

## School Voucher Proposals

Urban Institute, Jane Hannaway

**MR. NNAMDI:** From WAMU at American University in Washington, this is Public Interest. I'm Kojo Nnamdi.

These days it seems everyone is talking about school voucher programs. Presidential hopeful George W. Bush is touting national support for voucher programs. Voters in California and Michigan will get to cast ballots on voucher initiatives in November. And some 25 state legislatures around the country

are currently considering voucher bills. But ask anyone, and they'll tell you that Milwaukee, Wisconsin, is ground zero in America's experiment with market driven school reform. About 10 years ago, that city gave tuition vouchers to some 300 low income students for use of private schools. But, because of legal challenges, the program stayed pretty small until just two years ago. Once the legal battle ended, and the dust from it cleared, private religious schools won the right to be included in the Milwaukee parental choice program. So, during this broadcast, when you hear people say, MPCP, that's what they're referring to. The Milwaukee Parent Choice Program.

The legislature improved funding levels, and now nearly 8,000 students in Milwaukee use publicly-funded vouchers to attend private schools. As part of our continuing series with the Urban Institute on America's cities, we're going to try to get out of the pro/con debate on school vouchers, and try to present you with as many facts and as much analysis as possible.

And joining us to do that in our Washington studio is Jane Hannaway. She is the director of the education policy center with the Urban Institute. Jane, good to see you again.

**MS. HANNAWAY:** Nice to see you, Kojo.

**MR. NNAMDI:** Joining us from the studios of WUWM in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, is Emily Van Dunk, senior researcher with Milwaukee's Public Policy Forum.

Emily Van Dunk, welcome.

**MS. VAN DUNK:** Nice to be here, Kojo.

**MR. NNAMDI:** And joining us from the studios of the Radio Foundation in New York City is Joe Williams. Joe is a former education reporter for the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel up until last year. He's currently a reporter with the New York Daily News.

Joe, we were glad you were around Milwaukee for the 10 years or so we need to look at. Thank you for joining us, Joe.

**MR. WILLIAMS:** Good to be here.

**MR. NNAMDI:** Joe, Milwaukee's program, as we said, now in its 10th year, but I understand it's only recently expanded from the small pilot program to a program that now some 15 percent of Milwaukee's students participate in. Can you tell us a little bit about how the program works?

**MR. WILLIAMS:** Sure. And it hasn't quite reached 15 percent. That's what the cap is on the number of students who could participate. Basically, it's a program that allows low income families to receive taxpayer assistance in paying for private school tuition, if that's the type of education they'd like to select for their children. As you said, this was a completely different beast when this was a—when we're just talking about private schools, and when it was expanded to parochial schools, when the state supreme court ruled on the constitutionality of the program, it really took on a life of its own. It was able to grow a lot more quickly, simply because the capacity, and primarily Catholic and Lutheran schools was much greater. There just wasn't

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enough non-religious private schools for this program to have any kind of size before.

**MR. NNAMDI:** Emily Van Dunk, Joe says that it's for low income children, which means presumably that not all students or all schools are eligible to participate. What are the income restrictions?

**MS. VAN DUNK:** A family's income needs to be at 175 percent of the federal poverty level or below to be able to qualify. And that would be the household income for the current year.

**MR. NNAMDI:** And what options are there available to students and parents within that?

**MS. VAN DUNK:** This past year, which we have the most recent data, there were 91 private schools in Milwaukee that participated. About 67 of those were religious schools, and the rest were non-religious. And so there was quite a variety of options this past year after the expansion.

**MR. NNAMDI:** But it's my understanding that about 60 percent of the students in the program only participate in about 18 schools despite the availability of 91. Is that correct?

**MS. VAN DUNK:** There is a heavy concentration in enrollment in a number of schools. And so the concentration is about 50 percent attend 18 different schools, so you're right. They are larger schools, several of those have been in the program the longest, and they have a large number of students.

**MR. NNAMDI:** Jane Hannaway, the voucher programs being proposed in a number of states and localities around the country, but a lot of them very substantially, it is my understanding, from the model in Milwaukee. Tell us a little bit about the basic types of vouchers programs that are currently being considered.

**MS. HANNAWAY:** There are two initiatives on the ballot right now, one in California, and one in Michigan, and they differ substantially from each other. The one in California is a fairly open ended program. All students in the state are eligible, whether or not they're currently even in private school already, with no income criteria. In Michigan, there are special criteria that have to be met in order to be eligible to get a voucher. You have to be in a school district where less than two thirds of the kids are graduating, and there are about 55 such school districts in Michigan. So in Michigan it's really targeted towards low performing school districts.

