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APPLES TO APPLES

Assessing Wisconsin's State of Education



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Executive Summary



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The Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty (“WILL”) exists to advance the public interest in the rule of law, individual liberty, constitutional government, and a robust civil society.

WILL’s Apples to Apples report puts schools on a level playing field to fairly assess the state of education in the Badger State across public, charter, and private voucher schools. Unfortunately, demographic factors historically play a large role in student performance. Any honest assessment of how schools—and school sectors—are performing must take those factors into account. In many ways, the state’s report card fails to do this. This report endeavors to incorporate these factors through rigorous statistical modeling that controls for and assesses the impact of a number of student characteristics. The report has been updated to include data from the 2021-22 report cards.

Among the key findings:

- **Students in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program continue to outperform their public-school peers.** Proficiency rates in private choice schools were 8.1% higher in English/Language Arts (ELA) and 8.3% higher in math on average than proficiency rates in traditional public schools in Milwaukee.
- **Charter school students in Milwaukee continue to outperform their public school peers.** Independent charter schools in Milwaukee had proficiency rates 3.7% higher in ELA and 4.6% higher in math on average than their traditional public-school peers. District charters saw 8.5% and 8.8% higher proficiency in ELA and math respectively.
- **Statewide, choice students outperform their public-school peers in ELA and Math.** Proficiency rates were about 3.2% higher in ELA for students participating in school choice statewide than traditional public-school students, and 2.1% higher in math, on average.
- **Wisconsin continues to struggle with achievement gaps.** Statewide, a school with 100% low-income students would be expected to have proficiency rates 40% lower than a school with no low-income students in ELA and 42.4% lower in math. For African American students, that gap is 19.1% in ELA and 22% in math. Hispanic students have an achievement gap of approximately 3.7% in ELA and 7.2% in math.
- **Little evidence was found that more spending affects student performance.** Once the demographics of students in the schools are taken into account, the level of per capita spending in a public school district has no statistical impact on student proficiency.
- **Proficiency remains well below pre-COVID levels.** While math proficiency rebounded slightly, ELA proficiency continued to decline once non-participation on the test is accounted for.
- **Rural schools are the lowest performing subset.** On average, proficiency in Wisconsin’s rural schools is significantly lower in both ELA and math than urban, suburban, or small town schools.



Introduction

This is the fifth edition of WILL's Apples to Apples report. After a two-year pause due to COVID, the report resumed last year and now continues with data from the 2021-22 school year. In this report, we take a comprehensive look at Wisconsin's schools by assessing outcomes on a level playing field, while taking into account student characteristics. Unlike our 2020-21 report, much of the school year studied was conducted under "normal" circumstances—in person, with far fewer virtual learning days. Consequently, this year's report likely provides a clearer picture of where kids stand around the Badger State.

As the legislature considers expanding access to school choice, the data here can provide evidence on the relative effectiveness of the state's existing choice programs, which include private school choice, charter schools, and public school open enrollment. Each iteration of Apples to Apples has found that private schools in the choice program, as well as many forms of charter schools, outperform their traditional public school peers on a level playing field, and this year is no exception. But it is important to emphasize that we report all results, whether favorable to school choice or not. For example, the first several iterations of this program found no advantage of private school choice when we look statewide (that has since changed). In addition, certain subsets of charter schools have occasionally underperformed their public school peers, as is the case again with this year's report. The goal of this report is to present an unbiased and comprehensive view of where schools stand, not to advocate for any particular sector.



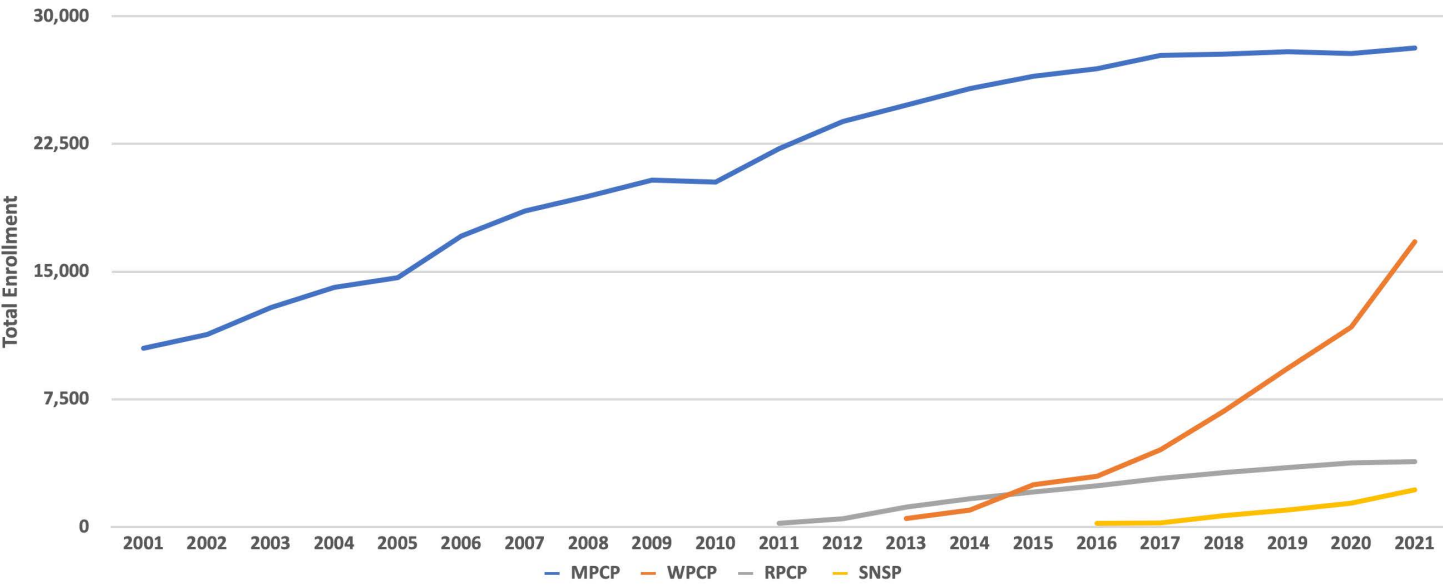
Overview of School Choice in Wisconsin

PRIVATE SCHOOL CHOICE PROGRAMS

Wisconsin has four private parental choice programs open to students in different areas of the state: the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP), Racine Parental Choice Program (RPCP), Wisconsin Parental Choice Program (WPCP), and the Special Needs Scholarship Program (SNSP). The requirements and status of each program are described in detail in the following sections. Schools participating in these

