

## Taxpayers Favor Expansion of Choice Schools and Agree on Accountability Guidelines.

Unlike their counterparts in other cities, poor parents in Cleveland and Milwaukee have a choice: They can send their children to public schools or to private “choice” schools. Choice school proponents contend that this idea not only improves opportunities for participating children but also promises to improve education for everyone by making it more competitive. Opponents contend that diverting public money to private schools undercuts public education and promotes disparity. Because the debate has focused on *whether* choice schools should exist, there has been little discussion about accountability for those that *do*.

The Public Policy Forum conducted a year long study that sought to find consensus on a method to hold private choice schools accountable to the children that attend them and to the public that supports them. To accomplish this, we assembled a national panel of academic researchers to design a research method and analyze the results. Then we conducted face-to-face interviews with 295 choice and public school

stakeholders (mostly parents and educators) in Cleveland and Milwaukee. Finally, we conducted telephone interviews with a representative sample of 771 taxpayers in Ohio and Wisconsin.

### Key Findings

- An overwhelming majority of taxpayers in both Ohio and Wisconsin approve of the concept of private school choice. Most favor *expansion* of private school choice in three ways: (1) extending the program statewide rather than limiting it to Cleveland and Milwaukee, (2) allowing religious schools to participate and (3) allowing all children to participate, not just those from low-income families.
- The vast majority of taxpayers in both states believe that each participating choice school should be *required* to make an array of information about the school available to the public.
- Asked who should be responsible for gathering the information and making it available to the public, 70% approved of the concept of a public board consisting of representatives of both public and private choice schools. In contrast, a small majority (53%) favor the option of involving the state department of education, and a minority (33%) favored leaving the task to a purely private entity.
- Among possible sanctions for non-compliance with reporting requirements, the overwhelming majority of those surveyed favored a probationary period; the more punitive sanctions of a fine or immediate loss of taxpayer money were less likely to be favored. Almost no respondents agreed with the view that there should be no formal sanctions.

#### Milwaukee Parental Choice Program

The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, created in 1989, was the first private school choice program in the nation to provide public funds for private school enrollment. The choice law authorizes a limited number of low-income students from MPS to attend private, nonsectarian schools within the City of Milwaukee. The voucher is currently worth up to \$4,700. In 1997-98 more than 1,500 choice students are enrolled in 23 participating choice schools.

#### Cleveland Scholarship Program

A similar program began in Cleveland in 1996. Participating children can attend either public or private, sectarian or non-sectarian schools. Scholarships are offered to students in kindergarten - fourth grade with the program intended to run through their eighth grade year. The scholarship is worth either 75% or 90% of tuition, depending on family income, with a maximum allotment of \$2,500. In the 1997-1998 school year 3,000 Cleveland children are attending 56 private religious or non-sectarian schools.

## WHO HOLDS A STAKE IN SELECTING THE CRITERIA AND VARIABLES THAT WILL BE USED IN ESTABLISHING PRIVATE SCHOOL CHOICE ACCOUNTABILITY?

Given the politically volatile nature of school choice policy, the academic panel that directed this project felt it was critical that individuals directly or indirectly involved in the choice issue be an integral part of the formulation of any school choice accountability guidelines. The panel did not create a list of accountability guidelines and test the feasibility of these guidelines. Instead the panel created a research design that focused first on the concerns of stakeholders in holding schools accountable.

In choosing the stakeholders we asked the following question: Who holds a stake in selecting the criteria and variables that will be used in establishing private school choice accountability? Using this question we viewed the inclusion of the following groups, representing both public and private choice schools, as imperative.

This first group included school administrators, parents, students and teachers. In this report we referred to this set of stakeholders as school-based respondents. These interviews focused on: What kinds of information did individuals believe should be available for holding schools accountable; second, what is the best means for determining the validity of the information; third, what kinds of criteria, if any, should schools that participate in choice adhere to; and finally, what consequences should exist if schools fail to adhere to these guidelines.

The inclusion of groups from the broader community was also considered important. This second group included school board members, members of the business community, legislators and teachers association members. We referred to these stakeholders as the community-based respondents. Each of the individuals interviewed had a vested stake in the issue of school choice accountability. In our interviews with community respondents we used a semi-structured interview format. We focused on two types of questions: the individuals' specific interest and involvement with school choice and how they believe private schools that participate in choice should be held accountable.

The findings from the interview data guided the creation of a survey design that was administered by telephone to a random sample of 771 taxpayers from Ohio and Wisconsin. The survey questionnaire tested whether there was widespread acceptance of the accountability information needs that were deemed important in the face-to-face interviews.