**MR. NNAMDI:** But in neither California, nor Michigan, it would appear, are there income restrictions.

**MS. HANNAWAY:** Not income restrictions, but in Michigan, those 55 districts tend to be districts that serve mainly low income kids. Then we have Florida, where Florida there is law on the books already, and there kids get vouchers if they're going to a school that's deemed to be a failing school. And, again, with that criteria, it tends to target low income kids.

**MR. NNAMDI:** Any potential federal role in all of this?

**MS. HANNAWAY:** I don't see where, unless Bush is elected, and then he will have his own proposals with federal money. But I can't see how the federal government would get involved other than through the Supreme Court, of course.

**MR. NNAMDI:** Some recent studies of small voucher programs around the country indicate that they're successful because they show academic improvement in individual students who are transferred from public school systems into a private school. One recent study citing both New York City and the District of Columbia. But do those studies necessarily mean that voucher programs work, Jane?

**MS. HANNAWAY:** Well, let me say something about the findings, per se. I think the way you've stated it may be a little bit overstated. Mathematica, for example, who was a partner in that New York study, has come out qualifying how those findings should be interpreted. I think what's been found in all these small voucher studies is that for some kids at some grade level in some subject, there have been significant gains. But there have not been the general across the board gains. But I think more generally, none of them, regardless of their findings, really evaluate the effective of voucher policy. Voucher policy is premised on the idea that it would introduce competition into the public school system, and that through competition, both public schools as well as private schools would improve. And none of the programs so far have been large enough to really generate that sort of competition.

**MR. NNAMDI:** Do you feel that in the final analysis that is how the broad citizenry and our legislators should evaluate the programs because, so far, as you've pointed out, what we've been seeing is the individual successes of individual students.

**MS. HANNAWAY:** Well, I think it has to be, Kojo, because otherwise all the programs so far are evaluating is the relative performance of existing private schools with existing public schools not facing high levels of competition. And if we're talking about a voucher system, we're really changing the whole dynamics of the system, and so it has to be evaluated that way.

**MR. NNAMDI:** Joe Williams, it's my understanding that the legislation that created the Milwaukee voucher program doesn't include requirements for evaluating the program's success, correct?

**MR. WILLIAMS:** Not at this point. When it was expanded to include the religious schools, that part was removed from the legislation.

**MR. NNAMDI:** What's the politics, why?

**MR. WILLIAMS:** I'm not sure. It's been—it has been baffling, and it has been somewhat frustrating. From the journalist perspective, you'd like to be able to describe how well it is or isn't working. One of the things,

though, that I think is different in Milwaukee—this has been up and running for some time compared to some of the national discussions is—this in the last 10 years has moved very much away from a question on whether public schools are better, or private schools are better, and focusing more on who gets to decide which type of education is best for each child, university professors and newspaper editorial boards, school administrators, or a parent. It's sort of had this evolution over time that a lot of the discussions you hear in terms of presidential candidates and whatnot, Milwaukee has sort of moved beyond that overtime. It's a program that's just sort of quietly existing. I think the question you ask about how we look back and evaluate this, and I know Emily has done work in this area, is an important one. If it's going to be test scores, as Jane said as well, are we talking about test scores for the public schools, because this was sold as a way to improve the education systems in the community, or is it just students participating, or is there a better way than test scores to even evaluate this.

I know a lot of this is based on parental satisfaction, and that may be fine for the parents involved, although I think a lot of taxpayers would like to see a little more than just a survey on how happy you are to be in the program.

**MR. NNAMDI:** Indeed, Emily Van Dunk, if the Milwaukee program doesn't include requirements for evaluation, it doesn't create really strict benchmarks for a city government or for taxpayers to measure the program's success, but, again, I ask the question, why not?

**MS. VAN DUNK:** I think there is probably a lot of different answers to why not, including in the evaluation, in this last expansion of the legislation. Part of that could be based on the controversy that came up during the first five years of Milwaukee's choice program. There were evaluations based on standardized test scores, and different academics looking at the results came to different conclusions. And I think there was a sense, unless we get a better way of measuring this, we're not ready to include that in the legislation.

Also, there is a desire by policymakers to have private schools remain independent. And, therefore, by requiring of specific standardized exam, especially the Wisconsin standardized exams, that the rest of the public schools in this state take, we would therefore maybe be stepping in and requiring them to teach or do the test, per se.

**MR. NNAMDI:** So if there are different standards for public schools and private schools that seem to obstruct a uniform evaluation, it would appear that as Joe pointed out, we are stumbling forward in this process on the basis of what the press says, or on the basis of what one politician says, or on the basis of what some parents feel. Is that correct?

