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**SCHOOL VOUCHERS NEED ACCOUNTABILITY
TO MAKE THE GRADE AS EDUCATION REFORM**

Washington, D.C. – The nation’s largest and oldest school voucher program has failed to live up to its promise and requires an accountability overhaul to do so, a comprehensive five-year study concludes in a book published today by Yale University Press.

The study focuses on Milwaukee’s controversial 14-year-old experiment to promote competition in education, which this year provides \$75 million to help 13,000 low-income children attend 106 private schools. It concludes that free market economic principles such as supply and demand cannot work in the education marketplace unless parents have access to the information they need to make informed choices.

“The book will move the debate out of theoretical discussion into a practical understanding of how a voucher program works and its effects on children’s education,” according to Emily Van Dunk, research director of the nonpartisan Public Policy Forum in Milwaukee and co-author of the new book, *School Choice and the Question of Accountability: The Milwaukee Experience*.

Said co-author Anneliese Dickman:

“Although we found that the Milwaukee program is not working as it should, it would be a mistake to conclude that this is an anti-voucher book. On the contrary, the book is supportive of the voucher experiment in the sense that we offer constructive and unobtrusive ways to remedy its flaws.”

The book is the result of more than five years of research in which Van Dunk and Dickman interviewed hundreds of parents, teachers, and administrators; performed an annual census of all participating schools in Milwaukee; analyzed the fiscal policies and data that accompany the choice program, and visited more than 60 private choice schools.

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Educational choice and accountability have become central in the debate concerning public education reform. The voucher system, in theory, allows parents to be more proactive in making educational decisions for their children. Milwaukee, the only city in the country that has implemented such a program on a large scale, has had a voucher system for over a decade.

Similar programs are at the forefront of the news in Washington, D.C., Colorado, Florida, and elsewhere in the United States. Nevertheless, Milwaukee's 13,000- student voucher program, its \$75 million price tag, and the U.S. Supreme Court's approval of its constitutionality give it prominence over every other school choice program.

No other book has such up-to-date, original information on as large a program.

Among the authors' conclusions are the following points of interest:

- **An accountable school choice program must have three components:** Parents who send messages about their needs by choosing among schools; schools that respond to these messages by meeting parents' needs; and a fiscal mechanism that rewards or penalizes schools based on their ability to meet the parents' needs.
- **Private schools are not helping parents make good choices:** School data is difficult to obtain, even when a personal visit is made to a school. Parents must use other clues as to school quality when making their schooling choice, such as the appearance of the school, the opinions of friends and family, or the location of the school.
- **Public schools' reactions to competition are not as predicted by the market theory:** Student performance in Milwaukee public schools is lower in neighborhoods that have competing voucher schools than in neighborhoods where there are no voucher schools nearby. In addition, a school with voucher schools nearby is significantly less likely to make changes to retain or attract students—exactly the opposite of what would be expected of a school facing imminent competition.
- **The market holds public schools harmless fiscally when they lose students to voucher schools:** Milwaukee's choice program is designed to purposefully insulate public schools from the full effects of competition by muting the fiscal impact. Public schools losing handfuls of students are not provoked into a competitive response because they can absorb the cost of the loss.

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- **Taxpayers, parents, and educators need to reach a consensus on how to make the program more accountable:** An independent entity should collect data from the schools to make available to parents and citizens. The most likely entity would be a public-private partnership between the schools and the state. Schools that do not provide data should be helped to fulfill the requirements, but continual failure to cooperate should result in loss of program eligibility.

The research for the book was sponsored by grants from The Joyce Foundation of Chicago, and the Richard and Ethel Herzfeld, the Halbert and Alice Kadish, and the Faye McBeath Foundations of Milwaukee. The Public Policy Forum is a non-profit, non-partisan research organization founded in 1913. The Forum is a good government watchdog dedicated to providing timely, objective information on issues of local and national relevance.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Emily Van Dunk is research director for the Public Policy Forum, where she is the principal investigator of “Evaluating Education Reform: The Effect of Charter Schools and Choices on Milwaukee Children and Their Education.” She holds a Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in Political Science, an MA from Iowa State, a BA from Luther College and has over ten years of experience in researching education and public policy.

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