



Who Takes Advantage of Education Choice?

by The Honorable Kent Grusendorf and Colin Butler

Key Points

- The appeal of parental choice is strongest among minority parents with lower incomes who are dissatisfied with the academic quality of their child's current school.
- Parents who enroll their children in education choice programs tend to have some college credit or hold a higher-education degree.
- Parents who take advantage of education choice programs tend to be more involved and have higher expectations of their children.
- Families participating in education choice are much more likely to be Catholic or religiously observant.

The Importance of an Educated Public

In the nation's first State of the Union address, Washington sketched the benefits of an educated public:

Knowledge is in every country the surest basis of public happiness. . . . To the security of a free constitution it contributes in various ways—by convincing those who are entrusted with the public administration that every valuable end of government is best answered by the enlightened confidence of the people, and by teaching the people themselves to know and to value their own rights; to discern and provide against invasions of them; to distinguish between oppression and the necessary exercise of lawful authority; between burdens proceeding from a disregard to their convenience and those resulting from the inevitable exigencies of society; to discriminate the spirit of liberty from that of licentiousness—cherishing the first, avoiding the last—and uniting a speedy but temperate vigilance against encroachments, with an inviolable respect to the laws (Pangle and Pangle, 113).

For our nation to secure these blessings of knowledge, we must improve opportunities for parents to have meaningful choice in the education of their children. One way to do this is to have a better understanding of which parents are most likely to pursue education choice. To this end, we can look at several choice programs from around the country.

Who uses education choice?

In general, those who choose to participate in choice programs tend to be low-income parents, from African-American or other minority families, are more religiously observant, somewhat more educated, have had “higher levels of

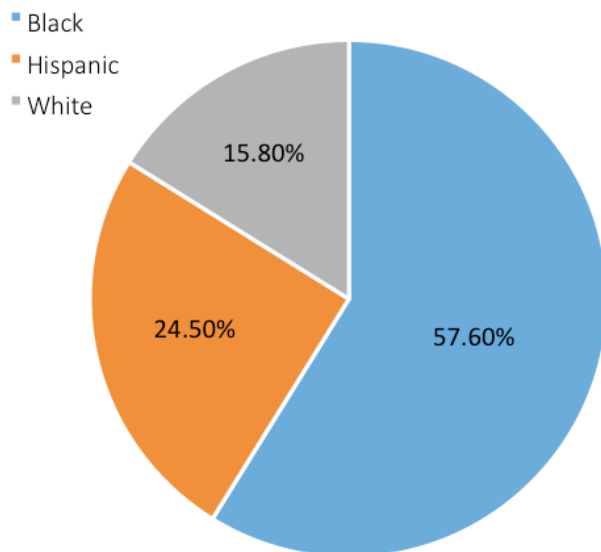
prior parental involvement,” and have higher educational attainment expectations for their children than those parents who choose not to participate (Witte, et al.).

Race

A study of various choice programs sheds light on the race of families who seek out such programs:

- In 2008, over 57 percent of the students in Wisconsin's choice program, the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP), were African-American, 24.5 percent were Hispanic, and 15.8 percent were white (Witte, et al.).
- In a national, privately funded voucher program, the Children's Scholarship Fund (CSF), voucher applicants continue to be twice as likely to be African-American as eligible non-applicants (Fleming, et al.).
- In the publicly funded Washington D.C. Opportunity Scholarship program, applicants are more likely to be African-American and more likely to be enrolled in a federal lunch program than other D.C. public school students (Fleming, et al.).

These facts have led analysts to conclude that the “appeal of private education is actually strongest among parents who are of minority background, of low income, and dissatisfied with the academic quality of their child's current school” (Peterson, et al.). This is to say that private education in a state-funded choice program attracts a different group of families than private education when the state is not involved. Peterson added that demand for choice among African-Americans “is larger than one would assume if one looked only at patterns of private school usage in the absence of an external subsidy.”

Figure 1: Race of Students in MPCP, 2008

Witte, John F., et al. 2008. "[MPCP Longitudinal Educational Growth Study Baseline Report](#)." Education Working Paper Archive.

