

LIES AND DISTORTIONS ABOUT CHOICE

SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT

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Tom Brokaw, anchor of the NBC Nightly News, is a frequent contributor to "Dateline NBC," which NBC calls its "signature primetime broadcast."

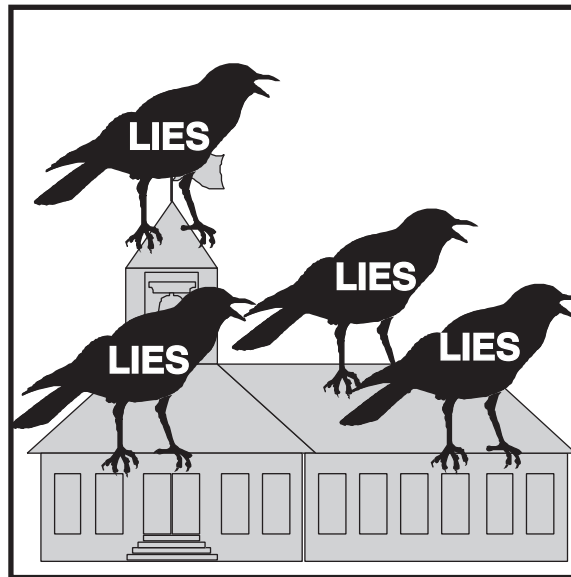
During an October 29, 2000 broadcast about the Milwaukee Parental Choice program (MPCP), Brokaw used his formidable credibility to support a frequent criticism of those who oppose existing school choice programs.

Specifically, Brokaw claimed that private schools may use selective admission policies in choosing MPCP students. As a result, Brokaw asserted that private schools "can pick and choose" students and thus do "not have to take the kids who are the most expensive to educate." In contrast, alleged Brokaw, public schools "can't choose" their students.

Brokaw's description likely was persuasive to millions of viewers. Yet, he was wrong.

His errors could have been avoided though basic research on Milwaukee's choice program and on the admissions policies of the Milwaukee Public Schools.

The truth is essentially the opposite of what Brokaw claimed. In Milwaukee, selective



admission criteria are widespread in public schools, whereas private schools may use no such criteria when it comes to choice students. When private schools are oversubscribed with choice students, they must use a random lottery to admit applicants.

Brokaw might be the most prominent journalist to circulate inaccurate claims about school choice,

but he is hardly the first.

More than a year before his "Dateline" program, the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* documented the widespread circulation of falsehoods about school choice programs.

Reacting to the *Journal Sentinel* report, an editorial in the *Wisconsin State Journal* stated: "Whether you're for or against Milwaukee's school choice voucher program, you've got to deplore the lies that opponents are telling —

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lies that get national attention, and frequently go [uncorrected]. . . . Scrutiny is one thing. Lies are another.”

Our concern here is not with honest errors. We do not argue that all misinformation about school choice is intentional. Indeed, an inevitable and healthy part of public discourse involves the process whereby participants correct errors that are brought to their attention.

Rather, our main concern is with known falsehoods, circulated long after evidence reveals them as flat-out wrong. These falsehoods often originate and are spread by organizations with multi-million dollar budgets; organizations that know fact from fiction, but ignore the distinction.

The Big Lie Strategy

“It’s time to get the truth out” about school choice.

So proclaimed Lu Battaglieri, President of the 147,000-teacher Michigan Education Association (MEA).¹

Battaglieri often failed to heed his own advice. As one example, he made the completely false claim that when vouchers were tried in Milwaukee, public schools there “lost some 10 percent of their budget, some \$200 million. . . .”²

The Associated Press reported this untrue claim as fact. Soon, former First Lady Hillary Clinton repeated a version of Battaglieri’s fiction before a convention of the National Education Association (NEA).³ The claim then was included in matter-of-fact national coverage of Ms. Clinton’s remarks. Later, Democratic Party consultant Robert Shrum repeated a similar false claim in a CNN debate with former Wisconsin Governor Tommy Thompson.

The quick journey of Battaglieri’s false statement, from Michigan to Ms. Clinton and on to the national media, epitomizes the “Big Lie Strategy,” aptly explained by author Os Guinness:

“[A] big falsehood repeated over and over is more effective than a small one.”⁴

The Big Lie Strategy requires three elements for “success:” (1) perpetrators willing to misstate facts; (2) reporters who don’t check statements for accuracy; and (3) other reporters, who read initial stories and repeat inaccuracies in their own copy.

The many examples we present are but a small sample. They share common characteristics:

- They are demonstrably false or intentionally misleading.
- They are widely reported.
- The truth rarely catches up. Corrections, if made, are obscure. Freestanding stories about inaccuracies — such as the *Journal Sentinel*’s September 1999 piece — are very rare.
- Some reporters legitimize and camouflage false statements by presenting them as a “point of view,” with an opposing “point of view,” — often, the facts — offered for “balance.”

