

SCHOOL CHOICE MISINFORMATION

WHY GOOD JOURNALISM MATTERS

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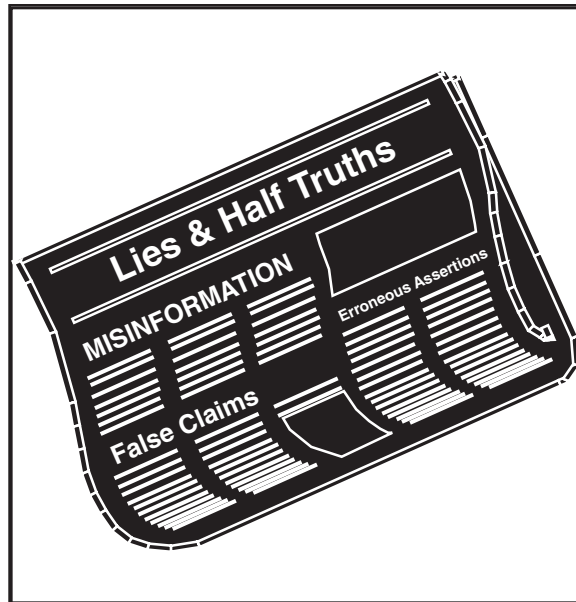
Now that the U. S. Supreme Court has upheld Cleveland's school choice program, legislators in many states are debating the idea of creating their own educational voucher programs.

These elected officials often look to media reports from Milwaukee — home of the nation's oldest and largest school choice plan for low-income families — for information. Frequently, they find stories based on misinformation from voucher opponents.

As one who follows this issue closely, I am struck by how competent journalism — or the lack thereof — can affect the debate. Good reporting matters a great deal.

For example, many people wrongly think that private schools in the Milwaukee program don't serve students with special needs, based on media reports. Here is one example of how that fiction spreads.

The National School Boards Association (NSBA), an avowed opponent of school choice, this year has used its web site to promote an inflammatory claim that "many [Milwaukee] students, often special needs children, return to public schools from voucher schools after just a



few weeks." The NSBA based this claim on a *Milwaukee Magazine* article charging that many private schools enroll choice students only long enough to collect state aid before "releasing" them. Befitting this provocative allegation, the November 2002 article was headlined "Cashing In."

Wisconsin's largest daily newspaper, the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, independently pursued the story. Noting that voucher opponents had circulated similar allegations for years, the paper eventually concluded: "There is one problem with the claim: No facts back it up."¹

While official records of the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) also refute the charge, *Milwaukee Magazine* has issued no correction. Indeed, the unrepentant reporter wrote a defense of his claims that would embarrass a serious journalist. Notwithstanding the *Journal Sentinel's* finding, the NSBA continued to tout the discredited article as a "must read."²

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This is no isolated example. Well-organized school choice opponents willfully and repeatedly circulate untrue and misleading claims about educational vouchers. As Marquette University Professor Howard Fuller explains, a harsh reality drives their campaign:

“Lie. Lie often. It works.”³

Reporters contribute to the problem when they don’t do their homework. Voucher opponents rely on this, knowing that accurate information will rarely catch up with misstatements. Lies, half-truths, and distortions thus take on a life of their own. This misdirects discussion of an issue that affects educational opportunities for millions of America’s most disadvantaged children.

Last year’s Supreme Court decision upholding Cleveland’s voucher program has heightened the significance of this problem in Wisconsin and elsewhere. With the legal hurdle gone, misinformation is the only significant tool left to opponents. They must discredit Milwaukee’s successful 13-year-old program to dissuade other states from following Wisconsin’s lead.

Here’s how this works. School choice opponents use polling to identify claims — often untrue — that elicit public opposition to vouchers and shape their propaganda campaigns accordingly. The two most misleading themes are selective admissions and negative fiscal impact.

Selective Admissions

Asserting that school choice programs use selective admissions is standard fare for voucher opponents. Take MPS teacher Bob Peterson, an editor at *Rethinking Schools*, a prominent anti-voucher publication based in Wisconsin. In June 2002, the *Janesville Gazette* quoted him as follows:

The [voucher] schools choose their students. . . . Most voucher schools don’t choose students who have language needs. Most voucher schools don’t accept special needs students.⁴

The claim is untrue in regard to voucher programs in Milwaukee, Cleveland, and Florida. Yet Peterson’s claim went unchallenged. An enterprising reporter would have told readers that, contrary to claims that schools in these programs “pick and choose” choice students, random selection lotteries are required when the number of students exceeds available space. Existing laws almost completely preclude screening of choice students based on ability and special needs.⁵

Indeed, Wisconsin statutes require schools in Milwaukee’s choice program to admit *all* eligible students who meet the program’s low-income requirement. This includes special needs students and students who don’t speak English. Many Milwaukee private schools with voucher students offer a range of programs for special needs students. The Lutheran Special School exclusively serves students with special needs. St. Adalbert’s Elementary School is one of several in the voucher program that serve a multi-lingual student body.

Because these facts are so infrequently reported, the phony selective admission claim has gained wide currency. In this context, the kind of unproven charges “reported” by the *Janesville Gazette* and *Milwaukee Magazine* take on a veneer of plausibility.

False statements about selective admission are often paired with misleading claims that “public schools cannot turn away anyone who comes to their door”⁶ or that “nearly all public schools offer [special education] services.”⁷ In truth, in Milwaukee and many other large urban systems, individual public schools routinely screen admission based on a student’s academic ability, prior behavior records, special education needs, or other factors.⁸ MPS data show that none of its elementary, middle, or high schools accept *all* students with special education needs.⁹

Given these facts, the real story is that the Milwaukee school choice program demonstrably results in more opportunities for special needs students.

