

In 1990, Milwaukee began a revolutionary experiment in school choice for low-income students. How is it faring 15 years later? Over the past five months, Journal Sentinel reporters visited 106 schools to find out.

Lessons from the voucher schools

How is Milwaukee's experiment to expand school choice for low-income students faring 15 years later?

By ALAN J. BORSUK AND SARAH CARR

Posted: June 11, 2005

First in a seven-day series

Now 15 years old, Milwaukee's school choice program is very much like a teenager - heartwarmingly good at times, disturbingly bad at others, and the subject of myths, misunderstandings and ignorance, even by the adults entrusted with its welfare.

And like a teenager, it remains - for all its familiarity - a bit of a mystery. Few people, even state officials, know what is going on inside all 115 schools in the program.

Over the last five months, the Journal Sentinel attempted to visit each school and find out. In visits to 106 schools, the newspaper focused not on politics and court battles, but on the classrooms themselves - the experiences of the nearly 14,000 students now served by choice schools at a cost this year to taxpayers of \$83 million.

Fifteen years ago, state government created in Milwaukee the biggest lab in the United States for one of the nation's most provocative education ideas: giving low-income parents the chance to send their children to private schools using "vouchers" to pay school costs. Eight years later, the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program expanded dramatically, and religious schools of every kind were made available to those parents.

Those visits, along with dozens of interviews with parents, students, teachers, principals, administrators and academics, revealed that many of the popular conceptions and politically motivated depictions of the program are incomplete and, in some cases, flat-out wrong.

The Journal Sentinel found that:

- The voucher schools feel, and look, surprisingly like schools in the Milwaukee Public Schools district. Both MPS and the voucher schools are struggling in the same battle to educate low-income, minority students.
- About 10% of the choice schools demonstrate alarming deficiencies. The collapse of four schools and the state's limited ability to take action against others have led to some agreement on the need for increased oversight to help shut down bad schools.
- The voucher program has brought some fresh energy to the mission of educating low-income youth in the city by fostering and financially supporting several very strong schools that might not exist otherwise. There are at least as many excellent schools as alarming ones.

- The amount of taxpayer money going to pay for religious education in Milwaukee has no parallel in the last century of American life. About 70% of the students in the program attend religious schools. Religion guides the choices that parents make, and the curriculum that a majority of schools choose, and has led to a network of dozens of independent church schools led by African-American ministers throughout the city.
- The choice program regenerated parochial schools in the city, including dozens of Catholic and Lutheran schools, which were experiencing declining enrollment. Overall, it has preserved the status quo in terms of schooling options in the city more than it has offered a range of new, innovative or distinctive schools.
- Parental choice by itself does not assure quality. Some parents pick bad schools - and keep their children in them long after it is clear the schools are failing. This has allowed some of the weakest schools in the program to remain in business.
- There is no evidence that voucher schools have "creamed" the best students from Milwaukee Public Schools, an early concern expressed by some critics. Except for the fact that the public schools are obligated to serve all special education students, the kids in the voucher program appear have the same backgrounds - and bring the same problems - as those in the public schools.
- Creating a new school through the choice program is easier than most people expected. Creating a *good* new school is harder than most thought it would be.

Dorothy Smith, a mother, grandmother, foster mother and adoptive mother, has seen many different stripes of the program over the last 10 years. She has enrolled several kids in choice schools, as well as MPS schools. She stresses above all else the importance of parents getting into the schools to see for themselves what they have to offer.

"A lot of time information is sugarcoated," she said. "For me, the best way to find out is to go and see for yourself."

Indeed, the Journal Sentinel found that too much of the political debate over vouchers is divorced from what's going on in classrooms. With the exception of the element of religion, it's the same story that's being played out in urban classrooms across America - a story of poverty, limited resources, poor leadership and broken families.

Many people pit school choice and the Milwaukee Public Schools against each other, emphasizing the differences, suggesting that one must fail for the other to succeed. But more than many politicians and educators realize - or some would care to admit - the challenges of school choice are the challenges of Milwaukee Public Schools.

Some of the articles in this series will touch on what makes the voucher schools unique. But the heart of the series will address the more universal challenges of educating urban, low-income youth, including the struggle to shut down the worst schools, improve the mediocre ones, and create more of the best.

Preserving private schools

What school best reflects the realities of the voucher program?

Is it Eastbrook Academy, where elementary school students learn Latin, where top-notch student work fills the hallways and where the principal, Julie Loomis, draws on her years on the staff of blue-blooded Brookfield Academy to set similar expectations for central-city kids?

Is it Grace Christian Academy, located in a dimly lighted, rented space in the basement of a church? Here, school leaders say they have developed their own curriculum, but one staff member said privately that there is none. When a reporter visited, many of the bookshelves were empty and students completed worksheets downloaded from an Internet site. Only one of four teachers on the staff has a teaching credential. The principal, Reginald Armstrong, said the founder of Grace Christian is a "very godly woman" who had a vision she should start a school.

Or is it St. Adalbert Catholic School, a century-old school, a once all-Polish but now all-Latino program, where a traditional curriculum is taught by fully licensed teachers in a crowded, bubblingly energetic atmosphere?

The answer may well be the third option. The principal effect of choice has been more to preserve the city's private schools, many of them Lutheran and Catholic ones, than to create schools that innovate or reform. Simply going by the numbers, more than half of the students in the program attend Catholic and Lutheran schools that operate in time-tested ways and rarely attract outside attention. Add in other religious schools, and nearly three-quarters of the students in the program attend religious institutions of learning.

Many of the schools feature drill-oriented instruction in math, a heavy reliance on phonics in reading, strict discipline codes and uniforms. More scarce are experimental or "student-centered" approaches.

The voucher program has led to the creation of more than 50 new private schools in the city, and those schools offer examples of both the best and the worst of the program.

The range includes Notre Dame Middle School, an all-girls program on the south side, where the expectations are high and the students often meet them. At Notre Dame, the teachers and administrators work with the predominantly Latina students and families even after they graduate, trying to make sure they make it through high school and on to college. But the range also includes the Academy of Excellence Preparatory School, where reporters found only one administrator and two students the day they visited. The trio was about to leave for McDonald's.

Based on firsthand observations and other reporting, Journal Sentinel reporters concluded that at least 10 of the 106 schools they visited appeared to lack the ability, resources, knowledge or will to offer children even a mediocre education. Most of these were led by individuals who had little to no background in running schools and had no resources other than the state payments.

Nine other schools would not allow reporters to observe their work. The quality of several of those has been questioned by educators and policy-makers outside the schools who are familiar with their operations.

Uphill climb to success

Even major advocates for the program say they did not realize 15 years ago how hard it was to start good schools from scratch.

Consider CEO Leadership Academy, a high school finishing its first year. It has strong support from an influential group of ministers. The school has been given expert advice on how to create both educational and business operations; it benefited from financial boosts to get started; and it is housed in a beautiful new wing of New Hope Missionary Baptist Church, 2433 W. Roosevelt Drive.

But Denise Pitchford, a former assistant principal in Milwaukee Public Schools who heads the school, says the first year has been a struggle. Many of the school's 60-plus students came to the school years behind in their basic abilities. Catching up became the top priority.

Instead of diving into project-based learning as they had hoped, teachers had to return to the basics. In one English class this last winter, 15 students tried to label different types of sentences as declarative, interrogative, or exclamatory. In a religion class, the teacher reviewed the story of Adam and Eve. Although the academics started slowly, attendance has been strong, at about 96%.

"We see sparks," Pitchford sad. "We see kids actually want to be here."

Building on what has been started at CEO is one matter. Cracking down on schools that didn't start with the strengths of CEO - sometimes to startling degrees - is another challenge altogether.

Sa'Rai Nance was a teacher's aide when she says she heard from God that she should open a school. But, judging by the lack of a curriculum and structure at Sa'Rai and Zigler Upper Excelled Academy, the charge appears to have come with few details about how she could do that successfully.

A big surprise has been the ease with which new schools, some poorly prepared, are able to join the program, said David Prothero, the director of Catholic education for the Archdiocese of Milwaukee. "We never saw that coming," he noted, adding that recent efforts to put the worst schools out of business are good, but "about eight years too late."

The issue came to the forefront last year when the now-defunct Mandella School of Science and Math turned into a public catastrophe after the owner over-reported students and used state dollars to buy two Mercedes-Benz automobiles. He is currently trying to withdraw a guilty plea made earlier this year in the case.

The Department of Public Instruction, which oversees the program, is working toward a much tighter system of financial regulations, including more extensive audits. The theory is that schools with financial problems are more likely to be troubled in other areas as well, including educationally, said Tony Evers, the deputy state superintendent.

For the most part, the school choice community supports increased financial regulation. Staff at School Choice Wisconsin even took the step of doing background checks last winter on 50 new school proposals, in an effort to alert state officials to potential problems.

Sense of family

One core idea behind vouchers - that parents could be counted on to pick a strong school for their children or pull their kids from the worst - has not proved uniformly true. Some parents continue to send children to weak schools.

Alex's Academics of Excellence, a school started by a convicted rapist, continued to enroll students even after facing two evictions, allegations of drug use by staff on school grounds, and an investigation by the district attorney.

Four of the worst schools have closed - Alex's, Mandella, Academic Solutions Center for Learning and Louis Tucker Academy. But the closures were the result of outside intervention or financial malfeasance, not parents voting with their feet.

Interviews with dozens of parents made it apparent that families pick schools in idiosyncratic, unexpected and misunderstood ways.

Above all else, parents appear to be looking for a feeling of community and safety.