The Big Lie Strategy begins in one of two ways:

- Sometimes, attacks on school choice are made where there is no clear evidence — one way or the other — as to their veracity. Here, voucher opponents appear content to cast the policy in a negative light without specific evidence.
- On other occasions, untrue statements are issued in spite of clear evidence that they are inaccurate.

In either case, inaccuracies, half-truths, and distortions become what we call “Big Lies” through sustained repetition, long after evidence shows the statements to be wrong.

Four common examples of Big Lies are that existing voucher programs:

1. **Use selective admission practices to “cream” the “best” students.**
2. **Do not serve students with special learning needs.**
3. **Will “destroy” public education.**

BIG LIE #1: VOUCHER PROGRAMS USE SELECTIVE ADMISSION PRACTICES TO “CREAM” THE “BEST” STUDENTS.

Big Lie

“[C]hoice schools [in Milwaukee] are...picking and choosing what children they want [but public schools] cannot turn away anyone who comes to their door.”

Wisconsin State Rep. Christine Sinicki, November 1999, in testimony on Wisconsin Assembly Bill 342.

Facts

Rep. Sinicki made this statement at a public hearing in Milwaukee. As a former member of the Milwaukee Public Schools Board of Directors, Rep. Sinicki was thoroughly aware at the time of her statement that many individual *public* schools routinely screen students based on academic ability and special education needs.

As for Rep. Sinicki's claim about choice schools, two months earlier the *Journal Sentinel* article on choice inaccuracies (Note 2) reported: “For the record, no student has formally complained of being denied admission to any [choice] school for [the] kinds of reasons” cited by such choice critics as Rep. Sinicki. We know of no such claims from a parent or family in Ohio or Florida, the other two states with public voucher programs mainly for low-income families.

Further, Wisconsin, Ohio, and Florida law all contain random selection provisions.

"In Milwaukee, thousands of eligible students didn't participate [in the Choice program because]...they couldn't find schools that would accept them. Because, you know, the corollary of parents having choice is that the schools do the selecting of the children. And suburban schools around Milwaukee would not take the children."

AFT President Sandra Feldman, NPR's "Talk of the Nation" on January 8, 2001.

Ms. Feldman's statement, **made earlier this year**, is plainly erroneous and is at odds with numerous published evidence.

The Milwaukee program allows students to attend private schools only *within the city of Milwaukee*, not the suburbs.

4. Do not improve the academic achievement of voucher students.

We demonstrate the inaccuracy of these claims. We describe untruths, half-truths, and distortions that have become Big Lies through sustained repetition, long after evidence shows them to be inaccurate or when no evidence is presented to support their accuracy.

Contrary to bogus claims that voucher programs “pick and choose” students, random selection lotteries are required when the number of choice students exceeds available space in Milwaukee, Cleveland, and Florida. While the laws vary, they almost completely preclude screening based on ability and special

needs.⁵ This is especially so in comparison to what occurs in many *public* schools. For example, the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) routinely screen admission to individual schools based on a student's academic ability, prior behavior records, special education needs, or other factors.⁶ This is the case in many large school systems.

In her January 8, 2001, appearance on National Public Radio's “Talk of the Nation,” AFT President Sandra Feldman perpetuated the blatant lie of selectivity. She boldly, and incorrectly, told host Juan Williams:

You know, there were lots of private schools [in Milwaukee] that just wouldn't

Big Lies

"Vouchers aren't helping the children they were designed to help: students doing poorly in low-performing public schools."

Former North Carolina Gov. James Hunt, 1999.

"Voucher[s] siphon the best students from public schools..."

*People for the American Way, 1999,
www.pfaw.org*

Facts

As we demonstrate after this table, state-sponsored evaluations of the Milwaukee and Cleveland programs show that these claims are false.⁷

Further, in Florida's A+ Opportunity Scholarship Program, students are eligible for choice only if they attend schools designated as "failing" by the State Department of Education.

take children, or children started school and ended up getting kicked out.

Feldman gave no proof. She cited no one familiar with the Milwaukee program, including the state's Department of Public Instruction (DPI), as a source. And, as is so often the case, this Big Lie went unchallenged.

Other versions of this Big Lie have circulated for years.

Numerous independent evaluations show these claims to be untrue.

- University of Wisconsin Professor John Witte, DPI's official evaluator of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP) from 1990-1995 found that:

The demographic profile [of Milwaukee's program] was quite consistent over each of the [first] five years.... [S]tudents who ultimately enrolled...were from very low-income families, considerably below the average [Milwaukee Public Schools — MPS] family and about \$500 below the low-income (free-lunch-eligible) MPS family. ...Blacks and Hispanics were the primary applicants...both being over represented compared with [MPS]. ...Choice students were considerably less likely to come from a household in which parents were married. ...Prior test scores of Choice students [showed they] were achieving considerably less than MPS students and somewhat less than low-income MPS students."⁸

- More recently, Wisconsin's nonpartisan Legislative Audit Bureau stated:

As intended, the [MPCP] appears to be serving children who meet statutory requirements related to low income...In addition, the program serves pupils whose overall ethnic composition is similar to that of Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) pupils. In the 1998-99 school year, 62.4 percent of Choice pupils were African-American, and 61.4 percent of MPS pupils were African-American.⁹

