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WISCONSIN LUTHERAN COLLEGE

Doing his homework

Education professor James Rahn
joins groundbreaking school
choice research team





STUDY OF Choice

WISCONSIN LUTHERAN EDUCATION PROFESSOR JAMES RAHN is actively involved in Milwaukee's school choice program. Now, he'll also be participating in a groundbreaking research study of school choice that will draw the attention of the education world—and the nation.

by Laura Warmuth, '03, Communicative Arts

All eyes are on Milwaukee. Home to the oldest and by far the largest school choice program in the United States, the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP) has enabled low-income families to send their children to private schools since 1990. While no significant research has been done on MPCP since 1998, later this spring, Georgetown University will launch a major study of the program. James Rahn, assistant professor of education at Wisconsin Lutheran College, will serve as a senior research associate along with researchers from Harvard, Columbia and Stanford, to name a few.

Reviewing Rahn's credentials, his involvement in the study makes perfect sense. He is the director of the Center for Urban Teaching at WLC (see sidebar) as well as a founding board member of the Alliance for Choices in Education. He is the co-chairman of the board for Hope Lutheran School, Inc., a family of three Lutheran schools founded in 1999 by Rahn and several other individuals. Rahn has also been a

frequent consultant to MPCP schools and participated in numerous groups to recommend educational policies relative to the school choice program.

"My passion for urban education was fueled during the four years I spent as the elementary school coordinator for the Wisconsin Lutheran High School Conference," Rahn says. "I had the opportunity to visit many WELS schools in the Metro-Milwaukee area frequently and was intrigued by the work of our urban schools."

Rahn's fervor for urban education will certainly fuel his work with the Georgetown study. "The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program is a major Wisconsin public policy issue that involves 15,000-plus students and more than \$90 million in public money per year," says Rahn. "As the legislature, governor, school leaders and parents seek to understand this program, and as others around the country seek to learn from the Milwaukee experience, rigorous research is necessary."

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Eighth grader Steve Gregory talks with WLC education professor James Rahn. Steve attends Hope Christian School, one of the religious choice schools Rahn will be researching as a participant in the Georgetown study.

Rigorous research

The Milwaukee study will be conducted by the School Choice Demonstration Project, a Georgetown University-based effort to learn more about what happens to students, families, schools and communities when low-income students are given the resources to enroll in nonpublic schools. Dr. Patrick Wolf, Georgetown's well-known researcher in education policy, is the principal investigator.



The premise of MPCP is that parental choice and competition among public and private schools will improve education for all children. The goal of this study is to evaluate MPCP's success and answer several questions: What is the average effect of the program on growth in student achievement and what explains this outcome? How do MPCP parents choose schools for their children? Do MPCP parents value different qualities in their children's schools than do other parents? Has MPCP affected economic or racial integration in Milwaukee communities? Are public educators behaving differently in response to the program?

From this ambitious list, one can see that the study merits the name "The Comprehensive Longitudinal Evaluation of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program." Dedicated to providing Milwaukee and the rest of the country with valuable, unbiased research, the national team of researchers will study Milwaukee's choice program for the next five years.

Broadening the scope

Upon learning of the emerging plans for the study in the spring of 2005, Rahn sought to broaden it to explore the impact of MPCP participation on the nature and character of religious schools themselves. During the 2004-05 school year, 10,522 of Milwaukee's 15,032 choice students were enrolled in religious schools and 84 of the 121 choice schools were religious. The majority of students enrolled in Milwaukee's Lutheran schools (66%) and Catholic schools (60%) were choice students.

"Without the choice program," says Rahn, "many more of the Milwaukee area parochial schools—WELS, Catholic and Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod—would likely have closed."

Since the addition of religious schools to the choice program in 1998, both MPCP and the religious schools themselves have clearly undergone changes—changes that led Rahn to submit a proposal to Georgetown's Wolf to include religious schools in the study design. When his proposal was accepted, he was asked not only to lead that area of research, but participate in several other aspects of the study including outreach to schools and the larger Milwaukee community, family sessions, data analysis and interpretation, and advising the SCDP on research protocols.

Rahn's research will seek to answer one main question: How has MPCP affected participating religious schools established prior to choice?

"I want to examine what happens at private schools with strong achievement cultures when large numbers of at-risk students transfer into the schools via choice," says Rahn. "Do the students change, adopting that achievement culture, or does the school necessarily change in order to accommodate the needs and values of the new choice students? Is the religious character of the school affected?"

Beyond enrollment numbers, little is known about MPCP's affect on religious schools. Past research has focused on the issues of student achievement, public school improvement and parental satisfaction.

According to Rahn, this study will begin to fill this gap in the understanding of MPCP's overall impact on Milwaukee by specifically investigating how and how much participating religious schools have changed their character in response to the program.

Far-reaching results

Since MPCP is the oldest and largest choice program in America, the results of this study are highly anticipated and will be watched closely.

"All eyes are on Milwaukee," says Rahn. "This study will be a major step in helping us to understand the aspects of the impact MPCP has had on this community. The results should inform the choice public policy debate in Wisconsin and beyond."

Indeed, Wolf, Rahn and the rest of the Georgetown research team expect their research will be of interest to everyone with a stake in education—which is indeed, everyone. ■



Liz Hochtritt, an '05 graduate and participant in the Center for Urban Teaching, puts what she learned into practice in her 6th grade classroom.

WLC'S

Center for Urban Teaching

FILLS AN UNMET NEED

JAMES RAHN, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF EDUCATION AT WISCONSIN LUTHERAN, believes in a moral and social responsibility to provide all students with access to the American dream. As the director of the Center for Urban Teaching (CfUT) in WLC's education department, his more specific goal is to provide Milwaukee schools with state certified teachers and future leaders who have the commitment and unique training necessary to be successful in the urban setting.

Serving as teachers, administrators, classroom aides, support staff and volunteers at urban schools (many of which are choice schools), numerous WLC alumni and students exemplify the success of CfUT.

"In most major cities, there are too many students from poor families whom we as a society are failing to provide with a high-caliber, college-preparatory education," says Rahn. CfUT exists to help Milwaukee become the exception to this rule.

Through CfUT, WLC education students visit highly effective urban schools in Milwaukee and Chicago. The center also offers workshops and seminars for WLC students as well as teachers and principals currently serving in urban schools.

Each year a cohort group of exceptionally qualified education students participates in an urban immersion experience including specially-designed coursework, an eight-day immersion at schools in New York City boroughs,

and a semester-long mentorship with a highly successful urban teacher in Milwaukee. Combined with extensive mentoring from Rahn and Dr. Ray Dusseau, professor of education, students develop the skills and passion necessary to be successful urban teachers.

Tanya Patterson is one such student. Dr. Dusseau walked into her classroom last year when she was talking to a student about a behavior issue. After watching Patterson handle the situation, "he told me that he knew teaching in an urban environment was what I was supposed to do with my life," she says. "And he was right!" Patterson is student teaching at West Side Academy in Milwaukee this semester.

A 2005 WLC graduate, Liz Hochtritt teaches sixth grade at Hope Christian School in Milwaukee. "It is an overwhelming task to address the issues that come up every day, but nothing is more rewarding than seeing a child succeed," says Hochtritt. "Teaching is my life and I couldn't be happier. My experiences through the Center for Urban Teaching gave me a glimpse of the kind of teacher I now strive to be and instilled in me the passion and drive to do so."

Students who have participated in CfUT cohort groups have consistently been rated at the "exceptional" level when student teaching in high-performing schools in Milwaukee. They will undoubtedly serve Milwaukee students and their Lord for many years to come.