Financial Impact

The most potent poll-tested mantra of school choice opponents is that educational vouchers drain badly needed funds from public schools. The sheer power of this argument explains why it is used across the country despite its misleading nature.

In Wisconsin, State Senator Russ Decker is the dubious champion of this technique. During his campaign for re-election last year, the *Wausau Daily Herald* reported that “Sen. Russ Decker . . . said the state’s effort to reduce its deficit should start with cuts” to the Milwaukee voucher program.¹⁰ Decker also repeatedly tells public school officials that their districts lose state school aid because of Milwaukee’s voucher program.

Decker’s claims are squarely at odds with information issued by Wisconsin’s nonpartisan Legislative Fiscal Bureau. In fact, according to the Fiscal Bureau, *ending the Milwaukee program would reduce school aids to non-Milwaukee districts and likely increase state spending.*

A Fiscal Bureau analysis of Decker’s plan described what would happen when voucher students transferred to MPS. The Bureau said that such an enrollment transfer would “shift [state school] aid to MPS from [all] other districts. . .” in Wisconsin.¹¹ Those school districts would either have to raise property taxes or cut budgets to offset the lost aid.

State costs would likely grow if school choice ended, a separate Fiscal Bureau report shows. Costs would be higher because the state pays about \$1,700 per pupil more for an MPS student than it does for a student in the voucher program. A 2001 Fiscal Bureau memo estimated that state expenditures would grow by nearly \$7 million if 75 percent of choice students transferred to MPS.¹²

Misleading information about the fiscal impact of Milwaukee’s program is a key part of the campaign to keep choice from expanding elsewhere. Here’s what Barbara Miner, another *Rethinking Schools* writer, wrote in an April 2003 commentary:

More than \$250 million has been spent on Milwaukee vouchers, including \$60 million this year alone. . . . Meanwhile, the Milwaukee public schools are facing year after year of budget deficits — \$40 million for next year, with an even higher deficit after that.¹³

Miner clearly wants readers to believe that the cost of Milwaukee’s choice program is

linked to public school financial problems. However, she omits information showing that the opposite is true. MPS itself issued a detailed report explaining that the district would face massive fiscal problems if school choice ended and thousands of students transferred to public schools.¹⁴

Another common claim is that Milwaukee public schools face “budget cuts” because of school choice. Really?

Official MPS data show that real spending per pupil has risen 24 percent since school choice was enacted.¹⁵

A Role for the News Media

Many school choice opponents continue to issue lies and half-truths to influence the school choice policy debate, a strategy that relies heavily on the news media as a vehicle to spread misinformation.

As a former reporter, I am heartened when I see members of the Wisconsin press and the media elsewhere do plain, old-fashioned reporting to identify false claims. The *Journal Sentinel*, in addition to exposing the erroneous

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Milwaukee Magazine piece, has used its news and editorial columns to puncture other erroneous assertions. Madison's *Wisconsin State Journal* has editorialized against the intentional distribution of false information about vouchers. The *Wausau Daily Herald*, the largest paper in Senator Decker's district, has noted the contradiction between his claims and reports from the nonpartisan Fiscal Bureau.¹⁶

While those and other examples are welcome, they remain the exception. My own reading file includes a daily collection of articles from throughout the nation on school choice. Rarely does a day go by when I don't observe the media unwittingly helping to implement the strategy of misinformation.

In the final analysis, policy makers — and the millions of children affected by this debate — deserve more.

Notes

1. Alan Borsuk, "Taking a look at MPS transfers," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, January 25, 2003.
2. According to its website, the NSBA "opposes school vouchers and is committed to defeating legislation and initiatives which create voucher programs."
3. Howard Fuller, "The Saturation Campaign of Lies and Distortions About Educational Vouchers," Institute for the Transformation of Learning (ITL), Marquette University, March 2000. See also Howard Fuller and Kaleem Caire, "Lies and Distortions: The Campaign Against School Vouchers," ITL, Marquette University, April 2001; and Fuller and Caire, "Ten Myths about School Choice: Answering the Campaign against School Vouchers," National Center for Policy Analysis, 2001. These reports are available at www.SchoolChoiceInfo.org and www.ncpa.org.
4. "Voucher sides react to ruling," *Janesville Gazette*, June 28, 2002.
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, Marquette University, January 2000.
6. Wisconsin Representative Christine Sinicki, a public hearing on 1999 AB 342, Milwaukee Area Technical College, November 17, 1999.
7. www.aft.org, December 1998.
8. Howard Fuller and George Mitchell, "Selective Admission Practices? Comparing the Milwaukee Public Schools and the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program," ITL, Marquette University, 2000.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Elizabeth Putnam, "Legislative candidates say education No. 1 issue," *Wausau Daily Herald*, October 9, 2002.
11. Legislative Fiscal Bureau analysis of Motion #263, March 6, 2002.
12. Legislative Fiscal Bureau memo to Rep. Antonio Riley, September 27, 2001.
13. Barbara Miner, "With school vouchers, rhetoric is not reality," *Tallahassee Democrat*, April 23, 2003.
14. Jason A. Helgeson and Audra D. Millen, MPS legislative and fiscal analysts, "Analysis of FY02 Fiscal Impact on MPS if MPCP is eliminated," June 25, 2001.
15. John Gardner, "How School Choice Helps the Milwaukee Public Schools," American Education Reform Council, January 2002. (The data were derived from MPS Comprehensive Annual Financial Reports.)
16. *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* editorial, "Evaluating Choice Schools," October 20, 2001; Mary Van de Kamp Nohl, "The Milwaukee Experiment: Myths Misinformation and the Effort to Kill School Choice," *Milwaukee Magazine*, August 2001; and Keith Uhlig, "School choice advocates hope Decker won't push funding cuts," *Wausau Daily Herald*, October 26, 2002.