In addition, Manhattan Institute Senior Fellow Jay Greene provides the following regarding tax-supported and privately-financed voucher programs:

The average income of families participating in the Milwaukee program was \$10,860. In Cleveland the mean family income was \$18,750. In New York it was \$10,540. In D.C. it was \$17,774 and in Dayton it was \$17,681. In Milwaukee 76% of choice students were in single, female-headed households. In Cleveland the figure was 70%. In D.C. it was 77% and in Dayton it was 76%. The standardized test [scores] of choice students before they began in private school showed that they averaged below the 31st percentile in D.C., and below the 26th percentile in Dayton. In other words, choice students were generally performing in the bottom third academically.¹⁰

Such unambiguous facts should be sufficient to counter lies about who participates in school choice programs. However, Big Lies, once sown, often grow deep roots.

These Feldman and PFAW statements are classic half-truths.

BIG LIE #2: VOUCHER PROGRAMS DO NOT SERVE STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL LEARNING NEEDS.

Big Lies	Facts
<p>"Private schools are not required to accept special education students."</p> <p><i>AFT President Sandra Feldman, 1998, www.aft.org.</i></p>	<p>While true of private schools and <u>many public schools</u>, this is <u>not true</u> and intentionally misleading with respect to students eligible for school choice programs in Milwaukee, Cleveland, or Florida.¹¹</p>
<p>"Disabled kids...with learning disabilities...kids who have behavioral problems, kids who have been involved with the juvenile criminal justice system. Those kids get left behind [by school vouchers because] a lot of private schools...don't have to take them, so that leaves it for public education to deal with those children."</p> <p><i>Tammy Johnson, Wisconsin Citizen Action, 1999</i></p>	<p>No private school in Milwaukee may exclude any MPCP-eligible student based on specific education needs. In fact, many students come to the program having been ill-served by MPS. None of MPS' schools accept all special needs students (see Note 10).</p> <p>In Florida, the state's Scholarship Program for Students With Disabilities serves over 1000 students with disabilities in 2000-01, its first year.</p> <p>Under the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program, the state of Ohio provides special financial aid for schools that accept learning disabled students. One example, the Hanna Perkins School, serves emotionally disabled, low-income children.</p>
<p>"[I]t's deeply troubling to see that the schools in the [Milwaukee] voucher program are being permitted to turn their backs on children with special needs."</p> <p><i>People for the American Way, 2000, www.pfaw.org.</i></p>	<p>Here, PFAW willfully distorts a Wisconsin Legislative Audit Bureau report (Note 13), which in fact describes many private choice schools that do serve special needs students. The LAB report says there were at least 171 such students in the program in 1998-99.</p>

- While Feldman's statement is accurate in the abstract, it is highly misleading. She implies that private schools will not accept voucher students with special education needs, but we know of no actual case, cited by voucher opponents or any other source, where such a student in a school choice program has been denied admission to a private school.
- The PFAW statement is a willful distortion of the Wisconsin LAB report. It states only that private schools are "not required" to provide the **same services** as in public schools. In fact, as we already have shown, many individual public schools are very selective. In PFAW's own words, these public schools are "permitted to turn their backs on" many students with special

learning needs. In contrast, as we show, private schools in choice programs have much less flexibility when it comes to voucher students with special learning needs.

Predictably, this version of the Big Lie quickly surfaced after President George W. Bush proposed a voucher plan for low-income children at under-performing public schools.

On January 24, 2001, *Chicago Tribune* reporters Ray Quintanilla and Noreen Ahmed-Ullah stated, with no attribution, that in Milwaukee "...most private or parochial schools will not take children with severe disabilities because the schools do not have the means to offer services." Such a story is the apex of the Big Lie strategy, with reporters

blithely presenting inaccurate information that they apparently accept as fact. We e-mailed Quintanilla regarding this error. We received no response.

Contrary to this inaccurate *Tribune* report, many private schools accepting voucher students offer a range of programs for special needs students. The Lutheran Special School in Milwaukee, which exclusively serves students with special needs, is one of several examples. Another example of vouchers specifically serving special needs students is Florida's statewide Scholarship Program for Students with Disabilities (SPSWD). Students with disabilities who have made inadequate progress at their assigned public school are eligible for the SPSWD. This year, more than 1000 students are participating. More than 105 private Florida schools have accepted SPSWD students.

Paralleling the lie that voucher schools do not serve special needs students is the claim that "public schools cannot turn away anyone who comes to their door"¹² or that "...nearly all public schools offer [special education] services."¹³ Such statements are again false. MPS

data show that **none** of its elementary, middle, or high schools accept **all** students with special education needs.¹⁴

A recent *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* headline — "Special-education enrollment not so open" — underscores the fact that individual public schools routinely decline to admit students with special learning needs. Describing an inter-district open enrollment program involving only public schools in Wisconsin, the story cited a "47% denial rate of applications from special education students in the first year of open enrollment..."¹⁵

Regarding students with disciplinary problems, voucher opponents again wrongly claim that private schools exclude such students. Wisconsin law does not allow private schools to consider disciplinary history when reviewing voucher applications. In contrast to this open admission requirement for voucher students, MPS has an extensive program of alternative and partnership schools where it unilaterally transfers truants, adjudicated juveniles, and other "at risk" students. Many of these are private, non-profit schools. Their capacity, as of October 1999, was 3579 stu-

BIG LIE #3: VOUCHER PROGRAMS WILL "DESTROY" PUBLIC EDUCATION.

