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Milwaukee's lessons on school vouchers

By Amanda Paulson

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MILWAUKEE – For Destiny Hatcher, private school has made all the difference. Once a failing student who often got in trouble, she's now getting good grades as an eighth-grader at the Hope Christian School and is determined to go to college.

"At my old school, the environment I was in was the same outside the school and inside the school," says Destiny, dressed in Hope's tie-and-jacket uniform, her braids pulled back with a headband. "Here, the school's in a bad neighborhood, but the environment in the school is really loving."

Hers is the sort of story Milwaukee's school-choice advocates cite when touting the oldest and largest voucher program in the country. Now it's expanding, but 16 years after it began, the policy is still controversial and has shown few documented benefits.

Proponents say it gives options to low-income kids who might otherwise be stuck in failing schools, and that the competition for students is good for all Milwaukee's schools, both public and private. Critics, meanwhile, cite the money the program drains from public schools and the highly uneven quality of the private ones, which aren't held to the same standards.

As one of the few programs in the country, Milwaukee offers a high-stakes test case for both camps. Yet researchers are only beginning to take a comprehensive look at how successful it's been.

"Now quality is emerging as the key issue," says Dan McKinley, director of Partners Advancing Values in Education (PAVE), a scholarship program for Milwaukee children that has been generally supportive of vouchers. "Advocates are getting past the ideological posturing, saying 'choice will fix everything.' Parental choice is a precondition for a quality education, not a panacea."

Choice is something lower-income Milwaukee parents definitely have. Families who make below a set income can get a voucher (worth up to \$6,500 in the coming school year) to send their school-age children to a private school, including a religiously affiliated school. In addition to some 125 schools that participate in Milwaukee's program, there are numerous charter schools in the city, and an open-enrollment program through which a few thousand students attend suburban schools.

The quality question - how to weed out the private schools that even voucher advocates admit are bad ones - is something that Mr. McKinley and others hope will be addressed by new rules.

In March, Wisconsin Gov. Jim Doyle (D) signed a bill that raises the cap on the number of voucher students from 15,000 to 22,500 and also requires accountability measures - such as standardized testing and accreditation - for the first time from the private schools in the program.

It's a step everyone agrees is needed. Voucher supporters had envisioned a system in which parents would choose only good schools, so the worst ones would fall by the wayside due to market forces. But that hasn't proved to be the case.

The voucher program has given new life to venerable Catholic and Lutheran schools in the city, and has spurred the creation of dozens of new schools - many of them religious - that rely solely on voucher students. All told, about 70 percent of the voucher schools are religious. Some of those schools, like Hope, show signs of excellence, but not all.

In one of the worst instances, a convicted rapist opened a school, which has since shut down. Reporters from the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel tried to visit all 115 schools then in the program last year, and found a mixed bag. Nine schools refused to let reporters in, and the paper cited "10 to 15 others where ... the overall operation appeared alarming when it came to the basic matter of educating children."

One school was opened by a woman who said she had a vision from God to start a school, and whose only educational background was as a teacher's aide. Others had few books or signs of a coherent curriculum. Yet they've been able to enroll students.

Some of the worst schools - including four this year - have been shut down, often for financial reasons, and voucher proponents hope that the new requirements will make it tougher for bad schools to enter the program.

"The reality is that when you look at the research, parents choose schools for a lot of different reasons," says Howard Fuller, head of Marquette University's Institute for the Transformation of Learning. He's a former Milwaukee schools superintendent and a prominent advocate of the city's choice program. "We need to be focused on making sure [every school] is excellent."

But critics say it's too little, too late.

"We need to ensure that what the public is paying for is a high quality education for kids," says Nancy Van Meter, director of the American Federation of Teachers' Center on Accountability and Privatization. "After this many years there ought to be some hard data, and there's not."

Studies done in the early years of Milwaukee's program, before the state stopped requiring yearly reporting from voucher schools and before religious schools were allowed into the program, showed little difference in student achievement among voucher students, but measurable improvement in parental satisfaction. A new five-year study was just announced by Georgetown University in Washington.

Nationally, studies on vouchers have been mixed. A few showed signs of improved student achievement and evidence that competition improves public schools. Others showed negligible difference. "The evidence to date is very mixed," says Jack Jennings, director of the nonpartisan Center on Education Policy. "For [the] sake of kids ... it would be good to have an objective analysis."

Smaller voucher programs currently exist in Washington, D.C. and Cleveland, while Florida and Utah have specialized ones that target students with disabilities. A larger Florida voucher program was declared unconstitutional by that state's supreme court earlier this year.

"People feel good about having choice," says Martin Carnoy, a professor of education and economics at Stanford University. "But most of what they're having is the choice to move into a private school that is not so different from the public school they left."

Still, some students say the program can make an enormous difference. "Everything has room for improvement, but if this works now, let's give it a chance," says Charles Green, a senior at Messmer Catholic High School, who will go to New York's Columbia University next fall on a full scholarship.

Messmer gets about 80 percent of its students through vouchers. Students put the name of the college they're shooting for on their locker, and the daily attendance rate - often higher than 95 percent - is posted by the entrance. Nearly 90 percent of its students go on to a four-year college every year, says principal Jeff Monday.

Like all schools in the program, it can't use selective criteria to admit students.

Its imposing brick building couldn't be more different from Hope Christian School, located in a shabby strip mall in one of the city's worst neighborhoods. But that doesn't stop Hope from offering a positive alternative to the neighborhood public schools.

Students there go to school for extended hours, call teachers on their cellphones if they have trouble with homework, and attend school on some Saturdays.

Marchelle Hicks says she didn't know what to do with her son Orlando at his old school - he was getting failing grades and the school insisted he go on medication for attention-deficit disorder. She found out about Hope's rigorous, no-excuses curriculum through a brochure in her door, and enrolled him in fourth grade there this year.

"He's an 'A' student," Ms. Hicks says proudly. "Now we don't talk about testing or medication.... His whole attitude of going to school has changed."