programs are funded at a significantly lower level than Wisconsin's public schools. For the 2022-23 school year, schools accepting the voucher for high school will receive \$9,045 per student. Schools with students in grades K-8 will receive \$8,399 per student.¹ These figures are significantly less than any public school in Wisconsin. On average, traditional public schools receive \$14,596 in state and local funding per student, and the lowest funded school district (Merton) receives \$11,440.² Figure 1 details enrollment in each of the programs over the past 20 years beginning with the 2001-02 school year.

Figure 1. Choice Program Enrollment by Year



MILWAUKEE PARENTAL CHOICE PROGRAM (MPCP)

The MPCP is the oldest school voucher program in the country.³ The program covers the geographic area of the City of Milwaukee, and only students who live in the city are eligible. Even then, the program is only open to students in the City of Milwaukee whose families are within 300% of the federal poverty limit. For a family of four, this works out to a yearly income limit of \$79,500.⁴ There are (unlike the WPCP discussed later) no enrollment caps. The program served 28,130 students during the 2021-22 school year.⁵

WISCONSIN PARENTAL CHOICE PROGRAM (WPCP)

The newest school voucher program in Wisconsin is the WPCP, which expanded access to vouchers statewide in 2013. The program has a lower income limit than other choice programs in Wisconsin, at only 220% of the federal poverty limit. For a family of four, this represents a yearly income limit of \$58,300. This program also faces strict enrollment caps that are set to increase over the years at a slow rate. For 2021-22, 7% of students in each school district were eligible for enrollment. This increases by 1% per year until that number reaches 10% in the 2025-2026 school year, at which point the caps will be lifted altogether. During the 2021-22 academic year, the program served 16,753 students.

RACINE PARENTAL CHOICE PROGRAM (RPCP)

The RPCP expanded Wisconsin access to voucher schools beyond Milwaukee. The program began in 2011 and is open only to students who are residents of the Racine Unified School District and whose families' incomes are within 300% of the federal poverty limit. During the 2021-22 school year the program served 3,839 students. The RPCP has no enrollment cap.

SPECIAL NEEDS SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM (SNSP)

The fourth private school choice program in Wisconsin, the Special Needs Scholarship Program, is open to students in Wisconsin with disabilities who wish to attend a private school that better meets their needs. The baseline voucher amount is higher than for other school choice programs in the state at \$13,076.⁶ The total amount of funding per student in the SNSP varies because expenses get partially reimbursed: schools can be reimbursed for 100% of expenses up to \$19,614, and then for 90% of expenses after that.⁷ There were 2,183 students taking advantage of the scholarship for the 2021-22 school year. The SNSP does not have an enrollment cap.



Charter Schools

Charter schools are public schools which are exempt from some district mandates. Wisconsin has three types of charter schools: instrumentality, non-instrumentality, and independent. These schools vary in the amount of freedom they have from school district policies. A number of charter schools operate as virtual schools—a sector that came to greater prominence during the pandemic. While non-instrumentality and instrumentality funding varies based on the individual schools' contracts with the district, the funding amount received by the school is often tied to the independent charter funding amount set by the state, which stands at \$9,100 per pupil. School districts get the full amount of funding for the student and retain the remainder. In the average school district, this means the district prevents more than \$5,000 from following the student to their charter school. Figure 2 shows enrollment across all types of charter schools over the last two decades, with separate lines for independent and district-run charter schools.⁸

INSTRUMENTALITY CHARTERS

These schools are under the purview of the local school district, and their employees are employees of the district. Instrumentality charters also have far more limited curricular freedom than other charters. Without looking at individual school contracts, it is difficult to differentiate instrumentalities from those in the following category, non-instrumentalities. Consequently, throughout most of this paper we will refer to both types as “District Charters.”

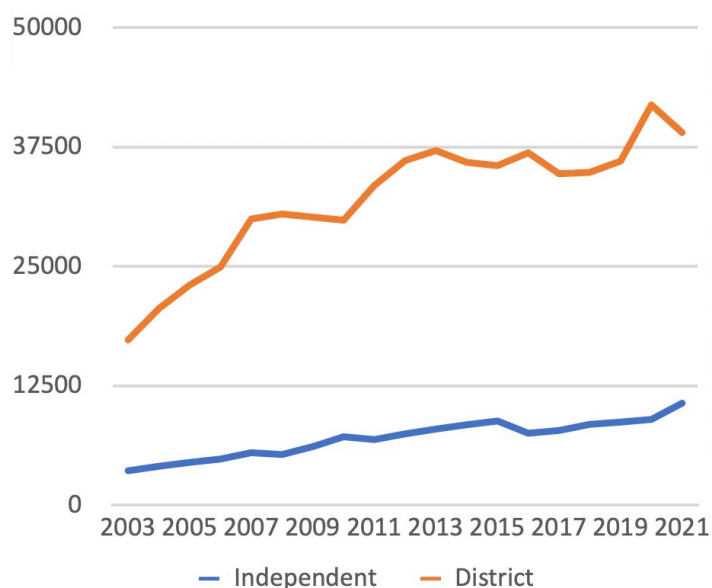
NON-INSTRUMENTALITY CHARTERS

These charter schools are under the purview of the school district but maintain a level of independence not seen in traditional public schools. The teachers are employees of the school rather than the district and are not unionized.

