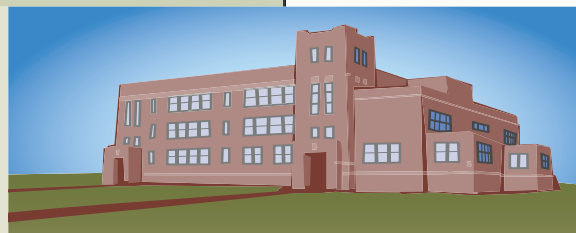


MILWAUKEE'S PUBLIC SCHOOLS

In an Era of Choice



Programs enacted in the last fifteen years give Milwaukee parents more educational choice than parents in other U.S. cities. Along with traditional public schools, tax-supported options include: private schools; charter schools; public schools outside the city's borders; and nonprofit partnership schools that primarily serve at-risk students.

Reflecting broad community support, the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) Board of Directors has acknowledged the many educational choices available to parents and pledged to build a coalition with school choice advocates for programs that benefit all Milwaukee students.

The growing support for school choice reflects a contrast between the community's actual experience and negative predictions made by some opponents of expanding parent options. In particular, some observers predicted that expanded school choice would cause enrollment declines, less financial support, and lower academic achievement in public schools.

Based on MPS data, this is the fourth report since 2002 describing trends since the enactment and rapid expansion of various choice programs. As in prior years, these MPS data are at odds with the sweeping and negative forecasts of school choice opponents. Here are some highlights of major trends and developments.

- MPS enrollment *increased* 7.4% between 1990 and 2005.
- The annual high school dropout rate *declined* from 16.2% to 10.2% between 1991 and 2003.
- The share of third grade students scoring proficient or advanced on state reading tests *increased* from 50% to 71% between 1998 and 2005.
- In thirteen of fifteen categories, MPS scores on state standardized tests *increased* between 1997 and 2005.
- The number of MPS schools on the list of Wisconsin Schools Identified for Improvement *decreased* from 55 to 37 between 2003 to 2005.
- Real spending per pupil *increased* (\$8,888 to \$11,317), as did state support for MPS (\$413 million to \$664.3 million), between 1990 and 2005.
- Budget reforms have made MPS *more* accountable. Dollars follow students, with 95% of the MPS operating budget now controlled at the school level.

"[The] array of school options available to Milwaukee parents – especially low-income parents ... may very well be without parallel in the United States."

– Milwaukee Journal Sentinel
October 17, 2003

MPS remains a district where overall academic achievement is too low. While test scores have improved, as noted elsewhere in this report, more progress is necessary. Further, as a 2004 study demonstrates, MPS graduation rates remain unacceptably low. Still, it is noteworthy and beyond dispute that the dire predictions of a district in decline have not come to pass. To the contrary, **MPS enrollment has increased** by 6,825 students (See Figure 1). **Real spending per pupil has grown** 27.3% (See Figure 2) and **state support** for MPS—adjusted for inflation—**has risen** 60.8% (See Figure 3).

“I think the improvement has been due to a combination of choice, charter schools and private scholarships. All of these programs made the Milwaukee Public Schools realize they would lose a large number of their students if they didn’t improve their education and decrease the minority dropout rate.”

– Tony Higgins, former Milwaukee Parental Choice Program parent

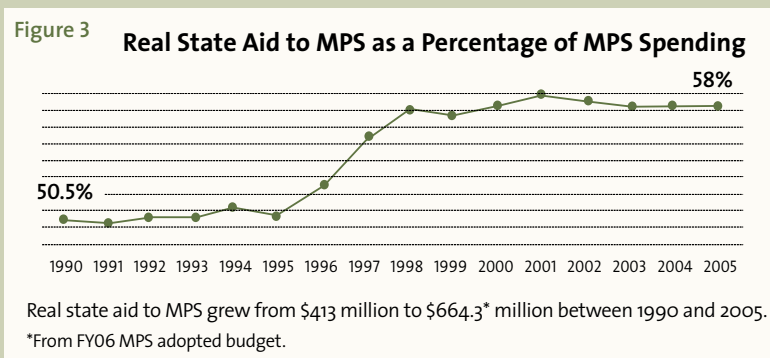
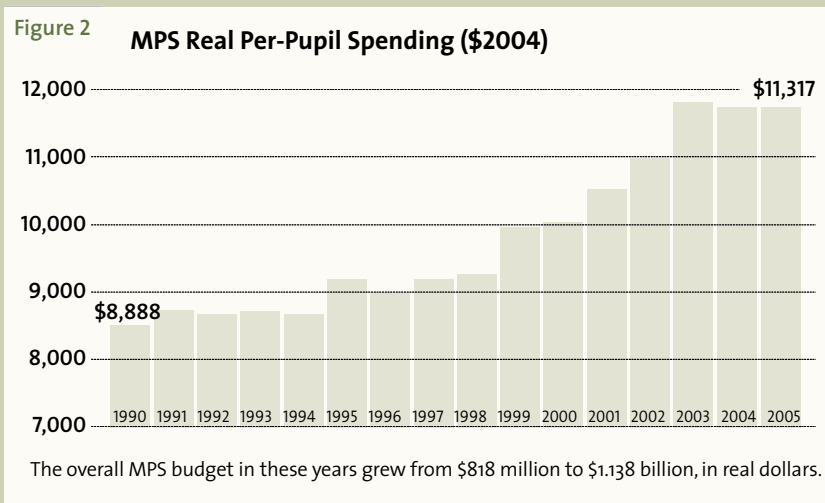
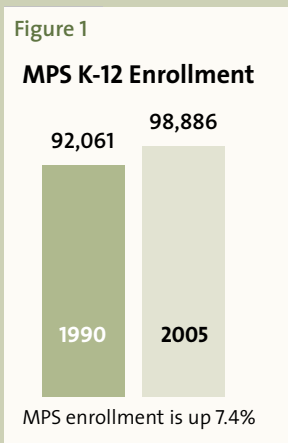