### Number of Interviews by School-Based Respondents.

	All	Cleveland Private Choice	Milwaukee Private Choice	Cleveland Public School	Milwaukee Public School
<b>Parent</b>	153	34	40	35	44
<b>School Administrator</b>	25	7	7	5	6
<b>Teacher</b>	92	22	22	26	22
<b>Total</b>	270	63	69	66	72

### Number of Interviews by Community Respondents.

	All	Cleveland	Milwaukee
<b>School Board</b>	7	4	3
<b>State Legislator/</b>	5	2	3
<b>Public School Union</b>	4	2	2
<b>Private Choice</b>	7	3	4
<b>Member of</b>	2	0	2
<b>Total</b>	25	11	14

### Percentage Distribution of Sampled Telephone Respondents and of the Adult Population in Ohio and Wisconsin on Selected Social Characteristics.

Characteristic	Ohio Sample	Ohio Population	WI Sample	WI Population
<b>Percent of Adult Pop. Age 35 and above</b>	65%	62%	67%	63%
<b>Gender, female</b>	55%	52%	53%	51%
<b>Ethnicity, African American</b>	12%	11%	12%	5%
<b>Median Household Income</b>	\$39,000	\$36,000	\$39,000	\$38,000
<b>Education, 1 or more years of college</b>	30%	22%	28%	16%

# FINDINGS: INTERVIEWS WITH SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY

## School-Based Interviews

There is essential agreement among school-based respondents, across both public and private schools, on the information parents need to hold a school accountable.

### Major Findings

- Information on the school’s program, primarily its curriculum and method of instruction, is the most common piece of information mentioned in our interviews.
- Information on teachers is the next most common response by parents.
- The other criteria that parents mention, in order of frequency after school program and teacher characteristics, are school characteristics, such as class size and make-up of student body; general student outcomes, such as development of lifetime skills and advancement to the next grade level; safety and discipline at the school; standardized test scores; level of parent involvement and the school’s reputation.

### Criteria Recommended by School-Based

	Parents (N=153)	Teachers (N=92)	School Administrators (N=25)
<b>School Program</b>	59%	67%	60%
<b>Teachers</b>	45%	45%	24%
<b>Outcomes General</b>	35%	39%	60%
<b>Outcomes Test Scores</b>	15%	12%	40%
<b>School Characteristics</b>	31%	30%	44%
<b>Safety and Discipline</b>	28%	35%	28%
<b>Reputation of School</b>	9%	20%	28%
<b>Parent Involvement</b>	12%	18%	8%

### Respondents in Cleveland and Milwaukee

In a final closed-ended question we presented the interviewees with a list of possible sources for gathering the requested information about schools and making sure that it was accurate.

### The main findings of this section are:

- The organizations that received the greatest level of support in order of frequency were a privately run parent information center and the state department of education.
- The private schools themselves and an accreditation agency received support from 54% and 50% of the respondents respectively.
- Few interviewees, less than 9%, agreed that parents should be left with this responsibility.

### School-Based Responses to Who Should be Responsible for Gathering Information.

	Agree	Disagree
<b>A Privately Run Parent Information Center</b>	64%	36%
<b>The State Department of Education</b>	62%	38%
<b>The Private Schools Themselves</b>	54%	46%
<b>An Accreditation Agency</b>	50%	50%
<b>No Agency Needs to be Responsible. Parents will decide for themselves and poor schools will fail</b>	9%	91%

### Discussion

What we learned from interviewing these 270 school-based respondents is quite intriguing. We learned that parents want information on a school’s program and teachers. To a lesser degree, parents want to know about general student outcomes, school characteristics, safety and discipline, parental involvement and test scores. However, their interest in these factors paled in comparison to their great interest in school program and teachers. We also learned that the most popular choice for who should gather and report this information was a privately run parent information center or the state department of education.

### Community Respondents

Because of the semi-structured format and the relatively small number of interviewees, we reported only the dominant themes that were mentioned. The community respondents were more focused on who should be responsible for gathering the information and the criteria that should be in place for determining who should participate in choice. They were less concerned with the types of information individuals were interested in obtaining.

# FINDINGS: INTERVIEWS WITH COMMUNITY RESPONDENTS

## Common Themes: Choice Community

Two common concerns were voiced by members of the choice community. The first is that parents should be trusted to choose. *Parents should be given the responsibility for holding the schools accountable.* The information needed should be determined by the individual parent, and the parent should be given full responsibility for gathering and ensuring the accuracy of the information.