INDEPENDENT CHARTERS

Independent charter schools are public schools outside of the purview of local school boards. They are chartered by a number of entities throughout the state, including the University of Wisconsin system and the City of Milwaukee. These schools are freed from many of the regulatory burdens found in traditional public schools. Thirty-four independent charter schools operate in Wisconsin, with eight located outside of Milwaukee.⁹

Figure 2. Charter School Enrollment by Year

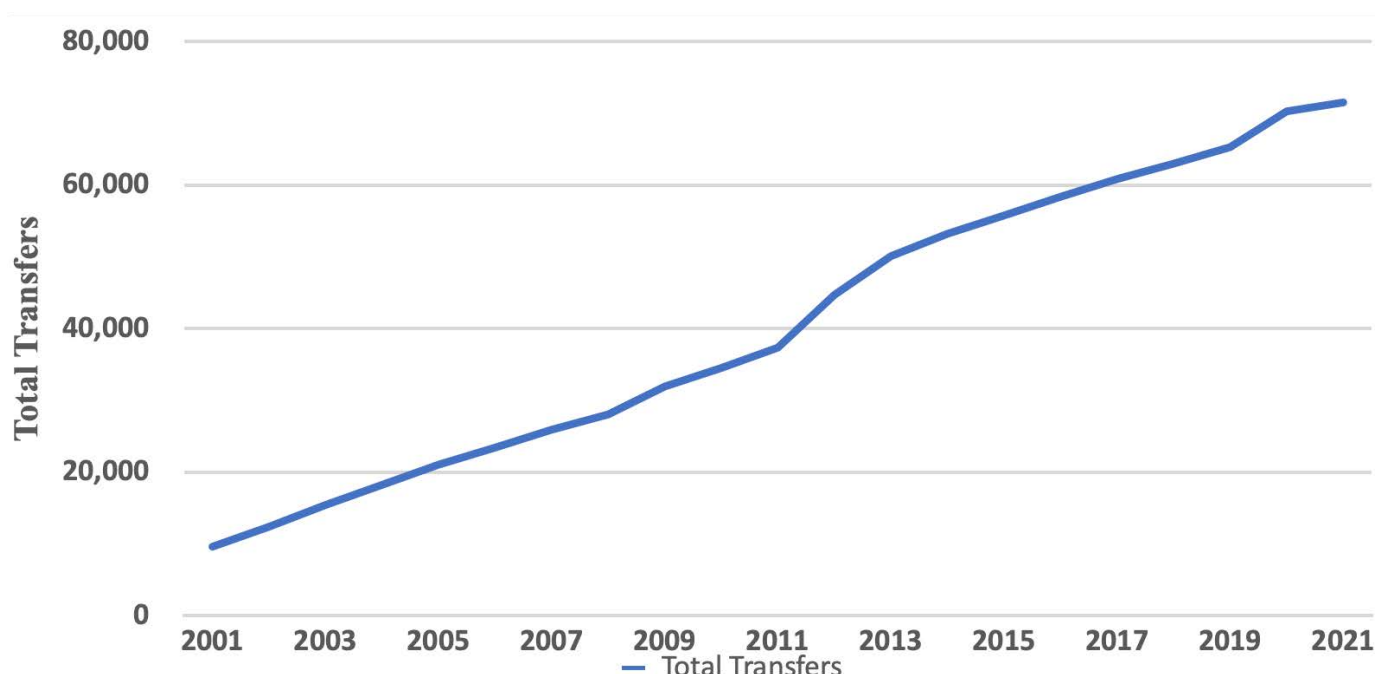




Open Enrollment

Wisconsin's largest school-choice program is the public-school open enrollment program. This program allows students from one school district to transfer to another district that has open seats. At their January meeting, school boards are required to determine and publicize the number of seats that they have available for open enrollment within each grade. Before a student can enroll in another district, the receiving district has discretion to consider a student's disciplinary record and whether they can meet the needs of a student with a disability before accepting them.¹⁰ Figure 3 shows the number of students who have utilized the open enrollment program over the past twenty years.

Figure 3. Open Enrollment by Year



METHODS

Wisconsin is relatively unique in providing extensive data on the demographic and economic characteristics of schools in choice programs across all sectors—public, charter, and private. The data set shows a school's racial makeup, socioeconomic status, enrollment counts, and English language learner counts. The data used in our Apples to Apples studies enables a more fine-grained analysis than has been conducted previously (outside of the work by the School Choice Demonstration Project), for which individual-level student data was made available by the Department of Public Instruction.¹¹

The factors considered for the Apples to Apples analysis include:

- Percentage of minority students,
- Percentage of students in the school who are economically disadvantaged,
- School enrollment,
- Percentage of students in the school who are English language learners, and
- Grade levels served by the school.

Our dependent variables are primarily measures of achievement gathered from DPI's WISEdash system for the 2021-22 school year. As we have done in the past, we gathered data on two of the most important subjects for success later in life: reading and mathematics. This data is aggregated at the school level. Students who took the alternative exam for disabilities are not included in the analysis.

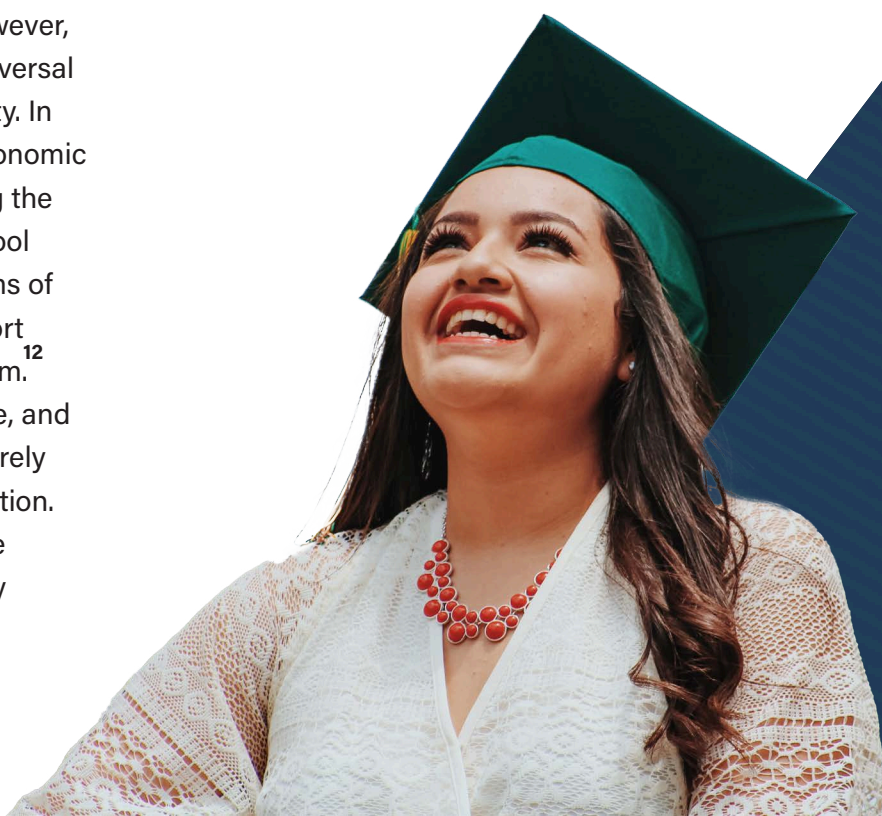
In most Wisconsin school districts, economic disadvantage is defined as whether or not the student utilizes free or reduced lunch. However, some school districts in the state have universal free lunch—known as Community Eligibility. In these districts, alternative measures of economic status are utilized. These include reporting the results of the count of students in the school whose families are eligible for various forms of public assistance and having families report their income status directly on another form.¹² These alternative metrics are less accurate, and have led to problems for researchers who rely on this data in evaluating American education. Particularly for some private schools in the choice program, the data tends to severely underestimate the number of low-income students. Consequently, our results on the