Big Lie

"[T]here is no evidence that ... vouchers will make public schools more responsive to parents' wishes."

Michael Apple and Gerald Bracey, "School Vouchers," January 24, 2001, Education Policy Project, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee School of Education.

The evidence shows that existing voucher programs have had a significant and positive impact on public schools.

As we describe following this table, the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) has responded to the competitive environment created by the school choice program by granting greater school autonomy and gearing the district's improvement efforts toward parents' needs and preferences. All these efforts were publicized widely in the weeks and months prior to the Apple and Bracey report.

Further, as we describe, research in Florida, issued before and after the Apple and Bracey claim, shows that vouchers have spurred statewide improvement in low-performing public schools.

Facts

dents, or more than 3% of MPS enrollment. The majority of this capacity was in private organizations.¹⁶

Fermin Burgos, a former director of MPS alternative programs, said those programs let “MPS...provide a whole range of different options...tailor-made programs for pregnant teens, chronic disrupters, or students coming from juvenile institutions. With [private] contracting, we can offer those programs. In some cases [private schools] are more effective than traditional schools.”¹⁷ MPS is not alone among public schools in relying heavily on private schools to educate some of its most difficult students. The practice is widespread.¹⁸

Pollsters document a strong interest among citizens in improving public schools. Voucher opponents exploit this sentiment with unsubstantiated and exaggerated claims that school choice might “destroy” public education and “drain” money from public schools.

It is our belief that public education is a concept and that government-owned and government-operated schools represent but one way of delivering public education. As illustrated at the post-secondary level, there are many ways to provide public education beyond high school. The same is so in grades K-12, where society is choosing an increasing variety of ways to organize schools that deliver “public education.”

We cite evidence on the previous page showing that existing school choice programs are not destroying “public education” or the vehicle that currently delivers most public education, namely, public schools. In fact, choice programs are a positive spur to public schools. Any contentions of supposed unfair fiscal harm by school choice programs on public school systems is illusory.

The *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* has reported extensively on this issue.

- A November 15, 2000 story listed several MPS schools that had sought, and received, “more freedom to shape their programs than traditional [public] schools.” The paper explained, “The schools clearly were aiming to reshape themselves to be more appealing in a more competitive school market.”¹⁹

- On November 28, 2000, the *Journal Sentinel* cited changes in “the fundamental realities of how many [public] schools operate in Milwaukee.” It described “decisions to

make schools more independent, more innovative, more attuned to their communities — and, most of all, more popular with parents in an era where Milwaukee parents have more choices for publicly funded education than perhaps anyone in American history.”²⁰

- A *Journal Sentinel* editorial on January 23, 2001 stated, “Milwaukee’s choice program [has] put pressure on Milwaukee Public Schools to improve.” Further, the

paper’s senior education reporter observed, “the spirit of choice is permeating the Milwaukee Public Schools. . . . [S]chools are trying with once-unthinkable earnestness to win over parents.”²¹

Illustrating the positive new environment, MPS has launched an extensive campaign to encourage parents to choose public schools. The campaign includes radio, newspaper, and TV ads, a 30-minute infomercial about the district, billboards, and district-wide open houses. In a January 12, 2001, interview on Wisconsin Public Television, Milwaukee Superintendent Spence Korte readily agreed that MPS is trying to be competitive:

*In fact, choice programs
are a positive spur to
public schools.*

Like many other monopolistic operations, you get a little bit complacent when you're the only game in town. ...We needed to be able to compete, to really get better, and to be more sensitive to what parents are telling us they need.²²

Demonstrating the new emphasis on better serving parents and families, Korte stated on a January 10, 2001 interview, "We are dedicating ourselves to make sure that public schools know how to reach out and know how to serve families and we're the logical place for people to start for their educational programs. We hope they'll give us a good look."²³

Notwithstanding all the above, Michael Apple and Gerald Bracey blithely say that "no evidence" exists showing that public schools respond positively to school choice.²⁴ Their assertion originally appeared in an error-laced paper posted on the internet by Apple and Bracey on December 1, 2000. On noticing many errors in this publicly issued paper, Kaleem Caire wrote Apple and Bracey, who on January 24, 2001 posted a revised paper containing some corrections.²⁵

Purveyors of school choice Big Lies are loathe to admit error. Thus, the January 24 corrections by Apple and Bracey suggest how completely inaccurate and slipshod their original paper was. The corrections should sound a five-alarm alert to the news media, as Bracey is a widely quoted source of anti-school choice claims.