**MS. VAN DUNK:** I think there is a perspective by some individuals that really desire to answer the question, does this make a difference academically. And I have heard people say that if it doesn't, then why are we bothering to do it. And so I think that there is a real sense of wanting to know the standardized test score increases of kids in choice versus kids that don't take a voucher.

And, on the other hand, there's another set of people that really focus on something else, Joe, and I think Jane mentioned this program in many ways was designed to empower parents who may not otherwise have a choice to select a school that their child goes to. And, in doing that, they should be the ones to judge whether or not that works. Does that settle the debate? No, because obviously this is a taxpayer funded program, and taxpayers are very interested in knowing whether it works.

**MS. HANNAWAY:** The ironic thing, though, is, if you look across the country right now, states are requiring public schools to test their students and publicize those results. So it is an odd situation where you have the State of Wisconsin not requiring testing of students in the program.

**MR. NNAMDI:** Jane Hannaway is director of the Education Policy Center with the Urban Institute. She joins us in our Washington studio. Emily Van Dunk is a senior researcher with Milwaukee's Public Policy Forum, she joins us from studios in Milwaukee. And Joe Williams is a former education reporter for the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. He's currently with the New York Daily News. He joins us from studios in New York City.

You, too, can join us by calling 1-800-433-8850. We're going to take a short break. We'll be right back.

**MR. NNAMDI:** Welcome back to our conversation on school vouchers, a conversation you can join emailing us at [pi@wamu.org](mailto:pi@wamu.org), or calling us at 1-800-433-8850.

Jane Hannaway, are there any lessons to be learned from the Milwaukee experiment, for instance, have California or Florida built accountability and evaluation standards into their legislation? How are other jurisdictions maybe planning to measure other programs' success, or are they planning to go the way Milwaukee went?

**MS. HANNAWAY:** Actually, the Florida program, interestingly enough, is part of the state's accountability system. So all the public schools in Florida are subjected to testing, and it's those schools that have been deemed as failing where the kids go on to private school. Then the kids that take the voucher and do go on are required to stay with the testing program, so that their performance can be evaluated after the fact.

**MR. NNAMDI:** Joe and Emily, back to Milwaukee again, if there are no clear evaluation processes for measuring whether the program is a success or a failure, how are parents expected to make good decisions, and how are parents making decisions in that process? First you, Joe?

**MR. WILLIAMS:** Well, I think the issue that we just talked about with test scores, and public schools being required to take tests and have the results publicized, parents at this point that want to participate in this program are in a position to ask a private school "I'd like to see your test scores." As a reporter that wasn't

enough for me. I wanted to see how a lot of private schools were performing. But in this case, if a test score is what you want as a parent, you have the ability to go and ask for it, and if you don't get it, you just don't select that school.

A lot of the parents that I talked to, though, that were participating in the program over the years, none of them mentioned academics as the reason, or few of them mentioned academics as the reason, or test scores as the reason they were selecting a school. Usually parents tended to have some kind of bad experience in the past with the Milwaukee Public Schools, whether when they were students themselves, or when their older children were in school, and were simply looking for an alternative. Other people wanted a school that was closer to their home than their public school.

**MR. NNAMDI:** Was safety ever mentioned as a factor?

**MR. WILLIAMS:** It was, especially in terms of walking, students walking to school. If there was a school close to their home where they wouldn't have to cross busy intersections, that was mentioned often. You would find students—families who weren't Catholic sending their kids to a Catholic school, not because they wanted a Catholic education, but because it was a school at the end of their block, and they felt comfortable with their son or daughter being in the neighborhood to go to school, rather than getting on a bus and going across town.

**MR. NNAMDI:** Emily, we talked earlier about some 60 percent of the students being in 18 schools. What is it that is common to those 18 schools that caused them to attract such large numbers of students, size?

**MS. VAN DUNK:** I think size is primarily it. I wanted to touch back on something you had raised that is very interesting to what we do at the forum. One of the questions is, obviously, how do parents who are now shoppers get information on these schools, compare schools, and go about selecting them?

**MR. NNAMDI:** Because they don't get it from the public school system in Milwaukee, do they?

**MS. VAN DUNK:** We have a tremendous amount of information on our public schools in Milwaukee and the metro area. We actually have rankings down to school building level, if parents are interested in that. But what we did at the forum is when we were gathering data for our research purposes on schools, we realized that parents didn't have this information. So as a new step we took this information and tried to make it user-friendly for parents, printed out 3,000 of what we call Choice Posters and put them in public libraries. So parents who were interested at least could have some basic information on who these schools are, how big they are, where they're located, do they provide transportation, do they have before and after school care, how many choice kids are in the program, how many teachers do they have, et cetera. And that is really the only information that is out there in a comparable form that allows cross comparisons.