performance of choice students relative to other sectors should be seen as conservative.

In the formal analysis, we attempt to determine the effect of types of schools by modeling test scores. While some participating private choice schools also receive a report card for all of the students in their school, test scores included in this analysis are for the choice students in each school only since we are most interested in determining the association of school choice with performance rather than the association of private schooling in general with performance. In the primary analysis, this is done through the inclusion of fixed effects for each Wisconsin school district. Thus, we run the following model:

$$\text{Test Score} = \beta_1(\text{Private}) + \beta_2(\text{Dist. Charter}) + \beta_3(\text{Ind. Charter}) + \beta_4(\text{Controls}) + \mu$$

Positive coefficients on the Betas would indicate that the characteristic has a positive relationship to student performance, while negative coefficients would indicate that the characteristic has a negative relationship.



SUMMARY STATISTICS

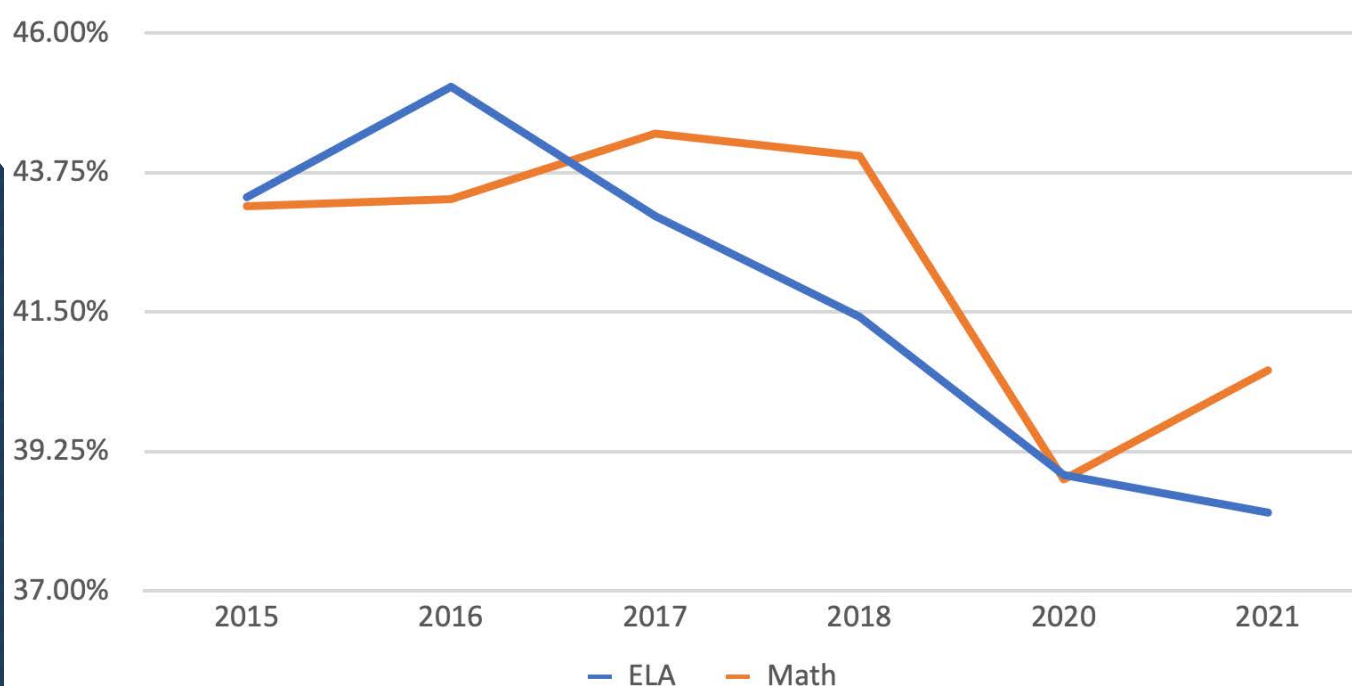
Before we move in to the more formal statistical analysis, this section provides a brief look at the overall state of student performance in Wisconsin schools. Since the 2011-12 school year, proficiency rates in Wisconsin have been aligned with the scores of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a national test that assesses student performance on a level playing field. The NAEP defines proficiency thus:

NAEP Proficient represents solid academic performance for each grade assessed. Students reaching this level have demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter, including subject-matter

knowledge, application of such knowledge to real-world situations, and analytical skills appropriate to the subject matter.