Apple and Bracey are among a group of openly hostile school choice critics affiliated with the Education Policy Project (EPP), a unit of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's (UWM) Center for Education Research, Analysis, and Innovation (CERAI). CERAI is directed by Alex Molnar, a widely quoted UWM education professor. The CERAI website contains a wealth of inaccurate information about school choice. In response to a Wisconsin Open Records Act request, UWM provided us with information showing that national and local teachers' unions provided more than \$300,000 to the EPP in the last two years.²⁶ The EPP issued the erroneous Apple-Bracey paper.

If choice is destructive to public schools, as opponents claim, consider an October 24, 2000 *USA Today* report on the percentage of fourth grade MPS students scoring at or above proficiency levels on statewide tests. Between 1997-98 and 1999-00, when the choice program grew rapidly, the scores of MPS students *rose substantially*. In 1997-98, fewer than half of fourth graders were proficient in reading, math, science, and social studies. Yet by last year, a majority of MPS fourth graders achieved proficiency in all four categories.²⁷

In Florida, the A+ Opportunity Scholarship Program also has had an important and positive impact on public schools.

On February 15, 2001, Florida State University, Harvard University, and The Manhattan Institute released a state-sponsored, independent evaluation of the A+ scholarship program.²⁸

USA Today described the report as the "most comprehensive non-partisan study to date...." The newspaper said it "shows that schools facing vouchers posted larger improvements on standardized test scores than schools that did not face that threat."²⁹ The report itself states:

The Florida A-Plus Program is a school accountability system with teeth. Schools [with] two failing grades from the state during a four-year period have vouchers offered to their students.... This report examines whether schools that faced the prospect of having vouchers offered to their students experienced larger improvements in [academic achievement] than other schools. The results show that schools...whose students would have been offered tuition vouchers if they failed ...achieved test score gains more than twice as large as those achieved by other schools....[S]chools with failing grades that faced the prospect of vouchers exhibited especially large gains... This report shows that the performance of students on academic tests improves when public schools are faced with the prospect that their students will receive vouchers....

Another Big Lie is that voucher programs impose unfair financial burdens on public edu-

Big Lies	Facts
<p>"There is no question about it, the voucher program in the city of Milwaukee is adversely affecting the schools. Class sizes are going up. Programs like art, music, physical education are being reduced. The ability to provide high-level education in technical areas is vanishing. It's only going to get worse."</p> <p><i>Sam Carmen, Executive Director, Milwaukee Teachers' Education Association, Colorado Springs Gazette, Feb. 19, 2001.</i></p> <p>"In areas where vouchers have been introduced, public schools have had their budgets drastically cut."</p> <p><i>NEA, November 1999, www.nea.org.</i></p>	<p>Carmen provides not a single specific example to back up his claim about the supposed budget and program cuts caused by vouchers.</p> <p>When we asked Jason Helgeson, an MPS budget expert, to comment on Carmen's statement, he said, "This could not be more wrong."</p> <p>Actually, contrary to Carmen and the NEA, education budgets in Milwaukee, Cleveland, and Pensacola have increased significantly. (see Note 44)</p>

cation and require massive budget cuts. These repeated claims of an unfair impact are made despite the fact that choice programs use a "dollars follow student" approach that long has characterized the financing of public education. Further, in the Milwaukee, Cleveland, and Florida programs, per pupil financial support for most voucher students is substantially less than in public schools.³⁰

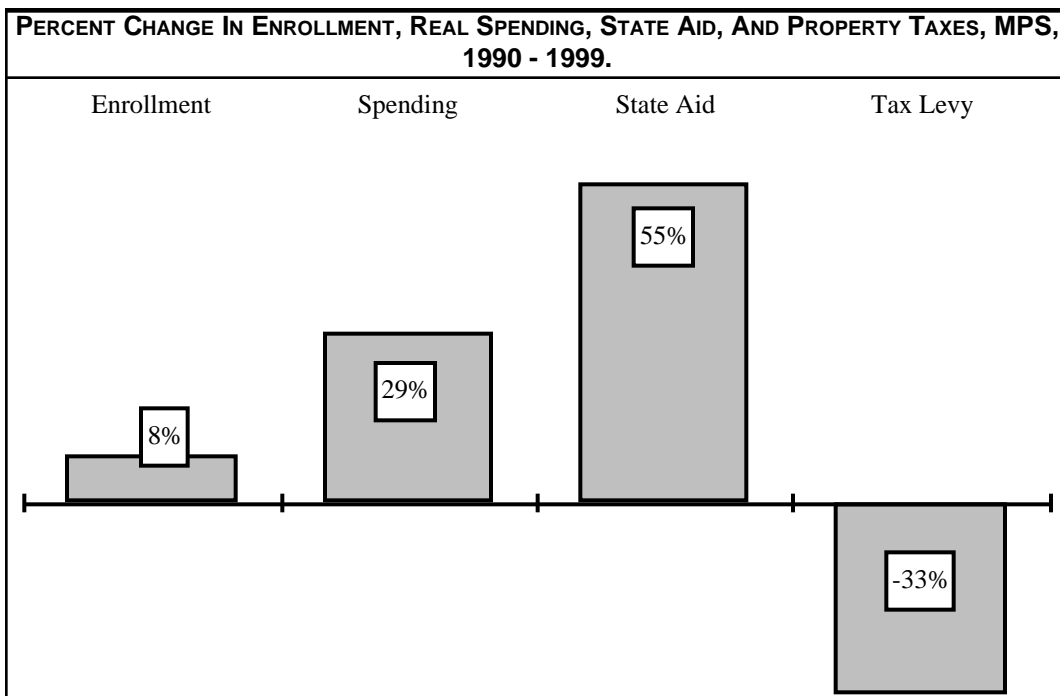
Milwaukee's lengthy experience provides the best available evidence that school choice does not impose unfair fiscal consequences on public schools. The October 24, 2000, analysis in *USA Today* shows that from 1990 to 1999 real (inflation-adjusted) MPS spending grew 25%, while enrollment was up 8%. In other words, public school spending grew three times faster than enrollment during the first decade of the Milwaukee voucher program.