**MR. NNAMDI:** Because, as I said earlier, the information about the availability of the voucher option for parents in Milwaukee does not come from the public school system itself, correct?

**MS. VAN DUNK:** Exactly. The public school system is not connected with this program. They receive a number of phone calls from parents who are looking for information. And they actually refer them now, oftentimes, to the forum. We talk with parents almost on a daily basis. And this, again, is something that grew out of the forum. We're actually a research organization, but we find ourselves talking with parent shoppers almost on a daily basis.

**MR. NNAMDI:** Jane Hannaway, is it logical and reasonable to expect public school systems, many of whose major administrators and employees feel that these voucher programs are unfair competition, is it reasonable to expect a public school system to provide parents with that information?

**MS. HANNAWAY:** No, I don't think it really is. These schools really are the competition for public schools, and jobs are threatened. I think public schools have a responsibility to show how well their own schools are doing, but I don't think they have a responsibility to market the competition.

**MR. NNAMDI:** Joe, you're a parent, when you lived in Milwaukee how did you make your decision.

**MR. WILLIAMS:** Well, I am a parent. My wife and I both have jobs that allowed us to be in a position to look at private schools and paying the tuition ourselves if we wanted to. We chose a Milwaukee Public School for our son, not because we were gung-ho public school, or gung-ho private school kind of people, but we just felt it was the best. It was a good school and a good choice for us to make.

We did a lot of research, and as an education reporter I had quick access to a lot of information that most parents don't have. But, my wife and I spent a lot of time going to schools, visiting, talking to principals and teachers, and other parents, and we made our decision, we were happy with it. That is one of the things we miss most about Milwaukee at this point, is our son's school.

**MR. NNAMDI:** Emily, the numbers I've been looking at indicate that many of the students now attending private schools on the voucher program in Milwaukee were already attending those private schools prior to the creation of the voucher program. Is that true?

**MS. VAN DUNK:** About 38 percent of the students that were in the program, in the most recent year where we have data, were already enrolled in the private school. Most of those students were students who were receiving a private scholarship that was available before the program expanded into religious schools. That scholarship was also income based, so when the program was expanded they were automatically switched over to vouchers in many of those schools.

**MR. NNAMDI:** Does that in some way, Jane Hannaway, undercut the objectives of a program, if almost half or at least more than one-third of the students participating in it were already in the private schools? That means that there are 38 percent less students coming over from the public schools into those private schools?

**MS. HANNAWAY:** Well, Milwaukee hasn't reached the limit, I think, of the 15 percent, I think it is, of Milwaukee.

**MS. VAN DUNK:** Less than 10 percent.

**MS. HANNAWAY:** Less than 10 percent. So clearly the demand isn't as great as you would expect. I'm not sure what the supply side looks like, the availability in classrooms.

**MR. WILLIAMS:** There's not much left.

**MS. HANNAWAY:** It's pretty much near its limit. And that's one of the big issues with all these voucher programs. If you look at California it's a big issue there too, where will the supply—if we do have a wide-spread voucher program, like in Florida that's being proposed, and California and Michigan, where will those seats come from, where will the supply of schools come from, and that's a major question that research to date has not been able to address.

**MR. NNAMDI:** Well, how about schools that seem to crop up over night, some of them existing largely on paper as a response to the availability of vouchers. It's my understanding that some places, it may have been Milwaukee, there was a guy who had several hundred students enrolled in a program and had no facility existing. It was just paper, and he actually got money to do this. There is here the potential for fraud, isn't there?

**MS. HANNAWAY:** Well, there's potential for a lot of things to go on, that's right, Kojo. And I think we don't know what the full range is yet, and it's one of the reasons that I think we really do need a close look at these programs as they grow and evolve to see exactly what the schools are that will emerge. If you look across the country, the largest fraction of kids in non-public schools are in Catholic schools. Catholic schools are an institution that has evolved over a century. And we really don't know what the new supply of schools will look like. They could be terrific or they could be real duds.

**MR. NNAMDI:** I guess we should point out that Milwaukee has what seems to be hundreds of educational options for parents, there's the voucher program, we mentioned the MSCP, there are charter schools, there's open enrollment, there's inter-district suburban integration that's called Chapter 220. All of these things operating at the same time, Emily, I guess, makes it difficult, even more difficult to evaluate exactly the impact that vouchers are having.