The second common theme was expressed in the following manner: There needs to be an avoidance of bureaucratic entanglements to the largest extent possible. It is critical that accountability guidelines should “*First Do No Harm,*” as expressed by one individual. The concern is that the state legislature will create a system of accountable requirements that kill the program.

## Common Themes: Choice Opponents

Two different themes expressed by strong choice opponents were the following. First, more information needs to be available about schools that participate in choice. These community respondents believed that information about schools should be made public. As one individual commented, *“It is impossible to have a program receiving public money and not hold those receiving the money accountable for those expenditures.”*

Second, several individuals expressed a strong feeling that schools that participate in choice should be held to the same standards and regulations as public schools. For example, a number of opponents of choice felt strongly that teachers working in private schools that accept public money must be state certified. Opponents of school choice also felt it was imperative that schools participating in choice select their students using a lottery system. They expressed a strong concern that schools allowed to select students would unfairly screen out students they considered the least desirable.

Our next phase of research focused on connecting these views of accountability with the needs of taxpayers for holding private choice schools accountable.

## Telephone Survey with Ohio and Wisconsin Taxpayers

Our survey questions were designed by the panel of experts using the findings from the school and community respondents as a guide.

As the table illustrates, a great majority of taxpayers in Ohio and Wisconsin support school choice. Seventy-six percent of those surveyed support school choice and 53% support expansion to all children regardless of income. Eighty-three percent believe that religious schools should be allowed to participate in a choice program. In addition, 77% percent of those surveyed in Ohio and 74% in Wisconsin believe the current school choice programs should be expanded to include all school districts in the state.

It was important for developing accountability guidelines that we found essential agreement among these proponents and opponents of school choice on accountability information.

### Percent Who Agree with Following Statements. Major Survey Findings:

I favor providing tax money to parents to allow their children to attend private schools	Religious schools should be allowed to participate in a choice program.	Choice programs should be expanded to include all districts in the state.
76%	83%	76%

- Three out of four people surveyed believe private schools participating in choice should report information on the qualifications of teachers and administrators, how money is budgeted and spent and the results of an annual financial audit.
- Seventy percent of interviewees believe a public board consisting of representatives from both the private choice and public schools should be responsible for gathering and reporting information on choice schools.
- Eighty-three percent of respondents believe that a school that does **not** follow the mandated reporting requirements should be granted a one-year probationary period in order to meet the requirement.

- **Compliance Criteria:**
  - Approximately 73% of those surveyed believe that teachers in participating choice schools should be certified by the state.
  - Eighty-six percent of those surveyed believe that private schools participating in a choice program should be required to make their meetings open to the public.
  - Sixty-six percent of those surveyed believe that private schools participating in a choice program should be allowed to charge for costs above those covered by the taxpayer contribution.
  - Approximately 66% of those surveyed believe that private schools participating in choice should be allowed to require parents to work as volunteers in the school.
  - Thirty-five percent of those surveyed believe that private schools participating in a choice program should be allowed to choose which students they will enroll.

**Information About Private Choice Schools, Rank-Ordered by Percentage of Respondents Who Believe its Reporting Should be Mandatory Rather than Voluntary. Dominant Themes**

Item	Mandatory
The qualifications of teachers and administrators	85
How money is budgeted and spent	78
The results of an annual financial audit	78
The graduation rate	75
The scores on state standardized tests	75
Student attendance rate	73
The curriculum	73
The school's governing structure	70
The methods of teaching	66
The mission and philosophy of a school	65
Number of students suspended/expelled annually	61
Teacher turnover	55
Class size	55
The requirements for parent involvement	49
The racial or ethnic makeup of the student body	33
The economic background of the student body	29
Graduate Placement	27

Several dominant themes emerge from our survey data. First, Ohio and Wisconsin taxpayers want all private schools participating in school choice to make public certain information about their school. Ten of fifteen possible types of information were each selected for

mandatory reporting by at least 60% of the sampled taxpayers.

The top four choices, each selected by between 75 and 85% of the taxpayers, were the qualifications of teachers and administrators, how the school's money is budgeted and spent, the school's graduation rate, and the students' state standardized test scores.

In contrast, taxpayers from both states considered it relatively unimportant to make public the racial, ethnic, or socio-economic composition of the schools' student bodies, as only about one-third selected these items for mandatory public reporting.

Second, this strong endorsement of public disclosure was made regardless of taxpayer differences in race, income level, or overall attitude toward school choice. The only exception was that two-thirds of African American taxpayers also wanted each school's requirements for parental involvement to be reported.

Third, three out of four individuals in Ohio and Wisconsin support creating a public board representing both private choice schools and public schools to gather and report information about schools. Taxpayers from both states do not support a privately run parent information center or having individual parents gather this information. Only one-third of those surveyed support these options.