When these standards were implemented statewide, proficiency dropped by about 30% in both ELA and math, indicating that the old standards were painting a rosier picture of student performance than was warranted. In Figure 4, we report the results since the 2015 implementation of the current state exam (the Forward Exam). These results are based on the exclusion of non-participants due to the high number of non-test takers each year, though this only has a significant effect on 2020, when a truly high number of students failed to take the exam. Note also that the 2019-20 school year is excluded because the Forward Exam was not administered at all.¹⁴

Figure 4. Proficiency Over Time, All Public Schools



Proficiency rates had been relatively steady in both ELA and math for the time frame of analysis here—until the pandemic. That coincided with a somewhat dramatic decline in proficiency around the state, down from an average around 44% in math to just over 38% in a single year. When one looks at the ELA data, the decline is steadier, though it accelerated during the pandemic. Unlike math proficiency, which somewhat rebounded in 2021-22, ELA proficiency continued to decline.

Many districts in Wisconsin suffer from extremely low proficiency. Table 1 below lists the 10 districts with the lowest proficiency in math and ELA.

Table 1. Lowest Proficiency Districts, Math and ELA

District	Math Proficiency	District	ELA Proficiency
Menominee Indian	1.40%	Menominee Indian	2.60%
Beloit	9.50%	Norris	5.30%
Milwaukee	10.50%	Beloit	14.10%
Norris	10.50%	Milwaukee	15.70%
Bayfield	10.90%	Wausaukee	16.00%
Racine Unified	12.90%	Lac du Flambeau Elementary	17.30%
Lac du Flambeau Elementary	14.70%	Phelps	17.50%
Lake Holcombe	17.70%	Racine Unified	17.90%
Tri-County Area	18.00%	Siren	18.40%
Bowler	18.90%	Mellen Public School	19.00%

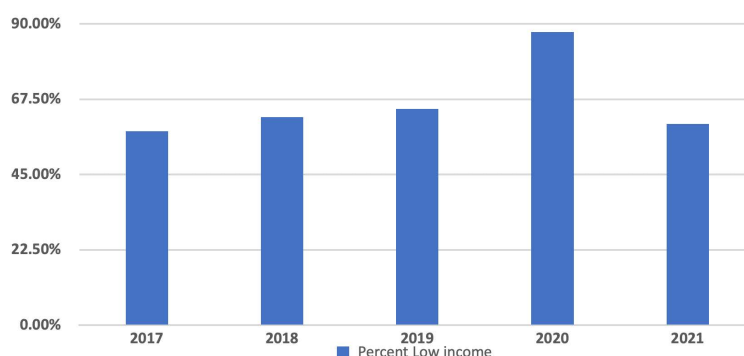
In the Menominee Indian School District, less than 3% of students are proficient in math or ELA. The story isn't much better in Beloit, which has proficiency rates of 9.50% in math and 14.10% in ELA. Milwaukee Public Schools has proficiency rates of 10.50% and 15.70% in math and reading respectively. In all of the districts in this list, more than 80% of students aren't reaching basic levels of proficiency.



DATA PROBLEMS

It continues to be worth noting that low-income status has historically been mismeasured, both in public schools and private schools in the choice program. Some private schools in the choice program report 0% of their students as being low-income, despite the choice program only being open to students who fall under 220% of the federal poverty limit in the WPCP or 300% in the RPCP and MPCP. This, plus anecdotal evidence on the financial struggles of many families in the state's choice programs, makes the 0% figure very unlikely. Another problem is extreme variation in low-income reporting, which affects public schools as well as private schools. For example, the Cudahy school district's extreme variation over the past few years is shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Low-Income Status by Year, Cudahy



While the district appears to have returned to something close to its normal level of low-income students, there was a huge spike in the status during the 2020 school year. Because income status is the single largest predictor of student outcomes in Wisconsin, we recognize that errors measuring this could lead to problems in the results reported further on in this paper.

For both public schools and private schools, problems in the reporting of low-income status can have a significant impact on their state report card score.¹⁵ The relative importance of proficiency versus student growth changes dramatically based on the number of low-income students in the school, and can mean the difference in a school being categorized as “Meets Expectations” or “Fails to Meet Expectations.”

Accurate data is especially difficult to garner in private schools that don't participate in the free-and-reduced lunch program, as well as for school districts where every student receives free meals, as there is little incentive for parents to provide their income information in such circumstances. This highlights, once again, the need for schools to do their best to acquire accurate data on the income status of students and for DPI to consider better ways to collect this important data.



Results

MILWAUKEE

The results from our analysis of Milwaukee data can be found in Table 2. Unlike last year's Apples to Apples IV, where circumstances required us to include test participation as a variable in the analysis, participation rates were relatively restored to normal this year, meaning that we do not have to undertake that additional analysis.

Table 2. Relationship Between Sector and Proficiency, Milwaukee

Variables	(1) Math Proficiency	(2) ELA Proficiency
Private Choice	0.0812*** (0.0156)	0.0830 (0.0146)
District Charter	0.0880*** (0.0251)	0.0850*** (0.0235)
Independent Charter	0.0461*** (0.0229)	0.0373* (0.0214)
African American	-0.282*** (0.0347)	-0.336*** (0.0325)
Hispanic	-0.138*** (0.0418)	-0.190*** (0.0392)
Low Income	-0.234*** (0.0373)	-0.318*** (0.0349)
ELL	-0.155*** (0.0544)	-0.150*** (0.0509)
6-8	0.103* (0.0543)	0.0785 (0.0508)
High School	0.0528 (0.0470)	0.0572 (0.0440)
K-12	0.0309 (0.0498)	0.0103 (0.0466)
Elementary	0.104** (0.0468)	0.0540 (0.0438)
K-8	0.0829* (0.0456)	0.0688 (0.0426)
Constant	0.400*** (0.0523)	0.567*** (0.0490)
Observations	253	253
R-Squared	0.588	0.706

As has been the case in every year we've conducted this analysis, choice and charter schools in Milwaukee exceed the proficiency of traditional public schools once appropriate control variables are included. Proficiency in private choice schools is approximately 8.1% higher in math and 8.3% higher in English/ Language Arts than in traditional public schools. Proficiency in district charters is about 8.8% higher in math and 8.5% higher in ELA, while independent charters enjoy a performance advantage of about 4.6% in math and 3.7% in ELA.