**MS. VAN DUNK:** Absolutely. I think that Milwaukee has been labeled, as you said earlier in the program, as ground zero for school choice, and that is because it not only has those programs you mentioned, but we also have today a program of choice within the public school system itself called a three-choice selection process where parents can participate in January in selecting the public school their child will attend within the city of Milwaukee.

So there's a wide variety and when it comes down to evaluating the different programs it depends on the data available. We can evaluate public schools on the outcome data, very good outcome data, and we can look at all kinds of different indicators. It becomes limited when we look at some of the private schools, trying to look at outcome data. We do have some input variables for private schools that we can compare, though.

**MR. NNAMDI:** Joining us now by telephone is Glenda Johnson.

Ms. Johnson, welcome.

**MS. JOHNSON:** Thank you.

**MR. NNAMDI:** Glenda Johnson, you have three kids. Two are enrolled in private, religious schools using the private voucher program, the other is enrolled in a Milwaukee Public School. Tell us how you made your decisions?

**MS. JOHNSON:** I basically did a lot of homework, research, trying to decide which school I wanted my daughter to stay in, would it be Milwaukee Public School, or Catholic school. MPS, Milwaukee Public Schools are going through a lot of changes right now, they are cutting, cutting, cutting. The art program has been cut, the music program has been cut, the para-professionals that work in the classroom with the teachers, their hours have been cut. So it was like a decision that I had to make to make sure that my daughter received the education that I feel she needs at this time.

**MR. NNAMDI:** Nevertheless, despite all these programs being cut, your middle son still attends a Milwaukee Public School. Why did you make that choice?

**MS. JOHNSON:** Because Catholic school—the other two are in Catholic school, and Catholic schools don't have the tools to give children that have special needs their therapies and stuff. So my middle son is in special education, and Catholic schools say they don't have the funding to make sure that they receive their occupational therapy, physical therapy, so on, and so forth. So therefore, he's still in MPS.

**MR. NNAMDI:** Well, now that your son is in a public school and your daughters are in Catholic schools, we said at the beginning of this broadcast, Glenda Johnson, that one of the purposes of voucher programs is to lead public schools to improve by being more competitive. You're talking about public schools just cutting all these programs, at your own son's public school have you seen any improvement that may have come as a

result of the competition with the private school?

**MS. JOHNSON:** No, I have not, none. It's the same thing, you know, the same.

**MR. NNAMDI:** Before this voucher program was available, were you for it or against it?

**MS. JOHNSON:** It was sort of like 50/50. I wasn't for it, I wasn't against it, you know, because I had to pay for my son to go to school. Yes, there was a scholarship, but the scholarship only paid half, the other half was coming out of my pocket. And for two years I had to pay the whole scholarship. So there it is.

**MR. NNAMDI:** This is Public Interest, I'm Kojo Nnamdi.

Emily Van Dunk, we hear from Glenda Johnson how an individual parent makes a decision that she believes is to the benefit of her kids. Does that help us at all in making some evaluation about whether or not the thing is working?

**MS. VAN DUNK:** Unless we're able to collect enough data, and interview enough parents to understand what it is that motivates them in making their decisions, we have anecdotal stories, some really rich anecdotal stories, stories that I think policymakers ought to listen to, but overall if you ask me based on the information that I have now if that level continued over the next five years could I tell you if this program worked or didn't work, I couldn't, and I don't know of a researcher who could.

**MR. NNAMDI:** Glenda Johnson, if your son did not have special needs, would he be going to a public school?

**MS. JOHNSON:** No, he would not.

**MR. NNAMDI:** So clearly, this one parent has made a choice in favor. Have you seen any significant difference in your daughter's education since they have been in private school, were they ever in public school?

**MS. JOHNSON:** Yes, my daughter was in public school, and yes I have seen a difference in her. They start off with Spanish in K-4, she's doing more. It's just—it's different. I'm not knocking MPS, I know that there are good MPS schools, Milwaukee Public Schools, as well as good Catholic schools here in Milwaukee, but I think MPS needs to really buckle down and focus more on the children and what they need to accomplish, so that the children can accomplish what they need to live a successful life.

**MR. NNAMDI:** Glenda Johnson, thank you very much for joining us.

**MS. JOHNSON:** Thanks.

**MR. NNAMDI:** Glenda Johnson is a parent in Milwaukee who thankfully cooperated with us, and agreed to join us on this broadcast.

Thank you, once again, for joining us.

**MS. JOHNSON:** And thank you.

**MR. NNAMDI:** Jane Hannaway, so we get back to the problem. The basic notion, one of the basic notions behind these voucher programs was they're supposed to force public schools to improve their offerings through competition. How do school systems generally go about trying to do that?