Peterson found that “rather than contributing to ‘white flight,’ the CSF scholarship program appears to have substantially increased the educational options available to blacks attending predominantly minority schools.” In addition, those who use choice programs “have a lower percentage of African Americans in their local schools, contrary to the fear that vouchers are a means for families to flee predominantly minority schools.” Students who use these choice programs transferred out of schools in which 33 percent of students are African-American, whereas students who do not use the choice program are enrolled in schools that are 38 percent African-American. In response to concerns that choice programs contribute to racial segregation, analysts concluded, “in sum, we can find no evidence that vouchers contribute to racial segregation” (Peterson, et al.).

Income

Milwaukee Public School (MPS) parents have a higher income on average than MPCP parents: 15 percent of public school parents made \$50,000 or more when only 4.7 percent of choice program parents made that much (Witte, et al.). The estimated average household income for each group was \$27,577 for MPS households and \$23,371 for MPCP households, both “quite low” (Fleming, et al.). According to Peterson, choice participants are relatively disadvantaged. A 2005 study concluded “there is no evidence of cream skimming based on family income and race” (Fleming, et al.).

Parents’ Educational Attainment

The parents of education choice students tend to be more educated. MPCP parents are more likely to have some college credit (30 percent against 26.3 percent of MPS parents), and to have at least a four-year degree (14 percent against 11.1 percent of MPS parents) (Witte, et al.). Consistent with this trend in Wisconsin, other analysts have found that applicants to New York City’s School Choice Scholarship Foundation are more likely to have mothers who attended some college or have a bachelor’s degree than are eligible nonapplicants (Fleming, et al.). These trends have led to the conclusion that, “among less-advantaged families, it is those who are better educated who are most likely to say they would go private if they could afford it” (Peterson, et al.).