They might trade off trained teachers for small class sizes. Or geographic proximity for a feeling of intimacy. Or overall academic success for a school their child likes.

Some seek a smaller school after struggling against what they perceive as an impersonal bureaucracy at Milwaukee Public Schools. They might desire education in a particular religious community, or simply among people they feel comfortable around.

Nicole Franklin, a parent and teacher at Blyden Delany Academy, an Afrocentric school, said, "When there's a 'situation' it's like a big family here. It really feels good working with people who feel comfortable with you, who are coming from your world."

Often, the families - and some of the school founders themselves - appeared to be motivated more by a dissatisfaction and personal frustration with MPS than anything else.

Indeed, the students at the vast majority of these schools are not high achievers from the public schools. Early critics of the program charged that the schools would "cream" the best and brightest from MPS. While a very small number of schools in the choice program draw more motivated students, and choice schools are not obligated to serve special-education students, many of the schools serve large numbers of at-risk students or even specialize in students who have struggled in MPS.

Of the parents interviewed for this series, many more had children who were struggling than soaring in public schools.

Embracing religion

If any single factor distinguishes the families and parents at the choice schools from those in MPS, it is religion. Students in the choice program pray together in class. They read the Bible, the Qur'an or the Torah. They attend Mass. Most schools report that even students from families outside of their faith accept - and seek out - religion as part of education. "I wanted (my granddaughter) to get a Catholic education," said Dolores Cooper, a Baptist whose granddaughter, also named Dolores, attends Messmer High School. "It teaches values."

At Dr. Brenda Noach Choice School, middle school students recently were watching Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ." Pastor Charles Ewing, who runs the school's daily operations, explained afterward that the school, and its curriculum, are centered on God.

On one recent Friday afternoon at Salam School, a Muslim school on the city's south side, the students gathered for a schoolwide prayer service. The girls all wore light-blue scarves covering their heads; rows of sneakers lined the walls of the room. Kneeling on carpets spread across the gym floor, the children listened as an imam prayed: "Allah make us better Muslims; Allah make us proud Muslims."

Not only has choice fostered religious start-ups like Ewing's school, it has preserved many of the existing religious schools in the city.

Some, such as Messmer High School, where Dolores Cooper's granddaughter attends, have embraced a new mission, educating a largely non-Catholic student body in a Catholic tradition. Others are uncertain whether they will try to retain their identity as parish schools, serving predominantly Catholic pupils, or stake out a new role.

To Kenneth Marton, the principal of Christ Memorial Lutheran school, choice means one thing above all else: "We can continue our mission to bring Jesus Christ, evangelize, work with the students."

Assessing the broader impact of choice - the effect it has had on the lives of the thousands of students who have participated, and on the quality of education in the city overall - is a trickier task.

There has been almost no research using fresh data about the performance of students in voucher schools since 1995, when the state Legislature dropped a requirement that there be an annual performance report on the schools.

Nor have the voucher schools provided a real solution to the problems confronting inner-city youth.

Howard Fuller, the former MPS superintendent who is the most prominent advocate of the voucher program, argues that school choice has prompted some talented educators to open schools and given low-income families a chance to make the private schooling choice that wealthier families have always had.

But Martin Carnoy, a Stanford University professor who has been critical of vouchers, says: "I don't see what the big impact of all of this was. Milwaukee's on the map as having done this. Not many other places jumped on the bandwagon, and I think the reason is they don't see anything spectacular and terrific happening. Basically, they can live without it."

There is a case to be made that the voucher schools have had a positive effect on the Milwaukee Public Schools as a whole, but it is anecdotal and strongly subject to opinion.

There are signs that the performance of MPS students on standardized tests has improved, and that a sense of reform has taken hold in MPS, as shown by the work of the current and most recent school superintendents, William Andrekopoulos and Spence Korte.

Others argue that the voucher program has drained resources and attention from MPS and crimped efforts to advance the far greater number of students - more than 85,000 - who still attend the main body of MPS schools.

The biggest impact of choice may be intangible. It opened the door for the spread of other forms of school choice, including charter schools, which have taken innovative paths and have been growing rapidly in enrollment. The voucher movement elicited soul-searching among educators as to the definition, and nature, of a public school.

When the state created the Milwaukee voucher program, nothing like it existed in the U.S. It was a blank slate, an opportunity for both parents and school operators to do things that hadn't been done before.

As Paul Hill, chairman of the National Working Commission on Choice in K-12 Education, a Brookings Institution effort, wrote in 2003, " 'Choice' does not educate anyone. Choice is not a teacher, a classroom or an instructional resource. If choice affects what students learn, it works indirectly, by leading to changes in what students experience, read and hear."

After 15 years, the slate is no longer blank. Some that has been written on it has been good; some of it bad. It is unfortunate, then, that the debates about the program often seem removed from the real dynamics that play out in classrooms each day.

It is in the city's classrooms that common ground, and a common cause, can be found.

A question of accountability

It's tougher to assess the quality of a voucher school than an open one

By ALAN BORSUK AND SARAH CARR

Posted: June 12, 2005

Second of 7 parts

Sa'Rai Nance was working as a teacher's aide a couple of years ago at Louis Tucker Academy, a voucher school. One day, she says, "I was praying and God told me to open a business with Cliff."

She asked, " 'A shelter?' He said, 'No, a school.' "

A school it was.

Cliff is Clifford Zigler. He worked as a teacher at Louis Tucker. He agreed to open a school with Nance.

And so Sa'Rai and Zigler Upper Excelled Academy opened last fall in rented space at St. Patrick's Congregation, 1115 S. 7th St., a worn school building well over a century old, partly modernized but still subpar by today's standards.

The rules of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program make it easy to open a school. Regulators have limited influence over how a school operates. Supporters say the freedom to open a school is a key to improving education in Milwaukee for the better; critics say it leads to bad education and wasted public money.

Key voucher supporters admit there are a small number of schools operating in Milwaukee that ought not to exist. Four voucher schools have closed in the last 18 months, each under pressure from regulators or legal authorities, each beset by questions about quality. One was Louis Tucker.

Journal Sentinel reporters visited 106 of the remaining 115 schools this spring to see what kind of education programs they were operating. The remaining nine did not allow reporters to observe. The large majority of those visited were either conventional parochial schools, with professional staff and clear, well-executed academic programs, or newer schools, both religious and non-religious, some of them very good, some of them mediocre.

But it was also clear that there were about 10 to 15 schools where professionalism appeared lacking, facilities were not good, and the overall operation appeared alarming when it came to the basic matter of educating children. And the quality of several of the nine schools that did not allow visits has been questioned by voucher school experts who are familiar with their operations.

Limited teaching tools

The Sa'Rai and Zigler school is not run by people grounded in school operations. Zigler is administrator of the school. Nance is principal. According to the state Department of Public Instruction, Zigler has an expired license as a substitute teacher. He said he has taught and worked as a security guard in schools in Chicago and Milwaukee. Nance said she has worked as a teacher's aide in Chicago and Milwaukee and is a certified reading tutor.

Is it a problem that she doesn't have a teaching license and is principal? "It's not a problem at all. . . . It's not necessary," she said.

Zigler said, "All you need to do is to have common sense, good communication skills and work with people."

Nance said: "It's all about heart anyway. . . . You have to love children and make sure they have what they need."

As for the school's name, "Upper" refers to "the upper room where Jesus prayed," Nance said. She said "Excellerated" is "short for anything that starts with excel." Zigler said it's a fusion word combining accelerated and excellent. Nance added, "It's spelled wrong on purpose."

Eighty students attended the school as of the official attendance day in January. They were in kindergarten through eighth grade and all were supported by vouchers. The school received \$414,524 in voucher payments this year, according to the Department of Public Instruction.

On an afternoon in March, fewer than 50 students appeared to be present. There were almost no signs of student work in any classroom or in the hallways. Most rooms had few textbooks or other reading material. "We have what they need," Nance said, but she added they could use more.

In a combined third- and fourth-grade class, 11 students were present. The teacher was drilling students on multiplication facts. Four times six, four times eight - they were supposed to master facts up to 13 times 13. He called on them individually. An hour later, the math drills were still under way. On a wall was a poster set up to mark progress by students as they completed assignments. There were 21 names on the chart. No entries had been made in three months.

In a combined first- and second-grade classroom, the teacher was drawing animals such as a kangaroo and an alligator on a marker board, using letters as parts of the animals. The students copied what she did.

In a seventh- and eighth-grade classroom, Nance talked to eight students about who should win upcoming student awards. The kids laughed as she suggested some students who might win. A student showed Nance a paper he put together on the beating of Frank Jude Jr., allegedly by off-duty Milwaukee police officers. It consisted of newspaper photos and what appeared to be a hand-copied, word-for-word repetition of what a newspaper story said.

On a doorway, a sign said, "Please keep gym door closed at all times. No exceptions. Thank you. Administrations (sic)." The door was open throughout the afternoon.

Accountability at issue

You don't need any credentials to open a voucher school. Your teachers don't need any, either. You don't need to meet any detailed standards of educational progress or performance. You can hold school in just about any place, as long as you can get an occupancy permit from the city building inspector.

Basically, all you need to run a voucher school is a building, parents who are willing to enroll their kids and the ability to meet the administrative rules of the state Department of Public Instruction.

"I believe there are about 10 schools that ought to be closed immediately and there are about 30 schools that are consistently worthy of children's intelligence and parents' commitment and support," said Robert Pavlik, director of the School Design and Development Center at Marquette University's Institute for the Transformation of Learning. The rest, he said, are in the middle.