**MS. HANNAWAY:** We don't know, Kojo. I mean, we're in the field now in Florida, this is research that the Urban Institute, myself and Dan Goldhaber a terrific colleague of mine, and C.C. Riuz at Princeton, and David Figlio at the University of Florida getting baseline data, large scale baseline data, we have surveys in every public school in Florida. We have a survey about to go out to parents. We've surveyed teachers and school districts, trying to get this baseline so that we can try to get a handle on how systems will respond to competition when and if the Florida program gets up and running. But, at this point there is very little data on system-level effects of vouchers and competition.

**MR. NNAMDI:** Joe Williams, listening to Glenda Johnson, it seems we get some anecdotal evidence of how systems are responding to declining resources. Are those resources declining because they're being funneled away to vouchers and to charter schools?

**MR. WILLIAMS:** That's been a subject of a lot of debate over time. Certainly, you can make the argument that the money that's going into vouchers and charter schools is money that otherwise could have been spent in the public schools. I think though that the history of this is that the Milwaukee Public Schools still has a lot of proving to do to legislators that they're already doing the best with the money that they have. And I think some of this past year's budget cycle for the Milwaukee Public Schools was tough, and it has more to do with state imposed spending limits than it does with the money that's going to charter schools, or the choice program.

And there's no doubt that the district has had to make some very difficult decisions about what kind of things they want to keep, and what kind of things they want to do away with. I think a lot of the kind of cuts that are there are doing exactly what Ms. Johnson said, though, it's focusing on what it is that the district needs to do to meet the needs of students. And anything that's outside of the immediate focus there is just extra.

**MR. NNAMDI:** Joe Williams is a reporter formally with the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, currently with the New York Daily News. He joins us from New York. Emily Van Dunk is with Milwaukee's Public Policy Forum. She joins us from Milwaukee. And Jane Hannaway is director of the Education Policy Center with the Urban Institute. She is in our Washington studio.

You can join us at 1-800-433-8850, first we take this short break.

**MR. NNAMDI:** On Public Interest, we're continuing our series on America's cities with the Urban Institute of Washington, and we're getting ready to go to the telephones, but Jane Hannaway, I guess one of the most frustrating aspects of this debate is, here we are talking about a program in Milwaukee that's been around for 10 years, and yet we can't put our hands on any significant statistical research, any empirical data that can help us clearly one way or the other. Why does it take so long?

**MS. HANNAWAY:** Lack of support, lack of support for research. Now, there was research that was done when the program was small. John Witte came out with a study, and Paul Peterson, and then Cecilia Rouse came out with a study. And while they did disagree, I think we learned a lot from those studies. But it's when the Milwaukee program was very small. I think it's a crime that this state is not evaluating this program in order that the rest of the country can learn from it.

**MR. NNAMDI:** Emily Van Dunk, it's something that you must feel more personally than the rest of us, since you are involved in the research business?

**MS. VAN DUNK:** Absolutely. We have done our best in every aspect of gathering data to be thorough, to learn more about this program. We can tell you a lot about what administrators think, we can tell you about what parents think. We can tell you a lot about what they're looking for in school, but we really can't tell you if the program makes a difference in academic achievement.

**MR. NNAMDI:** Allow me to go to the telephones starting with Janet in Gilford, Connecticut. Janet, you're on the air, go ahead, please.

**QUESTION:** Hi. Yes, I have a question. First I want to preface it with some experience. I grew up in St. Louis where we had busing that came in when I was in high school. And then, later on, 20 years later, my kids experienced young children being bussed into their very young school, and there were some problems with busing, which seems very clear. And the benefits weren't as clear.

And now, I live in Connecticut, and there is a lot of political pressure talking about coming up and bringing busing into Connecticut to alleviate discrepancies between school availabilities. And they don't seem to be looking a lot at what happened in St. Louis. I think the Supreme Court finally declared busing a failure, correct me if I'm wrong, I'm not a researcher.

**MR. NNAMDI:** Well, they've certainly got you urging them to look at the St. Louis experience, Janet.

**QUESTION:** Right. And then the next thing that I wanted to say is, it seems as though there's not a lot of research from this policy that you've implemented so far, data being gathered, and yet I think I've heard, rather than just casually, around that New Zealand has implemented a pretty much countrywide system of vouchers. And they found that it tended to enrich the schools that were chosen, and to impoverish the schools that were not, and has created a polarization. And that it has tended to create a sense of a problem, created a new problem, and it didn't necessarily solve the old one.

And I wanted to know if any of the panelists there have looked at New Zealand and seen differences of similarities between what New Zealand did and what they're doing, and if it's possible even to compare the two?