The *USA Today* finding confirms an earlier study showing that the overall fiscal condition of MPS schools dramatically improved following enactment of the Milwaukee choice program in 1990.³¹ This is illustrated in the following chart from the study, based on a 10-year analysis of data from the Wisconsin Department of Instruction and the Milwaukee Public Schools.

Evidence shows that in Cleveland as well, the voucher program has not had the negative fiscal impact on public schools that critics

claim. The Ohio Department of Education hired KMPG Public Services Consulting to study administrative and fiscal issues involving the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program (CSTP). KMPG reported that the per pupil costs in Cleveland public schools were more than three times that of the CSTP and that the CSTP had not cut state financial support from Cleveland's public schools.³² Notwithstanding such information, Apple and Bracey instead rely on a study published by the anti-voucher AFT when they state, "In the first year of Cleveland's voucher program, for instance, funding consisted of \$5.25 million taken from Cleveland's share of state aid."³³ That claim, from a source with a poor track record for accuracy, contradicts the more reliable and independent report done for the Ohio Department of Education.

As we have stated, school choice lies often take on a life of their own. Consider the claim by the MEA's Lu Battaglieri, cited at the beginning of this section. He told the Associated Press that public schools in Milwaukee "lost some 10 percent of their budget, some \$200 million" because of school choice. The AP reported this on June 12, 1999, in a lengthy, 1250-word story by reporter Kathy Barks Hoffman. AP's reporting of this erroneous claim likely has led to its repetition by Ms. Clinton and others. In truth, however:



- Battaglieri overstated by **600 percent** the actual cost of the MPCP in 1998-99, which was actually \$28.4 million.³⁴
- His claim implied a \$2 billion MPS budget, **129 percent** higher than the actual 1998-99 budget of \$873.4 million.³⁵
- Suggestions that the program cost MPS **anything** are debatable, owing to how the State of Wisconsin calculated aid and revenue available to MPS (Fuller and Mitchell, 1999). For example, while MPS enrollment **declined** in 1998-99, the district's overall budget grew, in real terms, by almost \$17 million.

BIG LIE #4: VOUCHER PROGRAMS DO NOT IMPROVE THE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT OF VOUCHER STUDENTS.

Lies

"There is no evidence that vouchers improve student learning. Every serious study of voucher plans concludes that vouchers don't improve student achievement."

NEA, 1999, www.nea.org.

"[E]very independent evaluation" of the Cleveland and Milwaukee choice programs says they don't raise student achievement.

AFT President Sandra Feldman, June 2000, letter to Commentary magazine.

Facts

Kim Metcalf of Indiana University, official evaluator of the Cleveland program for the State of Ohio, found statistically significant gains in test scores of voucher students.³⁶

Jay Greene, Paul Peterson, and Jiangtao Du, found statistically significant math and reading score gains for Milwaukee voucher students.³⁷

Princeton's Cecilia Rouse found "quite large," statistically significant math gains for Milwaukee choice students.³⁸

Section 3 describes significant new evidence from privately financed voucher programs in Dayton, Washington, D.C., New York City, and Charlotte.

Though the *Journal Sentinel's* September 1999 article highlighted some of these errors, as did the *Wisconsin State Journal's* September 20, 1999 editorial, neither had much exposure in Michigan, where Battaglieri made his initial remarks.

The net result was a gross misstatement in the Michigan media that was picked up by former First Lady Hillary Clinton and repeated in other national media.

Presidents of both major teachers unions, Bob Chase of the NEA and Sandra Feldman of the AFT, repeatedly claim that "every serious" or "independent" study of vouchers prove that they do not improve student achievement. Other choice opponents mimic their claim. Witness Battaglieri's statement that "the studies show the kids [using the vouchers] aren't doing any better."