The institute, headed by former Milwaukee Public Schools Superintendent Howard Fuller, is a major supporter of the voucher movement. It has found itself in the unexpected position in recent years of working hard to keep many potential voucher school operators from actually opening schools, even as it works to help a couple of dozen to get better.

In the meantime, DPI regulators have been working to strengthen their hand in dealing with problem schools. Barred from taking on educational aspects of voucher schools, they have focused on administrative and financial issues.

Deputy State School Superintendent Tony Evers said that regulators assume that problems in a school's business operations are often accompanied by problems in its educational program.

Although they still have strongly divergent views on what kind of accountability systems there ought to be, DPI officials and leading advocates of voucher schools have cooperated to a greater degree in the last couple of years than in the past to give the state more tools to go after problems in voucher schools. Many voucher school leaders have been stung by the low quality of some schools in the program and want to see problems cleaned up.

Strong boards

In an interview, Fuller was asked what he knew now about opening schools that he didn't know in 1990, when the contemporary voucher movement was launched in Milwaukee.

"I don't think I understood how hard it is to create a really good school," he said. He used to think having people who are totally committed to a school and who care deeply was enough to make a difference. Now he thinks those qualities are necessary, but not sufficient.

He said much more needs to be done to develop both the academic and business operations of schools. Many schools are underfunded even for routine operations. And he suggests that things which may be necessary to succeed with low-income, central-city children - such as evening and weekend classes, and summer school - are being done only in a small number of schools in Milwaukee, public or private.

Pavlik said one of the common characteristics of weak schools is the absence of a meaningful board of directors that can support the work of the principal and provide checks against mistakes.

It also is clear that the problems in the voucher movement are not due only to well-intentioned people falling short. The use of state money by David Seppeh, founder of the Mandella School of Science and Math, to buy himself two Mercedes-Benz cars has become a lasting and embarrassing symbol of how some school operators have not put students first.

Seppeh is currently trying to withdraw his earlier guilty plea to stealing more than \$300,000 from the state.

A leading critic of the voucher schools, Stan Johnson, president of the Wisconsin Education Association Council, the state teachers union, said the lack of accountability in the school choice program and the lack of information about how individual schools are doing means that almost nothing can be concluded about what the program has accomplished after 15 years.

Johnson said: "I'm sure there are some wonderful things that go on in those schools, but how can anyone say that, except for anecdotal information, because they do not take the same tests that we take in public schools."

Check to check

What can you do with \$6,000?

The amount of money paid in the voucher program, up to \$5,943 per student this year, is enough to pay for modest to slightly better than modest school operations if it's used well, many school administrators indicated. And there appeared to be little reason, in general, to think schools were not using their money to pay for just that - schooling - especially given the state's stronger financial oversight.

Kenneth Marton, principal of 84-student Christ Memorial Lutheran School at 5719 N. Teutonia Ave., said the school has enough money to be financially stable, but only by offering "not too many bells and whistles, a very good basic, generic education." The building and classroom observations support his description.

He said even some of his colleagues who head Lutheran schools outside the city assume he is rolling in money because of school choice. "We're still struggling, choice payment to choice payment," he said.

The state voucher payments are not linked to what a school charges in tuition but are intended to reflect the actual cost of educating a child.

Some of the choice schools visited by the Journal Sentinel were clearly short on money.

At LaBrew Troopers Military University School, which was housed this year in a former Catholic high school downtown, children in one classroom were working with the lights off when reporters visited. The daylight coming in through windows was adequate, but the principal, Shirley McCarty, said the school was so short of money that it needed to get by with the lights out to hold down utility bills.

Some schools that are dependent on vouchers have cash-flow problems because the state pays them only four times a year. In some cases, staff paychecks have been held up until the voucher checks arrive.

Lower pay, benefits

Few, if any, choice schools offer their staffs pay and benefits on par with MPS.

In many schools visited by the Journal Sentinel, it was clear that if finances are limited, the way to work it out has not been to pay a small number of teachers well, but to pay a larger number of teachers lower wages, sometimes below \$10 an hour, to keep class sizes down.

Many parents sending their children to voucher schools are making a choice - perhaps knowingly - to put their children in smaller, more personalized classes in exchange for teachers who do not have much background in education.

In the more established schools, the ability of teachers is less in question. The Catholic schools generally insist on teachers who are licensed by the state. Lutheran schools also generally use teachers who are licensed.

Five voucher schools, including Hickman Academy Preparatory School and Noah's Ark Preparatory, are working to obtain Wisconsin Religious and Independent Schools Accreditation (WRISA), which includes setting standards for teaching credentials. More than 30 schools, most of them Catholic, have that accreditation.

Seven parochial high schools that have voucher students and two kindergarten through eighth grade schools in the program have accreditation from the North Central Association Commission on Accreditation, the most widely recognized accrediting body.

Some Lutheran schools in the voucher program are accredited through organizations within the church's synod.

Many schools - about half of those in the program - do not have accreditation from an outside body.

Catholic schools typically aim to pay 80% of what public school salaries are, but the gap widens as teachers become more experienced. Fringe benefits, especially health insurance, fall far short of the packages most public school teachers have.

In schools that depend entirely on choice money, the gaps in pay, benefits and teacher quality appear to only grow.

'Just baby-sitting'

There are schools where even brief observations of classrooms left strong and troubling impressions about the quality of the teaching.

In some cases, voucher schools are really only a step up from day care centers, serving only very young children.

For example, reporters tried to visit the Academy of Excellence Preparatory School twice, each time finding a large, empty classroom in the back of the Parklawn YMCA on the north side. The classroom appeared unused, with few books or toys in sight.

On a third visit, the school's principal, Joe Nixon, said she kept the supplies in a back room. On that day, she had only two students. The school said it had seven choice students on the January student count date. The two students, a 4-year-old and a 5-year-old, were drawing. Nixon said she was getting ready to take them on a field trip to McDonald's.

At Milwaukee School of Choice, the teachers and principal, Michael Hutchinson, did not appear to have a well-developed curriculum. The school, at 5211 W. Hampton Ave., has only 4- and 5-year-old kindergarten students, and works in collaboration with Milwaukee Multicultural Academy. Hutchinson, in his first year as principal, was vague on the goals and teaching approach.

"It's a lot of just baby-sitting," he said. "We try to teach them the fundamentals of pretty much every subject."

At Carter's Christian Academy, 3936 W. Fond du Lac Ave., which is new to the choice program this year, James Carter, who runs the tiny school with his wife, said in February that the highest-paid teacher at the school makes \$8 an hour.

"The amount we get from the DPI is not enough to pay staff, utilities and for a building," Carter said. Since the enrollment at the school is so small - 14 kids in 4- and 5-year-old kindergarten - the school works with a small amount of revenue.

The two tiny classrooms have only bare-bones furniture. There are no toys in sight, and few books or other educational materials.

"The curriculum that we have is so basic that someone with just a high school diploma is able to teach it," Carter said.

Shoestring buildings

Schools operating on shoestrings are often operating in shoestring buildings.

Churches generally provide a school they are connected to with a facility, whether it is an older, unfancy building such as the one used by St. Philip's Lutheran School at 3012 N. Holton St., or a first-rate new building, such as the one King's Academy Christian School connected to Christ the King Baptist Church, 7798 N. 60th St., will move into this fall.

And some schools have succeeded in attracting the support of major philanthropists.

Without such support, schools become much rockier financially, and particularly appear to lack resources to pay for decent buildings - a situation made worse if they choose to use their limited funds to pay for such things as busing to school, which many choice schools offer. As a result, many schools bend the traditional notion of what a school looks like - at least from the outside.

D.J. Perkins Academy of Excellence, a first-year school with 25 students in kindergarten through third grade, is on the second floor of a small building at 3622 W. Silver Spring Drive, with a vacuum cleaner shop and hair salon on the first floor. The classrooms were formerly used as offices for a doctor, a dentist and a lawn service. Some are cramped. Getting to the principal's office requires going through the combined second- and third-grade class; only a partial wall separates the lunchroom and the first-grade classroom.

Dr. Brenda Noach Choice School has perhaps the most unlikely location of any school in Milwaukee - it's in the Milwaukee County War Memorial Center, connected to the Milwaukee Art Museum. The school rents several classrooms on the ground level of the north side of the building - space that is windowless, cramped and unattractive - plus two upper-floor classrooms that are spacious, well-lighted and offer gorgeous views of Lake Michigan.

Does bad space make for a bad school? Not necessarily. Community Vision Academy, a school connected to Community Baptist Church, has classes in buildings on all four corners of W. North Ave. and N. Sherman Blvd., including some in the basement of the church itself. It also has kindergarten operations on both floors of a duplex across the street, which means 4- and 5-year-olds are often led across North Ave. to get lunch.

But the staff members are mostly retired MPS teachers who appear to be providing a strong, religious-oriented program in a capable manner. The school is working to get everyone under one roof by September.

Different testing

Critics of the voucher program point frequently to the fact that the voucher schools do not need to follow the state's educational goals and do not need to take the state's standardized tests each year. Public schools are required not only to administer tests but to release detailed reports on results.

Almost every school that reporters visited reported that students take standardized tests each year. In many cases, school officials provided reporters with summaries of student performance, sometimes in detail.

"We believe in testing, totally, absolutely," said Julie Loomis, principal of Eastbrook Academy, 5375 N. Green Bay Ave. She said students at the school tested overall at the 91st percentile on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills.

But given that different tests are used - many private schools use the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills, not the tests used by public schools - no meaningful comparison of test scores was feasible even when data was presented.