Table 1 **Change in MPS Student Mean Scale Scores on WKCE Between 1996-97 and 2004-05**

	FOURTH GRADE	EIGHTH GRADE	TENTH GRADE
READING	+1	0	+13
LANGUAGE ARTS	+4	+7	+20
MATH	+16	+9	+16
SCIENCE	+7	+9	+11
SOCIAL STUDIES	+9	-1	+8

Figure 4 **MPS 3rd Grade Reading Comprehension Test Scores**

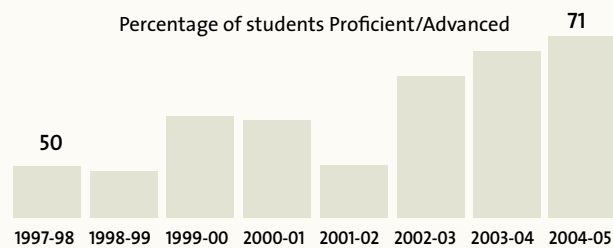
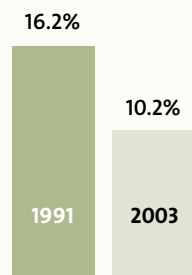


Figure 5 **MPS Dropout Rates**



“With the parent choice program, we have many different models by which parents can choose. When you have that, no longer is MPS a monopoly. That competitive nature has raised the bar for educators in Milwaukee to provide a good product or they know that parents will simply walk...”

– William Andrekopoulos,
MPS Superintendent

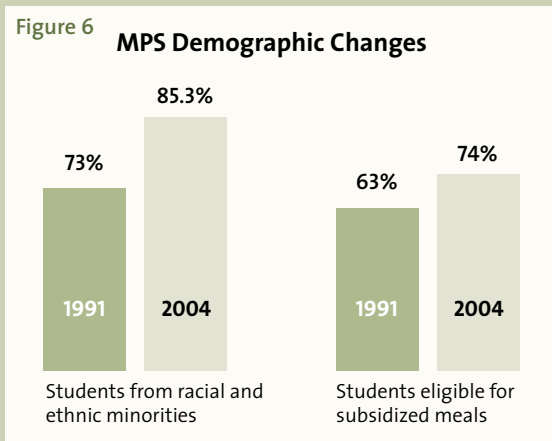
Indeed, when school choice options have expanded most rapidly, **the academic achievement of MPS students improved.**¹ Between 1997 and 2005, MPS student performance on statewide exams increased on thirteen of fifteen tests (See Table 1). In comparison, student performance statewide during the same period improved in 12 of 15 categories. The share of MPS third graders achieving proficient or advanced scores in reading improved from 50% to 71% from 1998 to 2005 (See Figure 4). In comparison, the share of third graders statewide achieving proficient or advanced scored during the same period improved from 65% to 87%. The MPS dropout rate declined (see Figure 5).

All these developments occurred as the number of MPS students from low-income families rose, a trend some observers associate with the likelihood of lower achievement (See Figure 6).

Scholarly research finds that gains experienced by MPS are in part a consequence of more school choice. Noted Harvard University economist Caroline M. Hoxby found that Milwaukee public schools that were most subjected to competition from vouchers showed rapid improvement in their students' results. Hoxby said: "Overall, the improvements in the Milwaukee public schools, following the 1998 voucher [expansion], are very impressive and have been maintained."²

The learning gains coincide with **important, system-wide changes** within MPS:

- School budgets have been decentralized and are driven by enrollment. Dollars follow students to schools that control 95% of their district operating funds. The result is increased accountability and schools that must recruit to strengthen their budgets.
- Teachers—once assigned almost strictly by seniority—are now typically hired by school selection committees (See Table 2).
- The district's teacher contract now contains eased provisions for releasing unsatisfactory probationary or non-tenured teachers.
- MPS has expanded dramatically its full-day four-year-old kindergarten programs and popular specialty programs in high demand by parents.
- Often working with private and independent charter schools, MPS has expanded facilities in central city neighborhoods, once neglected in favor of school construction at the city's periphery.



FOOTNOTES

¹Since 1996-97, the State of Wisconsin has tested Wisconsin public school students on what is called the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examination (WKCE), given annually at grades four, eight, and ten. These tests measure student achievement in math, science, reading, language arts, and social studies. A mean scale score is the statewide mean of students' scores on a specific subject test. Longitudinal comparisons of yearly mean scale scores reveal an overall increase or decrease in test performance.

²Hoxby, Caroline M., "School Choice and School Competition: Evidence from the United States." The Swedish Economic Policy Review 10, 2003.

Data Sources for all Tables and Figures: MPS Comprehensive Annual Financial Reports, MPS Accountability Reports, MPS Human Resources Department, and MPS Office of Research and Assessment.

Table 2 MPS Schools Using School-Based Hiring

	1989-90	1995-96	2004-05
MPS Schools Using School-Based Hiring	0	8	167
All Schools in MPS	150	153	167

School Choice Wisconsin (SCW) is a nonprofit organization that provides information on the impact of school choice on families, communities, and public schools. This report is the fourth in a series of yearly updates. For more information about school choice, go to www.SchoolChoiceWI.org.