Greene comprehensively refuted such claims in a March 2000, paper presented at a Harvard University conference on school choice. His Harvard paper emphasized that:³⁹

All researchers who have served as evaluators of the publicly-funded choice programs in Milwaukee and Cleveland as well as the privately-funded programs in Washington, D.C., Dayton, New York, and San Antonio agree that these programs have been generally positive developments and have supported their continuation if not expansion. If one only examined the competing interest group and research community spin on the various evaluations instead of reading the evaluations themselves one might easily miss the level of positive consensus that exists. This positive consensus is all the more remarkable given the politically contentious nature of the issue and the rewards scholars have for highlighting disagreements with one another. [Yet] there is largely agreement

among the researchers who have collected and analyzed the flood of new data on school choice that these programs are generally positive in their effects and ought to be continued if not expanded.

Consider Cleveland, where Metcalf, Ohio's official evaluator said that voucher "students in existing private schools had significantly higher test scores than public school students in language (45.0 versus 40.0) and science (40.0 versus 36.0). However, there were no statistically significant differences between these groups on any of the other scores."⁴⁰

Characteristically undaunted by the facts, nine months later Feldman said, (emphasis added) "every independent evaluation" of Cleveland's program shows no positive impact.⁴¹ While Feldman, Chase, and others routinely make this same claim about Milwaukee, they know better.

Greene, describing his peer-reviewed research published by The Brookings Institution in *Education and Urban Society*, says: "In Milwaukee [with Harvard's Paul Peterson and Jiangtao Du, we]

compared the test scores of applicants...accepted to the choice program by lottery to those who were rejected by lottery. We found significant test score gains...after three or four years of participation in the choice program. The...gains were quite large, 11 normal curve equivalent (NCE) points in math and 6 NCE points in reading" after four years.⁴³

Greene also cited Princeton's Rouse, a former staff member of the Clinton Administration's National Economic Council, whose 1998 Milwaukee analysis appeared in Harvard's *Quarterly Journal of Economics*. As we note above, Rouse said the math gains among

*Voucher students in
existing private schools
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test scores than public
school students in
language . . .
and science.*

Milwaukee voucher students that she found were “quite large.”⁴⁴

A third study, by UW’s Witte, used different comparisons than presented either by Greene, et al., and Rouse. Witte concluded, “[T]here is no substantial difference over the life of the program between the Choice and MPS students On a positive note, estimates for the overall samples, while always below national norms, do not substantially decline as the students enter higher grades. This is not the normal pattern in that usually inner-city student average scores decline relative to national norms in higher grades.”⁴⁵

If the generally positive findings of Greene, et al., Rouse, and Witte had involved urban **public** schools, of course Chase, Feldman, Battaglieri, and other choice critics would call them very promising. But, when such results are found at private schools participating in a voucher program, the results show vouchers “have no impact.”

Summary

The Big Lie strategy is apparent in any thorough review of media coverage of school choice. After individuals and organizations persistently circulate a Big Lie, an unquestioning member of the news media eventually reports it. Others in the media spread it.

While it may not be possible to prevent vested parties from issuing false statements, a vigilant media can limit their impact and hold perpetrators accountable.

Abigail Winger, Deborah Meyer, Sharon Schmeling and George A Mitchell assisted in preparing the report from which this article is excerpted.

Notes

1. Battaglieri’s statement appeared on www.mea.org during the campaign preceding the November 7, 2000, Michigan ballot initiative involving school choice.
2. Williams, “School choice attacks often fail accuracy test,” 1999.
3. Ibid.
4. Os Guinness, *Time for Truth – Living Free in a World of Lies, Hype, & Spin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), p. 119.

5. “A Comparison — School Vouchers: The Continuing Experiment,” *The New York Times*, March 14, 2000. Based on “Tax-Supported K-12 Voucher Programs — Key Legislative Provisions,” ITL Office of Research, January 2000.
6. Fuller and Mitchell, “Selective Admission Practices? Comparing the Milwaukee Public Schools and the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program,” 2000.
7. John Witte, et al., “Fifth Year Report — Milwaukee Parental Choice Program,” Department of Political Science and Robert M. La Follette Institute of Public Affairs, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1995. See www.lafollette.wisc.edu/outreach/pubs/fifthyear/index.htm.

Wisconsin Legislative Audit Bureau (LAB), “An Evaluation: Milwaukee Parental Choice Program,” February 2000.

Kim Metcalf, “Evaluation of the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program, 1996-1999,” September 1999. See www.indiana.edu/~iujce.
8. Witte, et al., “Fifth Year Report — Milwaukee Parental Choice Program,” 1995.
9. LAB, “An Evaluation: Milwaukee Parental Choice Program,” 2000.
10. Jay Greene, “A Survey of Results from Voucher Experiments: Where We Are and What We Know,” prepared for the Conference on Charter Schools, Vouchers, and Public Education, sponsored by the Harvard Program on Education Policy and Governance and the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, March 8-10, 2000, Cambridge, MA.
11. Fuller and Mitchell, “Selective Admission Practices? Comparing the Milwaukee Public Schools and the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program,” 2000.