Catholic schools, in particular, appear to be headed toward more participation in the state testing system and more openness with test results. The Milwaukee Archdiocese has asked all schools with eighth-grade students to take the same tests that public school eighth-graders take, and that may expand to include fourth-graders. Most Catholic schools were willing to share some or all of their schoolwide test scores with reporters.

In broad terms, most of the scores provided by Catholic and Lutheran schools appeared to be in the ballpark of scores in Milwaukee Public Schools, especially when the socioeconomics of the schools' student bodies were comparable.

No research has been done using data on student performance in voucher schools since 1995, when a state requirement for an annual research report ended. There have been efforts in the state Legislature to launch new research, but they have faltered amid highly partisan politics. Voucher program backers are close to agreement with researchers from Georgetown University to undertake a privately funded, long-term study of the voucher program.

Weeding out applicants

Pavlik, of the pro-voucher institute at Marquette, said he has worked in recent years with 184 people who were planning to open schools. Only 41 schools have actually opened, he said, which he took as a good thing.

More than 50 new schools or potential schools have applied to join the voucher program for next year, which could swell the number of schools to more than 170. But that won't happen. The DPI's Evers expects that come fall, fewer than 20 new schools will be in operation.

Susan Mitchell, a leading advocate of the voucher program, said she hopes many of the applicants don't succeed in opening schools because of their lack of qualifications.

Partners Advancing Values in Education, a private, non-profit organization that has provided scholarships, grants and other services involving voucher schools for more than a decade, declines to give money to some schools because of similar concerns. Executive Director Dan McKinley recently told the group's board that he believes about 10% of choice schools have serious quality issues. Whatever happens in the state Legislature in regard to the size, regulation and funding of the voucher program, it is clear that it will not be as easy in the future to open a school as it has been or to keep a weak school going.

As for Sa'Rai and Zigler Upper Excellerated Academy, more than a half-dozen calls to the school on different days since June 1 have been answered by a recording that urges applicants to file enrollment applications for this fall by Feb. 20. No one has responded to messages left on the answering machine. A secretary at St. Patrick's, the school's landlord, says the church is trying to get in touch with the school's owners to find out the status of the school.

In March, Sa'Rai Nance said her goal was to expand the school eventually to include a high school. But first, it must make it to September.

Gut instinct guides parents' choices

Word-of-mouth, small classes count more than test scores

By SARAH CARR

Posted: June 13, 2005

Third of 7 parts

Markita Amaechi just wanted smaller classes for her son.

Anthony, a fourth-grader, has attention deficit disorder, and Amaechi worried he would have difficulty learning in a traditional public school. So she enrolled him last fall in Louis Tucker Academy, a private school in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program.

Amaechi chose Louis Tucker after a school employee approached her with a brochure promising licensed teachers and smaller classes. "I thought smaller class settings would make it easier for him to learn," she said. "At Lancaster (Elementary School) there were 20-some kids in one class."

Like Amaechi, parents selecting choice schools for their children sometimes are not making selections based on extensive research. Their choices are based on gut feelings and word-of-mouth. Something clicks for them, and it can be as simple as a uniform requirement, a kind exchange with a school staff person, or the fact that their sister's kids, or the children of their neighbor's brother, attend the school.

Thousands of parents are seeking - and finding - schools they believe are safer, better environments for their kids. But the informal nature of the school search process also means parents are less likely to spot troubled schools, or pull their kids from them immediately. As a result, weaker schools in the choice program manage to survive - in some cases, even thrive.

Even the staunchest advocates of school choice admit today that the marketplace theory, which held that parents would pull their kids out of bad schools, or not choose them to begin with, did not pan out.

"The reality is that it hasn't worked like we thought it would in theory," said Howard Fuller, head of the Institute for the Transformation of Learning, at Marquette University. "I don't think anyone that is truthful can say that has occurred."

This winter Louis Tucker collapsed in dramatic fashion after state officials who oversee the choice program called on the district attorney to investigate the school for possible fraud.

Amaechi is trying to pick up the pieces. She and another mother are suing a teacher at the school and the woman who ran it, Bertha Collier, claiming the teacher assaulted their sons and the school did not respond adequately. Collier declared bankruptcy shortly after hearing of the lawsuit. Her bankruptcy lawyer did not return repeated calls seeking comment.

Little formal marketing

In 1989, then-Wisconsin Gov. Tommy G. Thompson told a White House policy conference that he wanted a law that would allow any low-income child in Milwaukee to attend any public or non-sectarian school in Milwaukee County.

"Competition breeds accountability," he said. "Under the concept of parental choice, schools would be held accountable for their students' performance. Schools providing a high-quality education would flourish. Schools failing to meet the needs of their students would not be able to compete and, in effect, would go out of business."

The theory was nifty. Reality has proved messier.

Dolores Cooper, whose daughter is a junior at Messmer High School, heard about the school from a friend. Marvia Auffant home-schooled her kids until the children's step-grandmother told her about Blyden Delany Academy. Anthony Sprewer, who sends two of his kids to Believers in Christ Christian Academy, chose the school where most of his nieces and nephews already went. "It's a family affair," he said.

Of the 106 schools visited for this Journal Sentinel series on the choice program, surprisingly few reported extensive marketing efforts. Instead, school administrators said they relied predominantly on more informal strategies. "The best thing is word-of-mouth," said Paul Hohl, the principal at St. Sebastian School at 1747 N. 54th St. "We used to have a one-day open house. But that seems to be a dying breed."

Parents of all income levels tend to rely on informal networks when picking schools, said Paul Teske, a professor in the graduate school of public affairs at the University of Colorado-Denver. They talk to relatives, friends, co-workers, and people at church.

"The reality of the school search process for most parents, of all income levels, involves a lot more shortcuts than I might have thought about when I started to research this," said Teske, co-author of the book "Choosing Schools."

But networks of high-income parents more often include people who are informed when it comes to school and education issues, Teske added. They are more likely to know and talk with teachers, PTA members, and those familiar with education policies.

In the end, nearly everyone feels safer at a school that comes recommended by someone they trust. "Partly, it's just psychological attachment issues," Teske said. "If you know a teacher or a person you like at a school, you get a feeling of social attachment."

Smaller classes

Selena Buchanan worried that her child would be seen and understood as a file rather than a real person in an urban school district like MPS. "I like calling a school where they recognize my voice, and know these are my children," she said. Her children attend Blyden Delany, a small school in the choice program.

Many parents with students at private schools in the choice program said they felt lost in the public school system. In many cases, they sought out small class sizes, close-knit school communities, and a values- or religious-based curriculum in Milwaukee's network of private schools.

Few parents interviewed for this article mentioned factors such as accreditation, teacher background or graduation rates as the basis for their choices.

Yet most low-income parents say they want information about teacher qualifications, student achievement and curriculum, according to a study by the Public Policy Forum, a local non-profit research organization. The problem, the study found, is that the parents did not actually request or receive that information before making their decision.

"Parents want to make choices based on measurable facets of school quality," said Anneliese Dickman, a senior researcher at the forum. "But they are not getting that information, and therefore make a choice based on something else. Unfortunately, what's troubling about that is you really don't know if your choice has been a good one or not until you have invested a lot of time in your child's life in a school."

In interviews, parents repeatedly mentioned the small class sizes and close-knit school communities available at some private schools.

"With MPS, a lot of the classes are real large," said Marie Jacqué, whose 15-year-old son attended Academic Solutions Center for Learning, a choice school that closed during the winter after experiencing a series of problems. Her son now attends Messmer High School, a Catholic school. "What I like about choice and private schools is the classes aren't as big. The teacher has a chance to get around to most of the kids."

Buchanan likes the close-knit community at Blyden Delany. The school is Afrocentric, meaning the curriculum is rooted in lessons about African and African-American art, culture and history.

"If something was to happen to my son or someone else's child, you are more concerned because you know that other mother," she said. "You have that in an alternative school. You have that village."

Rating performance

You also have an emotional attachment, which can lead to a blindness of sorts.

"Parents at all income levels, on average, tend to like their child's school, kind of unreasonably sometimes," Teske said. "The majority of parents don't know that their school is low performing, if that is the case."

It's even tougher to know with schools in the choice program, where information about demographics or test scores isn't a click away - as it is on the public school Web site - and sometimes isn't available at all.

Dickman recalled one phone call she received from a mother who had enrolled her son in a new school after someone knocked on her door and pitched the school by reporting that there was a pizza party going on there. "She had never set foot in the place or talked to anyone who worked there. . . . And, then, at the end of the school year, she was upset by her son's grades."

Dorothy Smith was one of a small number of parents interviewed for this article who chose a school in response to a formal advertisement. Twelve years ago, the mother, foster mother and grandmother of several children was driving when she heard a radio ad for a Milwaukee private school called Marva Collins.

Smith revered the famed educator, who earned a national reputation after starting a central-city Chicago school in 1975. As quickly as she could, Smith turned the car around and drove to the school. She later enrolled her kids.

Today, Smith still has children at the school - although it is now a charter school called Milwaukee College Preparatory - as well as at Messmer High School and LaBrew Troopers Military University School. She's done her best to pick schools suited for each of her kids. Her foster daughter at LaBrew, for instance, has some behavioral problems, and Smith chose the school for its tough-love approach and discipline. "Some kids need a little more umph than other kids," she says.

She is pleased with Milwaukee College Preparatory and Messmer but has some concerns about the academics at LaBrew - which she regularly shares with the principal, who knows all of her worries.

"If you see a problem, don't just sit there," Smith said.

Amaechi, whose son attended Louis Tucker, learned this the hard way.

She said her son had several different teachers in his year at Louis Tucker, and that not all of them were "licensed and certified" as the school had promised. When she visited the school, Amaechi said the staff would not let her visit classrooms.