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** P<0.05, * p<0.1

RESULTS: STATEWIDE

Next, we take a look statewide at the results by sector. These results are reported in Table 3.

Table 3. Relationship Between Sector and Proficiency, Statewide

Variables	(2) ELA Proficiency	(3) Math Proficiency
Private Choice	0.0812*** (0.0156)	0.0830 (0.0146)
District Charter	0.0880*** (0.0251)	0.0850*** (0.0235)
Independent Charter	0.0461*** (0.0229)	0.0373* (0.0214)
African American	-0.282*** (0.0347)	-0.336*** (0.0325)
Hispanic	-0.138*** (0.0418)	-0.190*** (0.0392)
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High School	0.0528 (0.0470)	0.0572 (0.0440)
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Elementary	0.104** (0.0468)	0.0540 (0.0438)
K-8	0.0829* (0.0456)	0.0688 (0.0426)
Constant	0.400*** (0.0523)	0.567*** (0.0490)
Observations	253	253
R-Squared	0.588	0.706

Standard errors in Parentheses *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

In terms of ELA proficiency, we continue to see concerning results in terms of achievement for African American, Hispanic, and low-income students. A hypothetical school with 100% African American students would be expected to have proficiency rates in ELA 19.1% lower than a school with no African American students. In a similar scenario, proficiency rates for a school with only Hispanic students would be expected to be 3.7% lower, while an all-low-income school would see proficiency rates 39.9% lower.

The results for mathematics are even more concerning. A swing in math proficiency of more than 40% would be predicted going from a school of all low-income students to a school with no low-income students. For Hispanics and African Americans on a similar metric, these numbers are 22.0% and 7.2%, respectively.

What's more, all of these effects are additive, meaning that a school with many low-income African American students suffers negative results from both proficiency drops together. Altogether, the data here shows that the failure of Wisconsin to educate students from diverse backgrounds is not just a Milwaukee problem.

We see more intriguing results for choice and charter schools here. Proficiency rates for all choice-participating students in private choice schools were 3.2% higher in ELA than in traditional public schools and 2.1% higher in math. For district charters, proficiency rates were 2.4% higher than in traditional public schools in ELA, though slightly lower in math.

The results for mathematics are even more concerning on some of our control variables. A swing in proficiency of more than 40% would be predicted going from a school of all low-income students to a school with no low-income students. For Hispanics and African Americans on a similar metric, these numbers are 22.0% and 7.2%, respectively.

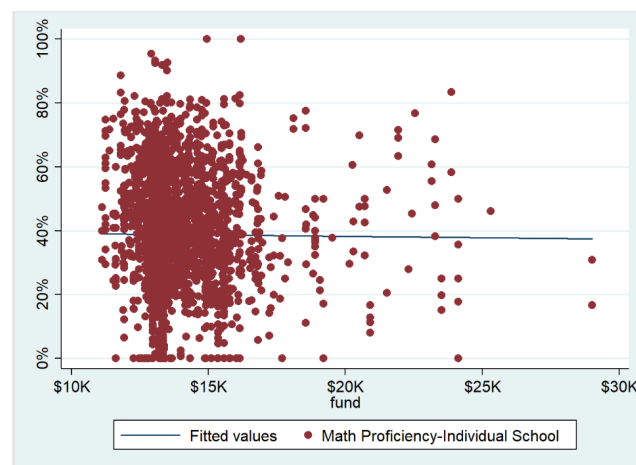
One may note the insignificance of the independent charter school variables. This result is consistent with last year, where no effect was found. One likely explanation is that, in a comparison of more than 2,000 schools around the state of Wisconsin, the approximately thirty independent charter schools simply don't provide enough data for strong conclusions.

Among district charters, we actually see significantly lower performance relative to traditional schools of 2.2% in math. It is important to note here that most virtual schools in Wisconsin are classified as district charter schools. Separating these schools out from the local district data renders the relationship between district charters and math proficiency insignificant. See Appendix Table A1 for this result.

SCHOOL FINANCE

As we move towards the next two-year state budget, the calls for more spending from public schools are inevitable. However, in Wisconsin and around the country, there has historically been very little relationship between overall spending and student outcomes. In this section of the paper, we examine whether spending per student in Wisconsin school districts has any relationship to how well students do, including the same control variables as in the other analyses in this paper.

Figure 6. Math Proficiency and Spending by District



In this plot, each red dot represents an individual Wisconsin school: higher math proficiencies move the dots higher (y-axis) with 100% proficiency at the top, while higher per-pupil district spending in that school district moves dots further to the right (x-axis). Note that 1 school district, Norris, is excluded from the table due to its high level of spending and the unique group of students they work with (it's inclusion would actually make the relationship negative). The blue line represents a line of best fit (a "bivariate regression") for the relationship between the two variables. The line is largely flat, with a slight downward trend (the relationship between the two variables is statistically insignificant). Similar results occur for ELA proficiency.

Of course, a full analysis requires the inclusion of control variables like in the previous sections of the paper. Table 4 depicts this analysis.

Table 4. Relationship Between Spending and Proficiency

Variables	(2) ELA Proficiency	(3) Math Proficiency
Funding \$1000s	-0.00296** (0.00127)	-0.00659*** (0.00138)
African American	-0.161*** (0.0157)	-0.195*** (0.0171)
Hispanic	-0.101*** (0.0296)	-0.181*** (0.0324)
Low Income	-0.477*** (0.0141)	-0.514*** (0.0154)
ELL	-0.00812 (0.0444)	0.0486 (0.0484)
6-8	0.0114 (0.0116)	0.0374*** (0.0127)
High School	0.0176 (0.0117)	0.0737 (0.0128)
K-12	-0.000499 (0.0181)	-0.00938 (0.0197)
Elementary	0.0617*** (0.0110)	0.203*** (0.0120)
K-8	0.0810*** (0.0137)	0.143*** (0.0150)
Constant	0.607*** (0.0223)	0.610*** (0.0244)
Observations	1,986	1,986
R-squared	0.619	0.679

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Unlike last year's study where this analysis was included for the first time, this year we find a significant, negative relationship between spending and proficiency. That said, the overall effects are small. The data here suggest that a district where spending is \$1,000 lower will have ELA proficiency rates 0.02% lower than a hypothetical, identical district where spending is \$1,000 higher. Of course, the results here do not mean that spending more money will cause lower outcomes. Rather, they suggest that we

are past the point of diminishing returns, where additional taxpayer spending does little or nothing to improve student performance.