Howard Fuller and George Mitchell, “The Fiscal Impact of School Choice on the Milwaukee Public Schools,” *Current Education Issues* No. 99-2, Marquette University, ITL, March 1999.
12. Wisconsin Rep. Christine Sinicki, a public hearing on 1999 A.B. 342, Milwaukee Area Technical College, November 17, 1999.
13. www.aft.org, December 1998.
14. Fuller and Mitchell, “Selective Admission Practices? Comparing the Milwaukee Public Schools and the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program,” 2000.
15. Amy Hetzner, “Special-education enrollment not so open,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, February 19, 2001.
16. Henryette Fisher, “ALT SCHOOL ENROLLMENT AS OF 10/19/99,” MPS Division of Small Community Schools, October 10, 1999.
17. Janet Beales and Thomas Bertonneau, “Do Private Schools Serve Difficult-to-Educate Students?” Mackinac Center for Public Policy and The Reason Foundation, October 1997.

18. Ibid.
19. Alan Borsuk, "MPS panel backs charter, K-8 schools," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, November 15, 2000.
20. Alan Borsuk, "MPS establishment taking Korte's cue for sweeping change," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, November 28, 2000.
21. *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* Editorial Board, "Choices on choice schools," January 23, 2001.
Alan Borsuk, "MPS schools work to woo parents," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, January 7, 2001.
22. "Weekend," Wisconsin Public Television, WMVS-TV, Milwaukee, "The School Down the Block," Anchor Patty Lowe, January 12, 2001.
23. WTMJ-4 TV (NBC), "Our Lights are On for You," interview with Milwaukee Public Schools Superintendent Spence Korte, January 10, 2001.
24. Michael Apple and Gerald Bracey, "School Vouchers," Education Policy Project, CERAI-00-31, January 24, 2001, www.uwm.edu/Dept/CERAI/edpolicyproject/cerai-00-31.htm.
25. Caire's letter was sent on December 18, 2000.
26. Sources of these funds were the National Education Association, its Wisconsin affiliate (the Wisconsin Education Association Council), and the American Federation of Teachers.
27. Tamara Henry and Anthony DeBarros, "Vouchers enter second decade: Milwaukee finds no easy answers in school choice," *USA Today*, October 24, 2000.
28. Jay Greene, "An Evaluation of the Florida A-Plus Accountability and School Choice Program," available at http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr_aplus.htm, February 15, 2001.
29. Tamara Henry, "Florida schools shape up amid voucher threat," *USA Today*, February 16, 2001.
30. A description of each program's fiscal support is found at www.schoolchoiceinfo.org.
31. Fuller and Mitchell, "The Fiscal Impact of School Choice on the Milwaukee Public Schools," 1999.
32. "Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program, Management Study Final Report," KMPG LLP, Dayton OH, (Phone # 937-259-9850).
33. Apple and Bracey, "School Vouchers," 2001.
34. www.dpi.state.wi.us/dpi/dfm/sms/histmem.html.
35. Fuller and Mitchell, "The Fiscal Impact of School Choice on the Milwaukee Public Schools," 1999.
36. Metcalf, "Evaluation of the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program, 1996-1999," 1999.
37. Jay Greene, Paul Peterson, and Jiangtao Du, "Effectiveness of School Choice: The Milwaukee Experiment," *Education and Urban Society*, February 1999.
Greene, et al., "School Choice in Milwaukee: A Randomized Experiment," in *Learning from School Choice*, Paul E. Peterson and Bryan C. Hassel, editors (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution Press, 1998).
38. Cecilia Rouse, "Private School Vouchers and Student Achievement: An Evaluation of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program," *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, May 1998.
39. Jay P. Greene, "A Survey of Results from Voucher Experiments: Where We Are and What We Know," paper prepared for presentation at the Conference on Charter Schools, Vouchers, and Public Education, Harvard University, March 9-10, 2000.
40. Metcalf, "Evaluation of the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program, 1996-1999," 1999.
41. Gary Rosen and Critics, "Are School Vouchers the Answer?" *Commentary Magazine*, June 2000.
42. Peer review of social science research does not put a study's findings beyond debate, nor does it mean that only one method of analyzing a problem or data is acceptable. This is illustrated by three generally positive, but different, assessments of Milwaukee's choice program (Witte, 1998, Greene, et al., 1999, and Rouse, 1998). Successful peer review by a respected publisher shows that: (i) the work voluntarily was presented for independent scrutiny; (ii) independent experts provided such scrutiny; and (iii) as a result of such review, including any modifications, the publisher believed the findings warranted publication.
43. Greene, et al., "Effectiveness of School Choice: The Milwaukee Experiment," 1999.
44. Said Greene, Rouse "analyzed the data from Milwaukee and arrived at similar results, at least in math scores. After trying several analytical strategies Rouse concludes: 'students selected for the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program... likely scored 1.5 – 2.3 [NCE] percentile points per year in math more than students in the comparison groups.' Rouse also writes that her findings for math scores are 'quite similar to those reported by Greene et al.'" Owing to use of a different analytical method of the statistics, Rouse did not find reading gains.
45. John Witte, "The Milwaukee Voucher Experiment," *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, Winter 1998.