Anthony is now a fourth-grader at Willowglen Academy, a private school, where Amaechi said he is finally making progress.

"They let you know each day about your children's activities," she said. "They send home a sheet which you have to sign and send back. That way you are aware what is going on."

Religious schools are a top choice

Expansion of vouchers has resulted in unprecedented level of public funding of religious education

By ALAN J. BORSUK

Posted: June 14, 2005

Fourth of 7 parts

Three sentences bring home one of the most significant impacts of Milwaukee's groundbreaking private school voucher program.

One: On doors throughout St. Margaret Mary School, at N. 92nd St. and Capitol Drive, there are small printed signs that say: "Be it known to all who enter here that Christ is the reason for this school."

Two: More than 10,000 students - over two-thirds of the total using publicly funded vouchers to attend private schools in Milwaukee this year - were attending religious schools.

Three: Wisconsin is putting money into religious schools in Milwaukee in ways and amounts that are without match in at least the last century of American history.

It was clear to Journal Sentinel reporters who visited 106 of the 115 schools that participated in the voucher program this year that without vouchers, there would be fewer religious kindergarten through eighth-grade schools left in the city. And aside from several strong parochial high schools that serve large numbers of suburban students, there wouldn't be many high schools, either.

Almost two-thirds of students who attended private schools in the city this year did so with vouchers. Because vouchers are limited to low-income families, few of these students could have done so without them. Most of the schools are religious.

Is it a public good that religious education is so widely available in Milwaukee at no cost to low-income families?

Many say it adds to the vitality of life in the city. Some schools have played key roles in strengthening neighborhoods. Proponents also point out that there is some precedent, that the G.I. Bill gave public money to use for education, with no regard to whether a school was public or had a religious affiliation.

Others say it's not right - that public money should not be used to pay for religious schools, period.

What cannot be debated is that thousands of parents are choosing religious schools for their children because they want the influence of faith in their children's education. Voucher payments to religious schools - now running about \$60 million a year - have given new life to old Catholic and Lutheran schools and brought about the creation of more than 20 Christian schools run by African-Americans and serving almost all-black student bodies.

Thirty-five Catholic schools; 12 Wisconsin Synod Lutheran schools; 11 Missouri Synod Lutheran schools; 22 other Christian schools, some affiliated with specific denominations and others not; three Muslim schools; and one Jewish school are part of the program.

The percentage of voucher students in specific schools ranges from 2% to 100%. Overall, 60% of students in Catholic kindergarten through eighth-grade schools were attending on vouchers. The figure was about 66% for both groups of Lutheran schools.

For many schools, the voucher payments are 80% to 100% of their income. That simple math, combined with shrinking congregations in many urban Catholic and Lutheran churches, leaves many principals to acknowledge that they would not exist without vouchers.

No 'strange-type' schools

June 10, 1998 was the pivotal date in the history of religious schools and the voucher program.

On that day, the Wisconsin Supreme Court ruled that including religious schools in the program was constitutional - the first decision by any state Supreme Court upholding school vouchers.

On a 4-2 vote, the court held that as long as voucher payments were based on parents' choices of schools, paying money to religious schools was not an impermissible form of state support for religion. It also held that there shouldn't be "excessive entanglement" between the state and the schools, which, in practical terms, has meant that the state has almost no power to tell a school what should go on in its classrooms.

The U.S. Supreme Court turned down an appeal of the Wisconsin decision, in effect letting it stand, then voted 5-4 in 2002 that a similar voucher program in Cleveland was constitutional.

The voucher movement has had limited impact nationally since then.

When the doors of the Milwaukee voucher program were opened to religious schools, some critics predicted that schools practicing extreme forms of religion - "some real strange-type schools," as then-state schools superintendent John Benson put it - would open. That has not happened. The religious schools speak to the mainstream of American life, not the fringes.

If you've ever been in a Catholic or Lutheran school, chances are you'd find visiting most of those schools - and they make up half the schools in the voucher program - a familiar experience.

They are traditional in their educational programs and conservative in their approaches to behavior. Most require uniforms such as light-colored polo shirts and dark pants or skirts. Their teachers are licensed, atmospheres are structured, and they generally have small classes meeting in buildings that haven't changed much in years.

Several Lutheran and Catholic schools are moving outside the traditional mold. In some ways, they are being even more traditional. St. Marcus Lutheran, the Hope School and Hope Christian School are each Lutheran schools that are taking a highly structured, no-compromises approach to academics and behavior, including drills and homework, rigorous enforcement of rules, and a strict dress code (ties and coats for boys at Hope School).

The religious schools vary widely in how intensely they teach the faith. In many instances, such as in a large number of Catholic schools, specific religious practices are not as front-and-center as they are elsewhere. People of other Christian faiths, even non-Christians, are comfortable there.

In other cases, the religious mission of the schools is so pervasive it would be illogical for someone who does not adhere to the school's belief system to attend.

Why would someone who isn't intent on Christianity attend a school named Believers in Christ? Why would anyone who isn't an Orthodox Jew attend a school such as Yeshiva Elementary School, where students spend about half of each day in such things as Talmudic study?

The answer is, they don't, although legally they have the right to.

The voucher law permits students to "opt out" of religious education in school - a major issue when the state Supreme Court found the law constitutional. Many religious schools worried that the opt-out rule would create difficult situations in school; that was one of several reasons some schools, particularly Lutheran schools, were slow to join the program after the 1998 decision.

In reality, opting out has been a non-issue. Except for isolated instances, it doesn't happen much.

Michael Brown, principal of St. Philip Neri Catholic School, 5501 N. 68th St., said: "People are smart. They're not going to send their kids to a religious school and then opt out of religion."

He estimated that only about 10% of the school's 183 students are Catholic, but said all take part in the religious aspect of the school, including daily prayer, weekly Mass and daily religious classes.

Brown said that several years ago, a couple of non-Catholic families said they did not want their children taking part in a specific religious program and that was no problem.

Numbers still falling

Even with the rise of the voucher program, the number of students attending private schools in the city has continued to fall in recent years and is now at the lowest level in a generation or more, according to the annual census of children in the city conducted by Milwaukee Public Schools.

MPS figures show that 21,829 children 4 to 19 years old were in private schools as of June 30, 2004, down from 27,723 in June 1998 - when the state Supreme Court opened the way for religious schools to get vouchers - and 49,306 in 1967.

That was a period when the religious schools in the city were much larger and stronger, before so many congregation members moved to the suburbs. Some had classrooms of 50. It is common to walk through a parochial school today that seems like it is fairly full when a couple hundred kids are present, then to be told that 500 or more used to attend the school.

In that era, the churches paired with the schools were much stronger and able to provide almost all the support a school needed. That is rarely the case in Milwaukee now. School enrollments are down, church support is a fraction of the budget and voucher money is, in many cases, the name of the financial game for religious schools, especially in high-poverty neighborhoods.

Serving African-Americans

If the No. 1 impact of school choice when it comes to religion has been to keep Catholic and Lutheran schools going in the city, an important second impact has been to open the door to the creation of religious schools connected to African-American churches.

Visitors to Holy Redeemer Christian Academy in recent years have included President George W. Bush and basketball legend Michael Jordan. Combine that high visibility with a large, beautiful new building at W. Hampton Ave. and Mother Daniels Way (N. 35th St.), and the school, which had 309 voucher students in January, is the one many people think of first on this score.

But Holy Redeemer is part of a broader picture. More than 20 Christian schools, with more than 2,300 students using vouchers, have arisen out of African-American community churches or have been started by people who wanted to head a Christian-oriented school serving African-Americans.

It could be said that one of the signs of being a vibrant church in the black community is to have launched a school connected to your church.

- Annie Oliver worked for Milwaukee Public Schools for 26 years, including six as an assistant principal of Washington High School. She says she left when her frustrations with MPS mounted and she felt there were better ways to reach children. In 1997, Mount Zion Assembly of the Apostolic Faith, headed by Bishop Earl Parchia, opened Early View Academy of Excellence with five students and Oliver heading its education program.

She says that within three years, the school had 300 students. For the last two years, the school has operated in a former budget movie theater at 7132 W. Good Hope Road, purchased and remodeled at a cost of more than \$3 million. It now has kindergarten through 10th-grade classes with about 265 students, all but a dozen or so on vouchers. Its education program includes the highly scripted Direct Instruction method of teaching reading, and textbooks for general curriculum subjects put out by a Christian publishing company.

- The influential Christian Faith Fellowship Church at W. Good Hope Road and N. 86th St. started the Darrell L. Hines Academy as a voucher school. That school became a charter school, authorized to operate by City Hall, several years ago. It had to drop religious content from its program at that time, but it remains in the same set of buildings as the church.

- King's Academy Christian School is connected to Christ the King Baptist Church, 7798 N. 60th St., headed by Pastors John and Marilyn McVicker. Now a school of 100 (with 80% of them using vouchers), it will move into a new multimillion dollar building this fall.

On the other end of the spectrum, some of the African-American religious schools are small, not connected to churches with resources, and housed in converted offices, storefronts, homes or other unconventional space. They include several schools that did not allow Journal Sentinel reporters to enter and raised some of the strongest questions about quality of any schools in the choice program.

Schools that did not allow reporters to visit include Greater Holy Temple Christian Center and Texas Bufkin Academy.

Grace Christian Academy, Sa'Rai and Zigler Upper Excellerated Academy and Dr. Brenda Noach Choice School were among those that were visited and which appeared to have substantial weaknesses in their academic programs.

High schools differ

School choice has largely been an elementary and middle school program, with fewer students at the high school level. One reason for that: While some of the best private high schools in the city consider it part of their mission to admit some low-income students, these schools are at capacity and highly competitive on admissions.