**MR. NNAMDI:** Okay, Janet. Any look at New Zealand at all, Jane?

**MS. HANNAWAY:** I can give you a reference. Helen Ladd, "Sunny" Ladd at Duke University and her husband Ted Fiske have a book, I think it's published by Harvard University Press, looking at New Zealand, and I don't feel quite up on it to be able to summarize its findings, but that's the reference.

**MR. NNAMDI:** But, Jane, you raise an intriguing issue domestically also. Joe Williams, Emily Van Dunk, any indication at all that the voucher program in the City of Milwaukee is leading to the stratification of schools along income or racial or ethnic lines?

**MS. VAN DUNK:** The program in Milwaukee is a targeted program, so that you have to be defined as a low income family. You must reside within the city limits of Milwaukee. Therefore, when John Woody gathered the most extensive data on the previous students, he found that it was low income, mainly, students that were not doing tremendously well in school. There wasn't the kind of creaming going on. If that was continuing with this new set of data, we obviously have expanded the program; it's three times as big as it was. Then we would say that there wasn't this creaming, this segregation going on in the program. But, again, it is important to note that this a targeted program to a set of families in Milwaukee.

**MR. NNAMDI:** Joe Williams, even though maybe statistics don't indicate segregation, perception is everything. As a reporter, can you tell us a little bit about what the perception is in Milwaukee about that?

**MR. WILLIAMS:** Well, I don't. I think—I don't think that that's the—if anything, I think people perceive this as a program that's giving an opportunity to low income students that otherwise wouldn't have that opportunity. I think there are certainly concerns about what this does to the racial makeup of the public schools and the private schools, and I think it's going to take some time to see what that means.

Your caller, though, it's ironic that she brought up the issue of busing, because I think that has a lot to do with the voucher program in Milwaukee. The grassroots kind of people, like Representative Annette Polly Williams, inner city black parents that were fighting for this weren't getting together saying, let's do vouchers because we think it's going to improve test scores. They didn't say, let's do this because we think it's going to

improve the public schools. They said, let's do this because we've had an entire generation of students in the inner city who we don't feel have been getting a fair shake from our public school system. And a lot of that has to do with how they feel they were treated when Milwaukee instituted its own busing program for the purposes of racial balance in the schools. And the two are tied very closely to each other in Milwaukee anyway.

**MR. NNAMDI:** Okay. Let's get back to the telephone. Here's Horst in Columbia, Missouri. Horst, you're on the air, go ahead, please.

**QUESTION:** Yes. Do any of your panelists, are they acquainted with this book by David Berliner and Bruce Biddle, *The Manufactured Crisis*? Anyway, I wanted to quote, they quote in the book, they quote Charlie Reese, a columnist for the *Orlando Sentinel*, who is an avowedly conservative. But part of his reading—I mean, part of his column, it was written in 1993. He says: "If a public school is underfinanced, finance it properly. If it is unsafe, make it safe. That's the proper commitment every American should make to every child in the United States." And then he refers to the Kemp-Bennett crowd in their words: "Let the wealthy flee, but let the middle class subsidize them, and let the poor suffer because they don't vote for us high tone Republicans anyway."

Anyway, that's who they quote in this book. And I'll listen off the air.

**MR. NNAMDI:** Okay, Horst. Thank you for your call.

Jane, care to comment on that at all?

**MS. HANNAWAY:** Well, I think there are some real accountability issues here. The question is, what happens when schools aren't performing? And I think if you look at the data on student performance in the United States, the most distressing part of the picture you see are these huge disparities in the performance between minority kids in cities and their white suburban counterparts. And many of these voucher programs, I think Joe was talking about this, have an equity rationale beneath them that are giving kids who are in schools that by standard criteria do not seem to be performing well an option to do something else.

**MR. NNAMDI:** I got an email from Joy in Charlotte, North Carolina, who asks the **QUESTION:** do the private schools that accept vouchers have to take any student regardless of educational needs, special education, ADHD, inadequate preparation? Well, we know in the case of Milwaukee having heard the testimony of Glenda that they don't necessarily have to take children with special education needs.

But, Emily, Joe, do the private schools that accept vouchers have to take all students who apply regardless of academic aptitude or performance?

**MS. VAN DUNK:** Yes. There is, technically, in the way the legislation is written, there can't be screening based on private, previous academic or behavioral performance in the schools.

**MR. NNAMDI:** And, Joy also asks, do these students have to accept any number of students, or can they cap enrollment to preserve their student/teacher ratios?

