. To close the gap between the state-financed tuition subsidy and the "real" cost, some schools require parents to pledge that they will engage in extensive fund-raising and volunteer work. Those who fail to sign such a contract may be assessed extra tuition, or have their children expelled. "Whereas public schools have to hire lunch aides and other school workers, free parent labor amounts to a very sizable subsidy for private schools," says Professor Witte.

Some private schools also get help from businesses and foundations. Harambee School, for example, receives a monthly donation of approximately \$50,000 from the Jane and Lloyd Pettit Foundation. The Bradley Foundation has been another generous contributor to several of Milwaukee's choice schools. But by far the most important factor holding down private school costs is teacher salaries and benefits. In 1991-92, Milwaukee public school teachers salaries ranged from \$23,113 for a

beginner with a bachelor's degree to \$46,907 for veterans with master's degrees. In contrast, teachers at Milwaukee's private choice schools earned from \$11,500 to \$27,000.

How is this possible? First, many of the Milwaukee private schools were formerly parochial schools; hence, some of the teachers and administrative staff are religious (at Urban Day, for example, three of sixteen teachers are nuns.) Second, roughly one-third of the teachers at these schools are young and at the lower end of the salary scale. Finally, many private school teachers are willing and able, because of family circumstances, to trade off high wages for attractive working conditions: "I felt a certain friendliness here, a feeling. We are allowed a tremendous amount of freedom," said one science and math teacher who formerly taught in the suburbs but now teaches at a Milwaukee choice school for "quite a bit less money."

Thus, Milwaukee's young, limited plan tells us something about both the potential and the problems of private school choice. On the positive side, children who participate in the program feel happier and safer. Further, parents are highly satisfied. Test scores and other data, however, have yet to show that private schools can produce higher achievement levels among choice children. Further, accountability is virtually nonexistent and as the case of Juanita Virgil Academy demonstrated, marketplace laws did not prevent an unsound private school from entering the program. Further, repeated claims by voucher advocates that Milwaukee private schools do the same job for half the money have proven to be debatable.

Reflecting on the larger implication of private school choice, it appears that the Milwaukee plan has, to date, neither helped nor hurt the city's public schools, though the *symbolic* message is considerable. Financially only about \$750,000 out of \$243.8 million in state aid in 1991-92 has been diverted from public to private schools, according to the district's department of financial services.

Especially discouraging is the fact that Milwaukee's inadequate system of parent information has left most families in the dark about the choice plan and virtually assured that only relatively savvy parents can find out about their options, much less exercise them. It also should be noted that the U.S. Department of Education has acquiesced to the virtual exclusion of the approximately 10 percent of children with disabilities from Milwaukee's choice plan. The reluctance of Milwaukee's private schools to accept such students may be understandable. They would be hard pressed, no doubt, to make needed physical changes in their school buildings, hire new special education teachers, establish individualized programs for the handicapped, and live with the crush of paperwork associated with the federal Education for All Handicapped Children Act. Still, if private school choice is being held out as a ticket to better education for public school children, it must be an option available to all, not just the most privileged.

Finally, it has yet to be demonstrated that private schools in Milwaukee are teaching low-achieving inner city youngsters either "better" or "cheaper." Private schools insist, with some justification, that two years isn't much time to be judged on, and that choice students who stay on with their programs will end up better off than they would have at public schools. But that remains to be seen. Claims that private schools are more efficient and economical must be weighed in light of sharply lower teacher salaries, the extensive free labor requirements placed on parents, the ability to turn away resource-intensive handicapped pupils, and often-sizable subsidies from private corporations and foundations.

Many of those most closely involved with Milwaukee's program see choice's impact as largely symbolic, as a wake-up call to the city's schools, as a sign that time is running out for administrators to improve relations with teacher unions and agree on fundamental changes. In the words of Jeannette Mitchell, Milwaukee school board

president, "As a board, we recognize that right now choice may not be a big deal. But choice is one more thing that says we should get better. . . . We feel we have a window of opportunity of about two years to get results and get back support."

Tom Fonfara, education aide to Governor Thompson, sees signs that choice in Milwaukee has nudged the state's education establishment toward acceptance of school reform ideas: "It is incredibly interesting to me that the teacher unions and school board associations are now saying that they don't want to be perceived as a roadblock to reform." In contrast, Dick Collins, president of the Wisconsin Education Association Council, which tried unsuccessfully to block the plan in court, argues that choice "takes off the pressure to change things. It gives the legislature an excuse not to do anything. They can argue that they've done something."

Whatever else may be said of it, Milwaukee's plan fails to sustain the assertion that vouchers can spark urban school reform. Few inner cities have enough nonsectarian private schools willing or able to participate in voucher schemes to really make much difference to poor children. And starting new ones in such impoverished areas would be no small challenge, since such schools would first of all have to find skilled teachers and administrators willing to work for salaries one-third or more below public school levels. Moreover, as long as courts keep intact the constitutional barriers to including parochial schools in voucher schemes, the possible universe for private vouchers is likely to be too limited in most places to have much impact for the vast majority of children.

In sum, two years of private school choice in Milwaukee have produced neither the heaven nor havoc forecast by those on both sides of the debate. In this city the battle lines have been drawn as clearly as anyplace in the nation between those who believe that public education cannot improve without the threat of competition, and those who believe that a voucher system would weaken public schools and dramatically reduce the prospects that such renewal ever will occur.

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