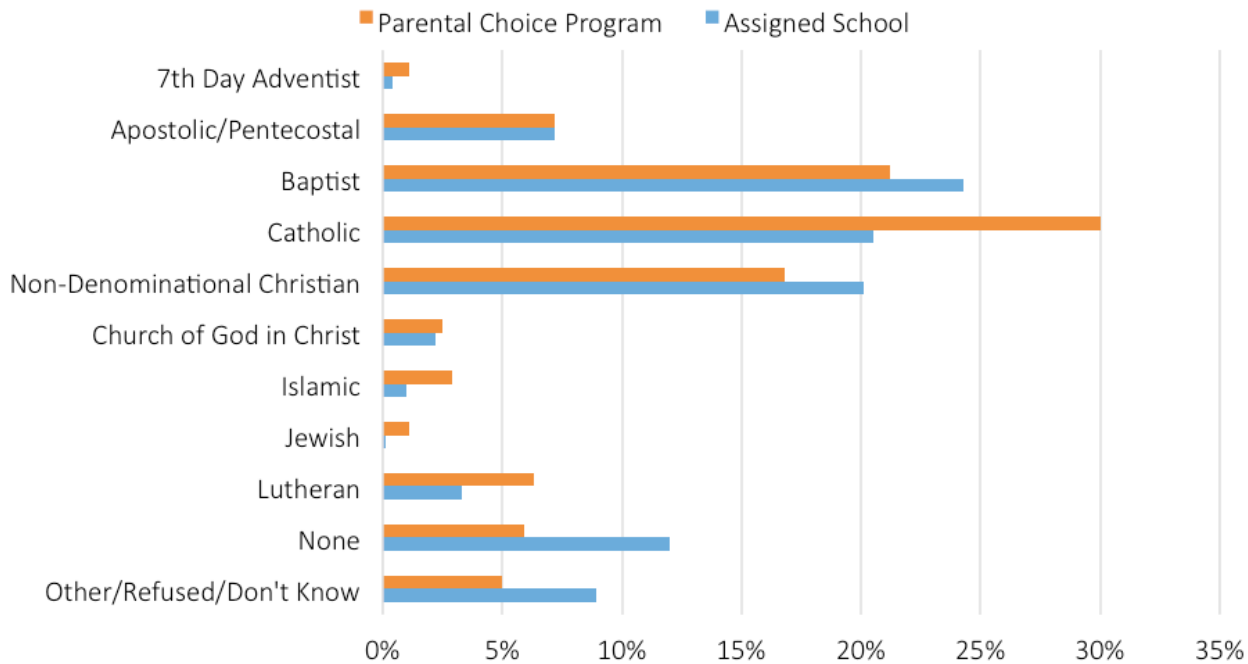
Parental Involvement

In Milwaukee, MPCP parents are also more likely to have shown “higher levels of prior parental involvement” and to expect their children to go to graduate school: 24.5 percent of choice parents had such expectations, whereas only 13 percent of public school parents had the same expectations of their children (Witte, et al.). Among MPCP parents, 54.7 percent volunteered at their child’s school, whereas only 37.9 percent of MPS parents did so.

Religion

Several studies of choice programs have found that participating families are more likely to be Catholic and to be religiously observant. In Milwaukee, 20.5 percent of Milwaukee Public School (MPS) parents are Catholic, as opposed to 30 percent of choice parents. Moreover, while 12 percent of MPS parents replied “none” to their religious affiliation, only 5.9 percent of choice parents replied the same way. Two-thirds of choice parents attend a religious function at least once a week, while about half of MPS parents do so (Witte, et al.). Results from a more recent study of the MPCP have verified the conclusion that choice families are far more active in religious associations (Fleming, et al.). This fact is again seen in the character of choice applicants: 66 percent of those who apply to an choice program attend a religious ceremony at least once a week whereas only 38 percent of eligible non-applicants do so (Peterson, et al.). Peterson concludes that being a practicing Catholic, rather than being a nominal Catholic, predicts use of choice programs. The same holds true for Christians generally. While some are concerned that Catholic schools, the most common type of

Figure 2: Religious Identification of Milwaukee Families in Assigned and Parental Choice Schools, 2008



Witte, John F., et al. 2008. ["MPCP Longitudinal Educational Growth Study Baseline Report."](#) Education Working Paper Archive.

school attended by choice recipients, would be too selective when admitting choice participants, existing research on Catholic schools “has shown that they are generally not selective in their admissions—not even with regard to religion” (Peterson, 2002).

Future opportunities for research: how do parents learn about their choices?

An area of interest to the scholars who conduct these studies is how parents are exposed to information about education choice programs. In the case of Milwaukee, choice parents were more likely to get information from “informal

social networks,” e.g., friends, family, and church, than MPS parents, who were more likely than MPCP parents to get information from formal sources, such as websites and informational handouts. Yet the majority of parents in both groups receive information from informal social networks. When asked if they knew about the MPCP, 41 percent of Milwaukee Public School (MPS) parents responded that they were not aware of it (Fleming, et al.). Fleming remarked that “policymakers need to consider new methods of educating parents on the MPCP, as approximately two out of five MPS parents said they had not heard of the choice program.” ★

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About the Authors



The Honorable Kent Grusendorf is the senior fellow and director of the Center for Education Freedom at the Texas Public Policy Foundation. Grusendorf spent most of his professional life in Arlington as a businessman and successful entrepreneur. Three months after graduating from college he started his own business in the aerospace industry, and has been an independent businessman ever since. In 1986 he and friends started a bank, now known as Southwest Securities FS Bank, where he served as chairman of the board through much of the banking crisis of the 1990s.

He represented Arlington for 20 years, 1987-2007, in the Texas Legislature where his primary interest and focus was education. In his freshman term, due to his prior service on the State Board of Education, he was viewed as a leader on education issues. Through his appointments, by three governors and three House Speakers, to the House Public Education Committee and various Select Committees, Grusendorf played a significant role in crafting legislative responses to the Edgewood I, Edgewood II, Edgewood III, Edgewood IV, and West Orange Cove school finance court decisions.

On the national level he was first appointed to the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) by Governor Clements. He was reappointed to the SREB by Governors Bush and Perry and also served on the SREB's Executive Committee. Grusendorf also served a term as Chairman of the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) Education Task Force. During Grusendorf's last two terms in the Texas Legislature he served as chairman of the House Public Education Committee. During his tenure in the Texas Legislature he carried education accountability/improvement initiatives for four governors: Clements, Richards, Bush, and Perry.

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