Marquette University High School and Divine Savior Holy Angels High School have capped participation at 2% of their student bodies; Pius XI High School had 236 voucher students - 18% of its student body - this year; and about 9% of Wisconsin Lutheran High's 900 students are attending on vouchers.

On the other hand, at Messmer High School, which is often spotlighted as an example of the voucher program at its best, nearly three-fourths of the 575 students attend on vouchers. St. Joan Antida High School also serves a large number of low-income students - about 63% of its 320 girls were attending on vouchers this spring.

Religion permeates content

No matter the faith of the school, the long-term goals of the religious schools are to inculcate their students with the values, morals and sometimes the specific practices that the school espouses.

Carrie Miller, principal of Mount Calvary Lutheran School, at N. 53rd and Locust streets, said she emphasizes the school's goal of making the students "Christ-like witnesses" to parents considering sending their children there.

The school wants students to learn how God wants people to act and relate to each other, and wants religion to be an element not only in specific classes on the subject but in everything done in the day, she said.

Like many other principals, she said the voucher program has allowed the church "to become even more of a mission/outreach environment."

Benjamin Clemons, principal of Risen Savior Lutheran School, 9550 W. Brown Deer Road, said, "We have an obligation to reach out to people with the word."

That worries Elliot M. Minberg, legal director of People for the American Way, a Washington-based group that has played a leading role in opposing vouchers, especially for religious schools.

Nothing about how things have unfolded in Milwaukee changes his view that it is "a fundamental founding principle that taxpayer money should not go to support religion and religious institutions in that way."

"The reason religion is so strong in this country," he said, "is because of the careful efforts to avoid interference with religion and to avoid government promotion of religion." Vouchers threaten that in a way that people may regret 50 years from now, he said.

Like many others working in religious schools, Clemons said he uses religion in setting standards for behavior and discipline. God's word is "an extremely powerful and potent tool" for dealing with kids, he said.

In many schools, religious and non-religious content blend together in classes.

One winter morning, first-graders at Community Vision Academy, an elementary school that is part of Community Baptist Church at N. Sherman Blvd. and W. North Ave., copied down the following sentences from the blackboard as part of their writing work for the day:

"Today is Monday. Jan. 31, 2005. It is cloudy and cold. This is the last day of January. Jacob was tricked and married Leah. Jacob had to work seven more years to marry Rachel his real love."

Even when the religious content is not overt, religion should be part of everything that goes on in a school such as hers, said Brenda White, principal of St. Margaret Mary School.

"What makes Catholic schools Catholic is how strongly what they're teaching in the classrooms is connected to their mission," she said.

And clearly, that's what a large number of parents want.

Yolande Lasky, principal of Our Lady of Good Hope Catholic School, 7140 N. 41st St., asked if any families in the school resist the religious content, said, "If anything, it goes the other way."

Parents choose the school because they want religion for their kids.

Big 'C' or little 'c' Catholic?

Catholic schools struggle with identity issues as their student bodies grow more diverse

By SARAH CARR and LEONARD SYKES JR.

Posted: June 15, 2005

Fifth of 7 parts

Each year, at least a few of the elderly parishioners of St. John Kanty, a Catholic parish on the city's south side, sell their houses or pass away, and Latino families take their place.

Without school vouchers, St. John Kanty School would be gone, too.

Vouchers have preserved dozens of religious schools in Milwaukee, but they've also presented them with a unique set of challenges.

In the seven years since the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program expanded to include religious schools, St. John Kanty's choice enrollment has steadily climbed along with the growing Latino population in the neighborhood. This year, 70% of the 140 students at St. John Kanty participate in the voucher program.

Without choice?

"We'd be closed," says Beth Eichman, principal of the school.

In most other cities in America, St. John Kanty would have shut down as its traditional parish base moved to the suburbs and Latino families who could not afford the tuition at the school moved in.

"The money just wouldn't be there" to keep so many city schools open without choice, said David Prothero, director of Catholic education for the Archdiocese of Milwaukee.

This school year, 56% of the students enrolled at Catholic elementary schools in the city of Milwaukee participate in choice, bringing tuition vouchers worth close to \$6,000 apiece along with them. As a result, Milwaukee's Catholic schools have stayed open to serve more poor students, more minority students and more non-Catholics than in other cities.

By contrast, earlier this year, the Archdiocese of Chicago said it would close 23 city and suburban elementary schools at the end of the school year, most of them in poor, minority neighborhoods.

But the rapidly changing student population in the Catholic schools in Milwaukee has come with its own set of issues: How can they teach theology to children who, increasingly, do not come from Catholic backgrounds? How can teaching staffs, which for years have been nearly all white, be diversified? And, for a school used to serving kids from one parish - kids often tightly connected by race, class and religion - how can the notion of what a Catholic school is, or should be, be broadened?

A question of identity

For Brother Bob Smith, the president of Messmer Catholic Schools: "Catholic means universal. We've always been an immigrant church, and opened our doors to the poor."

Still, some school officials are soul-searching about the mission and nature of their schools.

At St. Catherine of Alexandria School on the city's far northwest side, the percentage of non-Catholics has steadily risen in recent years; it's now above 40%. The percentage of choice students also has increased, to 42%; the school would like to keep it between 40% and 45% for now.

"When I started 25 years ago, everybody was Catholic," said Linda Kuhn, the principal. She said the church welcomes the changing demographics of the school, but "there is concern, particularly among older parishioners, that we want to keep the Catholic identity."

At St. Sebastian School on the city's west side, about 28% of the students participate in the choice program. That percentage increases every year, along with the number of students who aren't Catholic.

"Are we a parish school or an alternative to MPS?" asked Principal Paul Hohl. "Right now we are still a parish school, but we are talking more about that. We've seen that happen in other schools where they get so many choice students they can turn into something they weren't before, or didn't plan on being."

Kathryn McGrane-Sargent, co-chair of the school's education committee, said, "We view our participation the choice program as a very important aspect of our being a city school."

But she added that the committee recently decided to cap the percentage of choice students at 25%. McGrane-Sargent called it a "soft cap," noting that St. Sebastian won't turn away current choice students or their siblings. They wanted the cap, she said, to ensure that the school didn't grow too dependent on voucher money, and would keep its identity as a predominantly neighborhood and Catholic school.

"St. Sebastian is first and foremost a faith community," she said. "We wanted to make sure the people who attend our school are people committed to Catholic values . . . and to keep the neighborhood participation alive, and not have that in any way changed unnecessarily."

A higher percentage of the choice students come from outside the parish and neighborhood, and "when people come from a distance, it is more difficult for them to show up at a fish fry to volunteer or just be a part of daily life," McGrane-Sargent said.

A balancing act

In south side neighborhoods with exploding numbers of Latino families, the dynamic is different than in north side neighborhoods with largely African-American populations - simply because Latinos are more often Catholic.

Finding the right approach to teaching religion to non-Catholics can be a balancing act, says Brother Smith, who heads up educational efforts in the 10-county Milwaukee Archdiocese, in addition to his role at Messmer.

"As schools receive more children who are low-income and may not be Catholic, there is absolutely a discussion that must take place as to how you bridge their faith with Catholicism without demeaning them, and making them feel that it is wrong or less," he said. At St. Leo Catholic Urban Academy, only six of the 178 students are Catholic, at a school that was almost exclusively white, German and Catholic when it was founded in 1908. Nearly all the students today are African-American.

"We're ecumenical," said Sue Swieciak, who teaches classes on religion and faith at the school. "We're not teaching Catholicism. We're teaching about faith and Christian values."

Swieciak does not teach about the paschal mystery, the litany of the saints, or the assumption of Mary. The religion classes have a generic feel to them.

During one recent class, Swieciak asked the students to write a prayer to the Holy Spirit. A couple of the students looked bored, but Swieciak pushed forward with the lesson, asking the students to build mobiles cut from purple construction paper. The students attached strings of varying lengths to the oval shapes to show how the Holy Spirit influences their faith, moods and behavior.

For a parent who wants their child to learn Catholic practice, the ecumenical trend might be a turnoff. But for a student such as Daniel DeVougas, a Protestant who recently graduated from Marquette University High School, it shows what he sees as a willingness to embrace a larger community. Roughly 16% of the school's student body is non-Catholic.

Dan Quesnell, the director of admissions at Marquette, says for years the school has had a tradition of accommodating other religions. Overall, he said, the emphasis is not solely on Catholicism, but allowing students to express their own spirituality.

DeVougas said he does not take communion or participate in other rites of the Catholic Church. But he has given readings from the Bible during liturgies and participated in annual Catholic retreats. Muslim students also have read from the Qur'an at Marquette High liturgies. At commencement ceremonies last month, DeVougas received the highest award given a student at the Jesuit institution.

Says DeVougas: "The emphasis is on human values, a universal morality."

Diversifying staff

Beyond teaching theology, Milwaukee Catholic schools also struggle to diversify their teaching staffs, which historically have been white and accustomed to working with parish children.

Walk into many Milwaukee Catholic elementary schools, schools like St. Catherine of Alexandria, 8660 N. 76th Place, and you will see a nearly all-white teaching staff, many of them older women. This sharply contrasts to the diversity of the student body.

Catholic schools that want to diversify their teaching staffs often find it an uphill battle. The competition for qualified, minority teachers is keen, and the Catholic schools' pay target often is 80% of the salary of MPS teachers, or less.

"You have MPS. You have other private schools. You have a high demand and a low supply," Smith said. "It's not an excuse. It's a reality."