**MS. VAN DUNK:** They can. They determine, they send to DPI how many kids they're going to be taking. But the schools independently do their own selection enrollment process. It's probably the most confusing and the place where the legislative law bureau has said, we really need to take a look at it. There is no central place that processes these applications. Each school does it in and of themselves. There are at least 35 different enrollment periods, and parents find it incredibly confusing, and there is some room for error there in whether or not everything is being followed exactly as it's supposed to be.

**MR. NNAMDI:** Joe, I heard the sound of you nodding in agreement.

**MR. WILLIAMS:** It's extremely confusing. I chalk that up to really just being in the first few years of the expanded program here. This is the kind of thing, if somebody at the state level decides it's important enough, and people have, as Emily has pointed out, an audit done last year noted that this was something that needed some work. It's the kind of thing that competent people are going to be able to work with these schools to work out a better enrollment process. I think there was so much concern in the beginning about doing everything so that everything is still constitutional, that everyone was really looking over their shoulder about random selection, and things like that, because it's an important part of this that the integrity of the program depends upon every student having the same chance of getting a seat in one of these schools. At some point, the schools are going to have to get together and come up with a better way, for the sake of the parents and the students involved, and for the schools, too, it's a very complicated process.

**MR. NNAMDI:** This is Public Interest. I am Kojo Nnamdi.

Back to the telephone, here is Ed in Watertown, New York. Ed, you're on the air, go ahead, please.

**QUESTION:** Kojo, thanks for having me on.

**MR. NNAMDI:** You're welcome.

**QUESTION:** I've got more of a comment to make than anything. You know, with everybody talking about test scores and competition, and all that, it needs to be brought back to a more basic level. And the more basic level is parents, any parent, and all parents, should have a choice on where their kids go. And it can't be based on economics, all right? And the only way to do that is for the government to step in and do vouchers, because from my own experience, I grew up in a very rural small town, and I had to go to an inner city school because I got kicked out of the small school because I was a trouble maker. All right, but when I went to the big school, I was like, I was an angel compared to the kids. So, I went from a C student to an A



student, without doing anything different. It was just because the standards in the one school were a whole lot different than the standards in the inner city school. And, as a parent, I would like the choice, you know, whether I had the money or not, to send my kid to a school that I chose, whether it was the religion they were teaching, the curriculum, or the right of discipline that they would have over a public school.

**MR. NNAMDI:** Ed, you raise an important issue I'm sure that most parents would agree with you that they want a choice. But, Jane Hannaway, it brings me to this question. And that is, if in Milwaukee they are aspiring to have 15 percent of the public school students have vouchers available to them, and they are scrambling at this point to find schools that can take all of those students, what happens to those 85 percent of parents whose children are in the public school system who don't have school choice.

**MS. HANNAWAY:** They're going to stay in the public school system. And I don't think that there's anyone that really is predicting that even with the voucher program that the vast majority of kids would be using a voucher to go to non-public school. I think that regardless of what sort of system we get set up, the majority of kids will be in public schools. And that's why the question, I think the relevant question is, the ways in which, and the extent to which public schools respond when there is a significant private sector also operating.

**MR. NNAMDI:** Emily Van Dunk, any visible indications at all that public schools in Milwaukee, the MPS schools, are responding to the competition by implementing programs to improve their own attractiveness?

**MS. VAN DUNK:** The one thing that is going to be happening, and this is based on their understanding of maybe why parents are not selecting MPS, is a push to have before and after wrap-around care at the schools. That will be something that will be evident in this coming school year in some schools, and next year will be widely in almost all the elementary schools in Milwaukee, whether or not, based on our information from talking with parents, they actually do select schools on that factor is somewhat unclear. But that might be from the outside something that folks might say would be an impact of the voucher program or about competition. But, in general, in Milwaukee, what we're finding is competition may not be the right way to characterize what's happening. There's a tremendous amount of cooperation that happens between these private schools and the public school system. In a lot of ways, there might be an attitude of "We're all in this together to educate primarily low income students who may be at risk of not doing well academically." So I'm not sure if there's this kind of competitive environment between the public school building and the private school down the street.

**MR. NNAMDI:** And on that optimistic note, I'm afraid we have come to an end. Emily Van Dunk, a senior researcher with Milwaukee's Public Policy Forum. She joins us from the studios of WUWM in Milwaukee, for which we have to thank Bruce Winter.

Joe Williams joined us from the studios of the Radio Foundation in New York City. He's a former education reporter for the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, currently with the New York Daily News. For that, we have to thank Peter Zang with the Radio Foundation. And, by the way, Happy Birthday, Pete.

And here in Washington is Jane Hannaway, director of the Education Policy Center with the Urban Institute.

Our thanks to all of you, this has been public interest. I'm Kojo Nnamdi.

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