Fourth, taxpayers in Ohio and Wisconsin appear to support allowing choice schools extra time to adhere to these mandatory reporting requirements. Eighty-three percent of those surveyed support a one year probationary period to allow a school to comply with the reporting requirements.

Finally, other themes surfaced with significant support. We found majority support for open meetings, parent involvement requirements, allowing schools to charge for costs above those covered by tuition, an open enrollment system and licensure of teachers.

**Consensus View: Suggested Accountability Guidelines**

The following guidelines were developed through lengthy analysis of the school and community interviews and taxpayer surveys by our expert panel. The guidelines reflect consensus areas in which the panel felt there was a strong convergence of support. We offer them to policy makers who may tackle the controversial task of creating and enacting guidelines.

*Guideline 1. Schools that participate in choice need to make public the following information.*

# ACCOUNTABILITY GUIDELINES

- Curriculum
- Graduation rate
- How money is budgeted and spent
- Methods of teaching
- Mission and philosophy of a school
- Number of students suspended and expelled annually
- Qualifications of teachers and administrators
- School's governing structure
- Scores on state standardized tests
- Student attendance rate

Rationale: In our taxpayer surveys each item received support from at least 60% of those surveyed. In our face-to-face interviews information on the school's program, primarily its curriculum and method of instruction, are the most common kinds of information valued by parents. Information on teachers is the next most important for parents. Parents want this type of information and taxpayers who are providing the funds for these schools believe this information should be mandatory.

*Guideline 2. A public board consisting of representatives of private choice schools and public schools should be created to gather the required information about choice schools and make it available to the public.*

Rationale: In the school-based interviews we found that individuals supported a privately run parent information center, an accreditation agency or the state department of education for this responsibility. In our community interviews we found proponents of choice advocating for the creation of a public board with representation from both the choice and public school community. In our final survey we found overwhelming support for the public board with mixed representation from the private and public schools.

*Guideline 3. Private choice schools that do not follow the reporting requirements should be granted a one-year probationary period in order to meet the requirement. Failure to comply after one year should result in loss of taxpayer funds.*

Rationale: One of the fundamental points that choice supporters often make is that poor schools will fail and that this is the ultimate form of accountability. However, we found across both supporters and opponents of choice in our interviews and surveys the desire to foster the start-up and participation of choice schools by giving a school time to get established. There was overwhelming support for granting a probationary period of one year to a school in order to meet the requirements. Of those surveyed 83% supported this option. There was mixed support for having the school lose its eligibility for taxpayer money (57%).

**There was no consensus on the following issues that merit further discussion:**

- Should private choice schools be allowed to require parents to

work as volunteers in the school?

- Should choice schools be required to make their meetings open to the public?
- Should choice schools be allowed to charge parents for the costs above those covered by the taxpayer contribution?
- When choice schools get more applicants than they have vacancies, should they be allowed to choose which applicants they will enroll or should they be required to conduct a lottery?
- Should choice schools only be permitted to hire state-certified teachers?

## Future Discussion

If Wisconsin and Ohio taxpayers reflect the national mood, there is widespread support for expansion of private school choice. At the same time there is also a strong belief that, if public money is involved, private schools should be subject to certain accountability guidelines.

The information we have found changes the way we traditionally define accountability in public and private education. We learned that parents and taxpayers believe private choice schools need to make information available to the public.

The findings may go one step further and could change thinking about accountability for traditional public schools. For example, does it make sense for states that are implementing educational reforms, such as private school choice and charter schools, to continue to make traditional public schools follow one set of top-down driven accountability guidelines while private schools receiving public funding follow a different set guidelines?

Our study offers guidelines for private choice schools that we believe can assist in changing how we view accountability for traditional public schools.

The nonpartisan study, funded by grants from the Joyce Foundation of Chicago and the Faye McBeath Foundation of Milwaukee, was conducted under the direction of a national academic panel of social science researchers led by Mary Hoy and William Harvey, deans of the schools of education at Marquette University and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, respectively. The panel also included Michele Foster, a professor of education at Claremont Graduate School; Paul T. Hill, a research professor at the University of Washington; Mary E. Huba, a professor of education at Iowa State University; William R. Morgan, a sociology professor at Cleveland State University; Susan E. Phillips, a lawyer and education professor at Michigan State University; and Amy Stuart Wells, an associate professor at UCLA.

*Copies of the complete report can be obtained at a cost of \$15.00 from the Public Policy Forum, 633 W. Wisconsin Ave., Suite 406, Milwaukee, WI 53203. If you have any questions or comments please call 414-276-8240*