

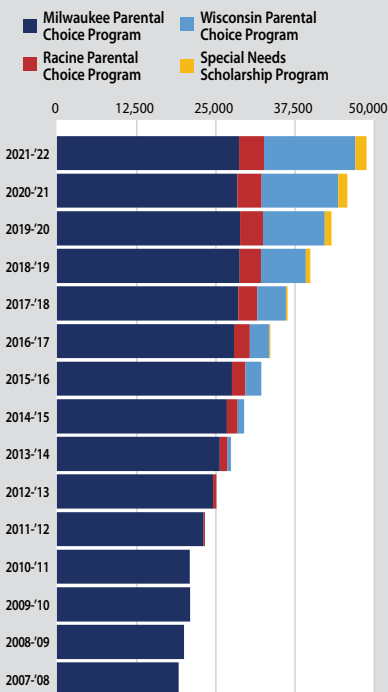


**Compared to 2019, Wisconsin's eighth-graders in 2022 are most of a year behind in math.**



**Even though all taxpaying families must live by mandatory attendance laws, not all the options for meeting that requirement are available to all families. That should change.**

#### Parental choice program enrollment



Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, via School Choice Wisconsin

# Give Every Wisconsin Family the Power to Choose the Best Education

Wisconsin has been a pioneer in the school choice movement.

Milwaukee's program to let parents direct state aid to the school of their choice is now more than three decades old and has produced remarkable results for tens of thousands of families. More recent expansions are spreading those benefits across Wisconsin.

Wisconsin's school choice program is actually four different programs.

Three main programs serve most choice families: one covering families in Milwaukee, another for families in eastern Racine County and a statewide program for families living anywhere else in Wisconsin. The latter is the newest, operating since 2013.

These three programs all offer the same grant and operate under the same enrollment rules: Schools cannot select students, nor generally can they charge families any additional tuition, nor place any religious requirements on students.

The Special Needs Scholarship Program serves about 1,800 students, offering a higher per-pupil funding for students with disabilities or other special education needs, analogous to how traditional public schools are given extra funding for such students.

#### Parents Want Better Results

Today, parents can choose to have their children educated in a district school run by the government, in a public charter school, in a private school or via home school.

While all Wisconsin families have legal access to these options, only some families have access to parental choice programs. There are restrictions on income, caps on enrollment, limits on when parents can enroll and other ways the state has limited choices for most families.

Even public school open enrollment includes no right to a transfer.

Yet even with all these restrictions, choice programs have grown steadily.

The need is urgent. Results for the latest "nation's report card" tests were disastrous, with kids' performance in reading and math falling sharply since 2019 in Wisconsin. Our state's eighth-graders in 2022, for instance, are most of a year behind in math compared to eighth-graders in 2019. In Milwaukee Public Schools, 68% of eighth-graders hadn't mastered even the basics of math.

Researchers commissioned by state law measured the performance of →

**2020-'21**

• *Statewide school district  
spending per pupil*

**\$11,000–\$22,000**

• *Statewide average*

**\$15,329**

**F**or at least two decades,  
per-pupil funding for  
choice students has lagged  
far behind the sum that  
taxpayers would spend  
if the very same students  
instead attended a local  
district school.

*Schools in Wisconsin's  
three choice programs received*



**\$9,045**

per pupil in high school

**\$8,399**

per pupil in K-8

choice schools in Milwaukee starting in 2006 and found that attending a choice school meant significantly higher proficiency in reading, a markedly higher likelihood of graduating from high school and of getting into college, and a lower likelihood of becoming involved in criminal activity as a young adult.

### **Inequity in Funding**

Traditional public school districts spent between \$11,000 and \$22,000 per pupil, all-in, according to Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction figures for the 2020-'21 school year. The statewide average was \$15,329 per pupil.

Schools in Wisconsin's three choice programs open to all students, by contrast, received \$9,045 per pupil in high school and \$8,399 per pupil in K-8.

For at least two decades, per-pupil funding for choice students has lagged far behind the sum that taxpayers would spend if the very same students instead attended a local district school. The amount of the average choice per-pupil grant has ranged from 49% and 59% of the average per-pupil cost in district schools since 2005. The most recent figure: 56%.

When parents take their child's state school aid to a choice school, by law that aid must be accepted as full payment. The choice voucher is all a school has to work with.

Most private high schools must do additional fundraising to cover operating costs not covered by the choice grant. It limits how many choice students schools can accept.

Differences in per-pupil funding amounts for school choice compared to traditional district schools limit the availability of choice. The complexity of choice funding and its entanglement with funding for district schools lead to confusion and conflict. The limits on which families can access choice are unjust.

Lawmakers who want every Wisconsin student to get the best education possible should:

- **Make sure all students have the same value in the eyes of the law. The location where one receives a publicly funded education should not determine the amount of funding available.**
- **Eliminate income limits that exclude middle- and working-class families from the program.**
- **Simplify and consolidate choice programs and their funding to increase efficiency for both parents and schools and to end local political conflicts over property tax impacts.**



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