But Catholic and Lutheran schools that have successfully diversified their faculty and staff say the payoff is worth the effort.

When Steven Gerner took over as principal of Siloah Lutheran School four years ago, he realized that it wasn't "beneficial to have all-white teachers teaching all-black students."

He started by hiring an African-American administrator and some teaching assistants, and then three African-American teachers.

Gerner said the school's relationship with parents and reputation in the community improved. The dynamic in some of the classrooms also was better. "When you talk about student discipline and body language, there is less of a cultural divide there with the African-American teachers and teaching assistants."

To some parents, having teachers of the same race is crucial. For others, it's far less important than the overall diversity and quality of the staff.

The color of the staff, the curriculum for theology class, the ties to the parish: It's all part of a shifting identity for Catholic schools across the city.

"It's a paradigm that's unknown to us," Smith said. "And there is no single best way to do it."

It's all about relationships

Not all of Marcia Spector's schools are in the voucher program, but they're 'choice' in other ways

By ALAN J. BORSUK

Posted: June 16, 2005

Sixth of 7 parts

Think of it as the Marcia Spector School District.

It includes five schools, which will grow to six this fall. By then, more than 900 students are expected to be part of the "district." Every student is paid for with public dollars. None of the schools is religious. Together, they have more students than almost 200 school districts in Wisconsin.

There is no Marcia Spector School District, of course. But three things about it are real:

One is the schools themselves. Among the more interesting in Milwaukee, they are well-run, focused, intimate and energetic.

A second is what the schools say about the way the definition of a public school is being stretched and reshaped, perhaps more so in Milwaukee than anywhere else in the United States.

And the third is Marcia Spector, 61, a forceful figure, both idealistic and effective as a business leader. She is executive director and chief sparkplug of Seeds of Health, the non-profit organization that operates the schools. Seeds is by no means a one-person show, but Spector has been at the pivot point of launching and running each of its schools. She illustrates the potent role an educational entrepreneur can have in creating schools and changing the status quo, given the latitude to do so that exists in Milwaukee.

Spector was well known in the 1980s as president of the Shorewood School Board - she was known as Marcia Stein then. She played a prominent role in setting the course for the city/suburban voluntary integration plan known as Chapter 220 and in developing a special education consortium among North Shore schools. She still sees herself as a strong proponent of public education.

"But there are different ways of doing that," she says, describing the alternative approaches the Seeds schools and some others take. "There are all kinds of choices out here now."

More and more, she says, she has seen that when it comes to educating children, there are children whose needs aren't being met by traditional public schools. She calls what Seeds has created "an education mosaic" of different approaches that emphasizes close relationships between teachers, students and parents.

One after another

Many who have tried to be entrepreneurs such as Spector have not been particularly successful, given the long list of skills and determination needed to create a school that is good. Count Spector on the short list of those who have shown how to do it.

When Spector joined Seeds of Health about 20 years ago, the agency consisted of a single clinic on the south side for a program known as WIC, which provides health and nutrition information and help to low-income women and children up to 5 years old.

Spector led efforts to expand Seeds to include a high school for 25 school-age parents. The school, now called Grandview, opened in 1988, operating under a contract with Milwaukee Public Schools and funded by state aid for youths who are labeled "at risk."

Things grew from there.

Grandview's enrollment rose quickly. Several years later, MPS, which at that time was short of space, asked Spector if Seeds wanted to open an elementary school on the south side under a partnership contract. That led to Windlake Elementary.

When Windlake reached capacity, Parkside Elementary was born. Hilltop Elementary, serving kindergarten kids, was opened in the building that houses Grandview. The three elementary schools are small, stress connecting to families and serve a wide range of children, many of them Latino.

Believing there was a large, unmet need for small, relationship-oriented high schools, Seeds was given permission by the Milwaukee school board in 2001 to open Veritas High School, a college-prep charter with an alternative-school feel, in a Christian Science church on Oklahoma Ave.

And now Seeds is readying a charter high school, to be called Tenor, located in the old Cathedral High School building downtown and focused on preparing students for careers.

That comes to six schools, with many of the students low-income, from minority groups or with the kinds of personalities or needs that have led them to seek alternatives to the conventional public schools.

Breaking conventions

They are part of a strong component of the local education scene. About 23,500 students in Milwaukee attended publicly funded schools that aren't traditional public schools this year. That includes charter schools, alternative schools, schools for at-risk kids, and schools taking part in the state's private school voucher program.

That's more than 25% of the enrollment in the conventional MPS school system - which isn't always so conventional itself because it includes more than 8,200 students enrolled in charter schools that are staffed by unionized, MPS teachers.

And then there's another 6,700 Milwaukee children who attend public schools outside the city under two state programs: Chapter 220, which encourages voluntary transfers to increase racial integration in urban and suburban schools; and another called open enrollment that allows students generally to attend schools in any district other than the one in which they live.

Add all those numbers together and nearly a third of all students getting a publicly funded education in Milwaukee are doing it in a school that would not have been in-bounds 30 years ago.

The school voucher program is only the best-known and most controversial part of an explosion in Milwaukee of new schools, many of them started by individuals or small groups who had a vision of what they thought would work. Some have been huge failures. Many are OK, but have fallen short of being really good. And some are showing what the idea is supposed to be about.

Howard Fuller, a former MPS superintendent and the most prominent advocate of Milwaukee's voucher and charter schools, is wistful and almost sad when he talks about the track record of many of the new schools. But ask him about Spector and he says, "She's been able to realize the new vision of public education. . . . Marcia is an example of how it works and how it could work."

'The family feel'

The main Seeds building is the old St. Mary's on the Hill Hospital at W. Greenfield Ave. and S. 32nd St. It is an unusual structure, perched atop a knoll and home to Grandview, Hilltop and the WIC program still run by Seeds.

Like the other two elementary schools in the Seeds network, Hilltop stresses relationships with kids and parents, and it has a relatively conventional, well-run program on other counts.

Students at Windlake did well above the average for MPS schools this year on standardized tests. Students at Parkside and Hilltop did not take the tests because the schools serve only kindergartners.

At Grandview High School, classes often involve just a handful of kids, working in an atmosphere that appeared to an observer to be informal but on-task, often with the goal of making up for prior years when they pretty much ignored their schoolwork. Each student has a teacher-mentor, and the relationships are strong. Teachers are universally called by their first names, and the teachers know the personal background of each student.

Grandview student Travis Lilach, 15, said: "It's not that it's easier. It's just they help you to understand." She said she had major truancy problems at the public school she attended previously and is getting high grades at Grandview.

Jan Dahlman, principal of the school, said the graduation rate is above 80%, a good record given the students' backgrounds.

On the state tests this year, the percentage of Grandview students who were proficient or better in each subject was very similar to the MPS averages - which is quite good for an alternative school.

At Veritas, the program is more sophisticated academically and the orientation is much more toward going on to college. But the feeling is still informal and intimate, with small classes, a schedule with fewer classes for longer periods each day and such features as an intersession for somewhat unconventional subjects in the middle of the school year.

"What appeals to me is the one-on-one basis with the teachers," says Lazandria Skinner, 18, who recently graduated as valedictorian at Veritas.

Julia Lugo, 14, a freshman at Veritas in the school year just ended, says, "I like this school because of the family feel to it."

Veritas 10th-graders scored above average for MPS on the state tests, with 63% of students proficient or better in reading, compared with 42% for MPS. In math, it was 54% at the school, compared with 29% in the system, and in social studies it was 56% to 35%.

Spector and Seeds have mastered the several channels that exist to get funding for schools.

That includes contract arrangements with MPS to provide alternative and partnership schools, contracts with MPS and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee for charter schools and participation in the Milwaukee parental choice voucher program. Seeds of Health schools also receive federally funded services under what is called Title 1 for low-income children.

All together, Seeds of Health received \$5.2 million in public money this year to operate its schools - which might sound like a lot until you figure out what it costs to educate more than 800 kids.

One thing that is consistent among the Seeds schools is the emphasis on relationships.

A widely used slogan in education currently, both in Milwaukee and nationally, is that schools, especially high schools, need to address a new version of the 3 R's: Rigor, relevance and relationships. Based on what Spector has heard from the students who have come to her schools, she knows which one she puts at the top of the list.

"It's all about relationships," she says. "There is a great crying out for small, individualized schools."

She says the key thing she has learned in 15 years in the alternative stream of public education is "that bigness doesn't work."

Given the same choices, results can vary widely

The voucher program's ups and downs can be seen through 3 pioneering schools

By LEONARD SYKES JR.

Posted: June 17, 2005

Seventh of 7 parts

Bruce Guadalupe, Harambee Community and Urban Day were once considered the cream of Milwaukee's private schools.

Each rose from the remains of financially strapped Catholic schools. Each became a respected, non-sectarian, community-controlled institution. Each earned a reputation for learning steeped in ethnic culture.

When lawmakers made the case for creating the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, they pointed to schools like Bruce Guadalupe, Harambee and Urban Day.

But over the years, the paths of the three schools have diverged dramatically. Now, these schools are symbols both of some of the most serious challenges facing the program as well as its biggest successes:

- Harambee has severe financial and management problems that some believe have affected the quality of education. The school has lost something it held dear: community control. Visits to 106 voucher schools by Journal Sentinel reporters, as well as other reporting, showed that many schools have financial worries but few have fallen as far or as hard as Harambee.
- Urban Day remains well-regarded for academics and puts a premium on parental involvement. But it is quartered in a cramped facility and sometimes struggles to make ends meet.
- Bruce Guadalupe has left the voucher program. Now a charter school, Bruce Guadalupe receives more money per pupil than it did as part of the parental choice program. It enjoys a solid reputation for academics.