This portion of the analysis included public schools only. However, it is possible to include private voucher and charter schools in the analysis with some assumptions. Because the voucher amount varies between grade levels, we make the assumption that schools that cross the ninth grade threshold have an even distribution of students in all grade levels. So, for instance, the voucher amount used for a school that includes grades K-12 would be:

$$\frac{(9 \times 8,300) + (4 \times 8,946)}{13} = 8,498$$

Given that there are fewer choice high schools than K-8 schools, this actually provides a conservative estimate of the relative efficiency advantage of choice schools. Independent charter schools receive an amount set in state law that increases proportionally with any per-pupil revenue limit adjustments. For the 2021-22 school year under study here, that amount stood at \$9,201. In the table below, we present the 20 schools in the state that achieve the highest proficiency per taxpayer dollar spent.

Table 5. Proficiency Gains per \$1,000

School Name	Prof. per \$1k (Math)	School Name	Prof. per \$1K (ELA)
Pacelli Catholic Elementary Saint Bronislava	12.05%	Saint Francis de Sales Grade School	9.04%
Stevens Point Christian Academy	11.77%	Divine Savior Holy Angels High	8.38%
Eastside Evangelical Lutheran	10.19%	Eastside Evangelical Lutheran	8.34%
Saint Mary's Grade School	9.04%	Maranatha Baptist Academy	8.08%
Milwaukee Seventh Day Adventist School	9.04%	Lake Country Lutheran High	7.74%
Saint Francis de Sales Grade School	9.04%	Saint Mary's Grade School	7.53%
Maranatha Baptist Academy	8.07%	Manitowoc Lutheran High	7.51%
Saint Margaret Mary Grade School	8.04%	Abundant Life Christian School	7.48%
Marquette University High	8.01%	Saint Thomas Aquinas Academy	7.46%
Mount Olive Evangelical Lutheran School	7.95%	Chesterton Academy of Milwaukee Inc	7.44%
Saint Thomas Aquinas Academy	7.88%	Fox Valley Lutheran High	7.43%
Luther High	7.85%	Saint Paul Evangelical Lutheran	7.36%
Luther Preparatory School	7.75%	Luther Preparatory School	7.30%
Woodland School	7.51%	Saint Charles Borromeo Catholic School	7.23%
Saint Peter Lutheran School	7.39%	Marquette University High	7.09%
Accelerated Advanced Learning Program	7.38%	Oostburg Christian Grade School	7.04%
Christ Child Academy	7.33%	Westside Christian School	7.02%
Saint Paul Lutheran School	7.23%	Accelerated Advanced Learning Program	7.01%
Lakeview Elementary (Muskego Norway)	7.14%	Saint Luke's Lutheran School	6.98%
Fox Valley Lutheran High	7.09%	Milestone Democratic School	6.92%
Mill Valley Elementary	7.08%	Leonardo da Vinci School for Gifted Learners (Green Bay)	6.92%

Choice and charter schools necessarily rise to the top in this sort of analysis given their higher relative proficiency and significantly lower spending per pupil. Among the two public schools that appear on the list, one of them (Leonardo da Vinci School for Gifted Learners) enjoys the ability to selectively admit students based on a test score that private choice schools do not enjoy.¹⁶ The full list of schools and their rankings will be available on our website.

RURAL VS. URBAN SCHOOLS

Oftentimes, education in Wisconsin is seen as a contrast between poor performance in Wisconsin’s urban centers and decent or good performance in other parts of the state. When one considers suburbs exclusively as the “other” parts of the state for comparison, this analysis holds some water. But when rural schools are added to the calculus, the picture changes to some extent. In this portion of the paper, we compare the performance of Wisconsin schools based on their urbanicity in four categories—city, suburb, town, and rural. These are based on locale definitions from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)¹⁷, which relate the population of the area to its relative location inside or outside of an urban center.

These designations are included for all public schools in the state on the report card, though they do not exist for private schools in the choice program which are consequently excluded from this portion of the analysis. It is important to note that “cities” here does not just mean the largest cities like Milwaukee. DPI also applies this designation to smaller cities such as Janesville.

Table 6 below undertakes the same analysis on proficiency that we conducted in Table 5 with the addition of variables for urbanicity. The coefficients should be read as relative to baseline proficiency, which is proficiency in cities.

Table 5. Proficiency by Urbanicity

Variables	(1) ELA Proficiency	(2) Math Proficiency
Rural	-0.0458*** (0.00763)	-0.0232*** (0.00853)
Suburb	0.0109 (0.00784)	0.0187** (0.00876)
Town	-0.0229*** (0.00836)	-0.00667 (0.00934)
Constant	0.586*** (0.0134)	0.513*** (0.0150)
Observations	2,017	2,017
R-Squared	0.638	0.679

Standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

LEARNING LOSS

As mentioned in the methods section, test participation rates were largely restored to pre-COVID levels this year, giving us the opportunity to examine which districts have suffered the largest amount of learning loss during the pandemic. In this section, we compare proficiency rates by district in the last year prior to COVID (2018-19 school year). Unlike the other analyses in this paper, these results are presented at the school district level. We think this is arguably more useful here because district-wide policies on issues like school reopenings likely had a large impact on the extent of learning loss.

On average, districts declined by 3.3% in both ELA and math between 2019 and 2021. There were substantial outliers, particularly on the negative side. The districts with the 10 largest drops in proficiency for each subject are reported in Table 7 below.

It may be surprising to learn that the largest proficiency drops have happened in what are largely rural and small-town school districts rather than our larger metropolitan areas. Some of this is due to the sad reality that proficiency in urban centers is already extremely low, giving less room to drop. In Milwaukee, for instance, proficiency only fell by 2.7% and 4.3% in ELA and math respectively, but proficiency in the district has been under 20% since before the pandemic. Return to Table 1 to view the lowest proficiency districts in the state.