To get a feel for the current state of the voucher program - and its immediate future - you need look no further than Harambee, Urban Day and Bruce Guadalupe.

Harambee Community School

Harambee is a Swahili term that means "pulling together." It was the community's way of saying it would pull together all resources to educate its children.

For many years, before the voucher program existed, the private school's record at doing that was strong. Milwaukee County Circuit Judge Joe Donald, a graduate of Harambee, can tick off a list of classmates from 1973 who are successful today.

There is Jesse Wray, who became a Milwaukee businessman, and there is his brother, Noble, the chief of police in Madison.

On April 27, 1990, former Gov. Tommy G. Thompson used Harambee as the backdrop when he signed legislation creating the voucher system.

But in recent years, Harambee's detractors charge that the school has pulled back from its mission.

Mikel Holt, who served on the Harambee School Board for close to 20 years and whose three sons attended Harambee, questions whether academics at the school remain solid amid turmoil. Holt was concerned enough that he pulled his youngest son from Harambee two years ago, he said. He has continued to stay in touch with school families.

In January, Cleveland Lee Sr., a former financial officer at Harambee, was criminally charged with systematically embezzling up to \$750,000 from the school.

In April, a small group of teachers walked out in protest of a delay in their paychecks and other disputes over personnel issues. They eventually were paid. Harambee officials said no classroom was left unattended. But teachers at the school have complained that sometimes their paychecks bounced, and one former board member said the school could be as much as \$500,000 in debt.

In five years, in quick succession, the school has had five principals and lost experienced staff members. Just last week, some of its teaching staff was laid off.

Sister Callista Robinson, a longtime leader and vice president of the school board, said the teachers were let go because enrollment has dropped and administrators won't know until the fall how many children they will have. She declined to say how many teachers were laid off in recent days.

Aside from money problems, both Holt and former principal Russell Stamper, a reserve Milwaukee County circuit judge, believe Harambee lost parent control. Some critics, including Holt, claim parents no longer have a voice on the school board.

Both Holt and Donald, who formerly served on Harambee's development board, believe Harambee will overcome its internal problems. But Holt is skeptical that the present board will be able to deal with the school's finances.

"We all were on this quest to create future black leaders in Milwaukee," Holt said. "And that meant if we had to sacrifice, if we couldn't have the latest computers so that we could bring in the best teachers possible, then that's what we did."

Robinson contends that Harambee remains on solid ground despite its troubles.

"I think what we're doing now is rebuilding," she said. "We had our past problems. We've corrected them, and teachers have not missed a paycheck."

The voucher program is a case study for what can happen in the absence of public scrutiny, Holt said. Voucher schools, like Harambee, are not required to let state officials - or anyone else - see their books.

"We wanted to prove that we could educate our own through this vehicle called Harambee Community School," he said. "We'd go above and beyond to make sure our kids got a quality education."

"But there's some distance between that mission today - between that and what the mission or direction of the board is today."

Urban Day School

The primary campus of Urban Day School on 24th St. is hemmed in by a parking lot on one side and St. Michael's Catholic Church on the other. It's cramped, no doubt. But the faculty and students there have a broad sense of what makes school choice valuable: parental involvement and an emphasis on achievement.

The Urban Day 4-year-old kindergarten program is accredited by the North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and School Improvements, one of the few K-4 programs in the state with that distinction.

At its annual science fair in May, students in grades one through eight competed for the top prize: a \$50 savings bond. The fair drew more than two dozen parents and volunteers to judge the 86 science projects.

Glen Diamante, 12, a seventh-grader, grew patches of grass in plastic containers. His hypothesis: Using a name-brand or generic fertilizer would produce the same results. He concluded there was no difference. Roberta Boose, a sixth-grader, also 12, wanted to know what makes volcanoes erupt. Her red, green and yellow clay model of a volcano surrounded by valleys was bolstered by one tablespoon of baking soda, a dash of dishwashing liquid and a quarter cup of water.

The science fair, with its parent and community volunteers, is what parents have come to expect at Urban Day.

State Rep. Annette Polly Williams, the Democratic legislator who crossed party lines in 1989 to sponsor the initial bill for voucher schools, sent all four of her children to the school.

Williams said her intent, mostly hewed from her experiences as a board member and active parent at Urban Day, was to use school choice to give parents of color an advantage.

"I liked the idea that the focus was going to be placed on the needs of the children, as opposed to the needs of the bureaucracy.

"I used to beat up on public schools, but I don't do that now. What I wanted to see was the public schools address more of the needs of the students. It wasn't doing that before choice, but I think it's beginning to do it now."

Urban Day was offering an alternative long before the voucher school program began. But the flow of public money into the school has taken some of the pressure off fund-raising and allowed the school to channel more energy into its curriculum and programs, officials say.

John Plantenberg, a Kansas City, Mo., shoe company executive who was hired in February as the school's new president, said what choice really needs to survive is accountability.

"What we'd like to see is more collaboration between elementary and secondary educational institutions and less of a competitive feeling," Plantenberg said. "This marketplace has been rife with that. It's driven politically. But I don't think our politicians serve us well when they fan the fires. The mission is education, not finances."

Nevertheless, finances are what run facilities and programs, and the approximately \$6,000 per child that the state provides Urban Day for its 475 students in K-4 through eighth grade is never enough to pay all the bills. School officials say they would need about \$9,000 a child to do that.

Bruce Guadalupe School

Increasing its flow of money was one of the primary reasons Bruce Guadalupe pulled away from the voucher program in 2000 and opted to become a charter school under Milwaukee Public Schools.

As the income of Hispanic families in the neighborhood improved in the 1990s, about a third of its students were no longer eligible for vouchers. The reimbursement provided to MPS charter schools was about \$1,000 more per child, and every child qualifies. That spurred board members of Bruce Guadalupe to switch, said Ricardo Diaz, executive director of the United Community Center, the agency that oversees the school.

"We've got to go every single year and prove ourselves," Diaz said. "I think you stay sharper that way. We've got to respond to a number of constituencies, including parents involved in the school who may not be able to write you a check, but they vote with their feet in terms of the fact that they can go anywhere else."

About 97% of the students at Bruce Guadalupe return each year, according to Diaz. It has one of the highest rates of returning students in the state. Ninety-eight percent of parents are involved in the school in one way or another.

The school shows progress in achievement. Its reading scores on the Wisconsin Comprehensive Reading Test for third-graders rose from 67% in 2002 to 95% this year. The state's average score for third-grade reading was 87.4%. School officials credit the growth to consistency of staff, low student turnover and mandatory summer school and after-school programs. In 2006, the school is planning to add a 3-year-old kindergarten. It has both elementary and middle schools.

Bruce Guadalupe has the feel of a suburban school. Last month, its fourth-graders gathered in the school's auditorium for the annual visit from the traveling program of the Milwaukee County Zoo. Chinchillas were among animals on display.

Those kinds of exhibits are not out of the ordinary for the school, Diaz said.

Its after-school and summer school programs are mandatory and closed to children who are not enrolled in the school. Parental involvement is mandatory - part of a pledge parents agree to when they sign up.

"It's because we choose to totally focus in on education," Diaz said. "It's the only issue. If we're going to get kids to go to more challenging high schools, we need to give them an elementary base so that they can compete, because a diploma from (Rufus) King is different than one from South Division."

About 60% of the children who graduate from Bruce Guadalupe attend private high schools, including Marquette, Thomas More, Messmer, St. Joan Antida and Dominican.

Bruce Guadalupe also offers students something many choice schools cannot: Top-tier students who graduate from the school have a third of their high school tuition paid for by the school. Last year, Bruce Guadalupe spent about \$24,000 on graduating eighth-graders. This year, it will spend \$48,000.

"This is about the future of the city," Diaz said. "Until we get 5,000 or so college graduates every year for the next 20 years in Milwaukee, this town will not be a first-class city."

Change likely

Fifteen years after its launch, Milwaukee's pioneering private school voucher program is like Bruce Guadalupe School: It is vibrant, growing and sometimes excellent.

The program is also like Urban Day School: It is working hard but struggling to make progress in educating the city's children.

And the program is like Harambee: It has schools where even good intentions and promise have led to troubling - even alarming - results.

The voucher program plowed new ground in American education but produced little information about what is growing there.

It brought satisfaction to many parents who like the idea of having private school options, who want religious schools for their children, who want the small classes and intimacy that many of the voucher schools offer. It has shaken up the status quo for all schools in the city.

But the warts - in the form of problem schools that parents continue to select, year after year - have persisted. And given the great range in quality among the 115 schools in the voucher program and the small amount of data about student performance, no one knows whether vouchers help address the urgent need for a better educated generation of urban school children.

Like a teenager growing up, the voucher program itself now will probably change.

Even some advocates for vouchers are focused on the need to improve the quality of some schools. Other changes could come from the Legislature, regulators, or the grass roots where the schools and their students operate.

But amid the continuing controversies over the future of the program, it seems that vouchers are here to stay.

"The schools that have solid programs are going to be the ones that survive," said Sister Virgine Lawinger, the former principal of Urban Day, who is actively involved in the school and its affairs. "I sometimes wonder what the answers would be if you asked the parents what they wanted. I think they would say, 'We want to raise our children in safety and see that they get a good education.' Universally, that's what they want.

"They can be fooled for a while, but they can't be fooled for very long. They'll know if their children are learning."

Still, parents have not always known whether they've chosen schools that are faltering or rising toward excellence - and neither has the broader public.

The future of vouchers, as well as the future of urban education in the country, depends on reaching clearer and better answers.