Table 7. Proficiency Declines, 2019-2021

District	ELA Decline	District	Math Decline
Juda	-18.00%	Reedsville	-19.70%
Phelps	-16.20%	De Soto Area	-18.70%
Reedsville	-15.20%	Gilmanton	-18.50%
Green Lake	-15.00%	Rosendale-Brandon	-18.20%
Randall Consolidated	-14.00%	Juda	-16.40%
Marathon City	-13.60%	Washburn	-16.00%
Greenwood	-13.60%	Mineral Point Unified	-15.80%
Royall	-13.50%	Cochrane-Fountain City	-14.90%
Argyle	-13.40%	Beecher-Dunbar-Pembine	-14.80%
Norris	-12.90%	Tri-County Area	-14.70%
Potosi	-12.90%	Highland	-14.40%

Conclusion

School choice in Wisconsin continues to offer a valuable alternative to traditional public education in the state. Particularly for students in the city of Milwaukee, the strong record of success found in previous editions of this report was once again identified. Outstate, the continued growth of the WPCP is increasingly showing a performance advantage relative to traditional public schools. Meanwhile the charter sector continues to perform above traditional public schools, particularly in urban areas. This competition is important because traditional public schools continue to suffer. Not only do we continue to see large racial and economic achievement gaps, but we also see that our rural and small town communities are being left behind.

Unfortunately, only some residents of the state enjoy the opportunity to take advantage of these programs. Onerous income limits on private school choice mean that middle-class families are priced out of educational options. Moreover, a limited willingness to open new charter schools from some authorizers, coupled with outright hostility to charters among others, has limited the supply of these high-performing schools.

Appendix

Table A1. Proficiency with Virtual Charters Separated

Variables	(1) ELA Proficiency	(2) Math Proficiency
African American	-0.193*** (0.0142)	-0.223*** (0.0156)
Hispanic	-0.0369* (0.0197)	-0.0715*** (0.0217)
Low Income	-0.398*** (0.0133)	-0.423*** (0.0146)
ELL	-0.129*** (0.0255)	-0.134*** (0.0280)
Private	0.0307*** (0.00940)	0.0173* (0.0103)
Indp. Charter	0.0109 (0.0215)	-0.0235 (0.0236)
District Charter	0.0304*** (0.0100)	-0.0121 (0.0110)
Virtual	-0.0338 (0.0207)	-0.0663*** (0.0227)
High School	0.0273** (0.0126)	0.0468*** (0.0138)
6-8	0.0254** (0.0128)	0.0729*** (0.0141)
K-12	0.0247 (0.0186)	0.0611*** (0.0204)
K-5	0.0715*** (0.0121)	0.204*** (0.0133)
K-8	0.0672*** (0.0139)	0.125*** (0.0152)
Constant	0.555*** (0.0238)	0.544*** (0.0262)
Observations	2,246	2,246
R-Squared	0.572	0.629

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table A2. Proficiency with Virtual Charters Separated

Type	Description
City-Large	Territory inside an Urbanized Area and inside a Principal City with population of 250,000 or more.
City-Midsize	Territory inside an Urbanized Area and inside a Principal City with population less than 250,000 and greater than or equal to 100,000.
City-Small	Territory inside an Urbanized Area and inside a Principal City with population less than 100,000.
Suburban-Large	Territory outside a Principal City and inside an Urbanized Area with population of 250,000 or more.
Suburban-Midsize	Territory outside a Principal City and inside an Urbanized Area with population less than 250,000 and greater than or equal to 100,000.
Suburban-Small	Territory outside a Principal City and inside an Urbanized Area with population less than 100,000.
Town-Fringe	Territory inside an Urban Cluster that is less than or equal to 10 miles from an Urbanized Area.
Town-Distant	Territory inside an Urban Cluster that is more than 10 miles and less than or equal to 35 miles from an Urbanized Area.
Town-Remote	Territory inside an Urban Cluster that is more than 35 miles from an Urbanized Area.
Rural-Fringe	Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an Urbanized Area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an Urban Cluster.
Rural-Distant	Census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an Urbanized Area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an Urban Cluster.
Rural-Remote	Census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an Urbanized Area and also more than 10 miles from an Urban Cluster.

Endnotes

1: <https://dpi.wi.gov/parental-education-options/choice-programs/payment-amounts-frequently-asked-questions#Q1>

2: <https://sfs.dpi.wi.gov/SFSdw/CompRevReport.aspx>

3: <https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2017/05/16/523612949/lessons-on-race-and-vouchers-from-milwaukee>

4: <https://dpi.wi.gov/parental-education-options/choice-programs/student-applications>

5: <https://dpi.wi.gov/parental-education-options/choice-programs/data>

6: <https://www.edchoice.org/school-choice/programs/wisconsin-special-needs-scholarship-program/>

7: https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/misc/lfb/informational_papers/january_2021/0028_private_school_choice_and_special_needs_scholarship_programs_informational_paper_28.pdf

8: <https://dpi.wi.gov/parental-education-options/charter-schools/current>

9: https://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/parental-education-options/Charter-Schools/xls/2022-23_List_of_All_CS.xlsx

10: https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/misc/lfb/informational_papers/january_2021/0029_open_enrollment_program_informational_paper_29.pdf

11: <https://scdp.uark.edu/milwaukee-parental-choice-program-evaluation/>

12: <https://dpi.wi.gov/wise/data-elements/econ-status>

13: <https://www.nagb.gov/content/dam/nagb/en/documents/naep/achievement-level-one-pager-4.6.pdf>

14: <https://will-law.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/ApplestoApplesII.pdf>

15: <https://will-law.org/wisconsins-state-report-cards-mask-troubling-proficiency-rates/>

16: https://davinci.gbaps.org/2020_2021_enrollment

17: https://nces.ed.gov/programs/edge/docs/LOCALE_CLASSIFICATIONS.pdf#:~:text=The%20NCES%20locale%20framework%20is%20composed%20of%20four,locale%20criteria%2C%20see%20the%20Locale%20Boundaries%20User%E2%80%99s%20Manual



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