

Opinion:

Giving students a choice helps keep them in class

By Alan Bonsteel , Los Angeles Daily News, October 27, 2004

The evidence that our dropout rates are shockingly high is clear. This spring, Education Trust-West pegged California's dropout rate at 30 percent, with far higher numbers for our minorities. The yawning chasm between the haves and the have-nots as a result of these dropouts, and the vast numbers of them who end up behind bars, is an embarrassment to a country that preaches liberty and justice for all.

Those of us in the school-reform movement have long known of the many private and charter schools that not only graduate every single one of their kids, but also get 100 percent enrolled in college. But, until now, no one had done a formal study of dropout rates in private schools.

In late September, Jay Greene released a study of dropout rates in Milwaukee's public schools, compared with those in the private voucher schools there. The Milwaukee voucher program, enacted in 1990, is the nation's oldest publicly funded K-12 school choice program. Greene found that while Milwaukee's notoriously dysfunctional public schools lost 64 percent of their students to dropping out, only 36 percent of the kids in the voucher schools left school.

Was Greene biased because he is a school-choice supporter? Using the methodology of the liberal-leaning, pro-public-school Harvard Integration Project, Milwaukee's public schools lost 61 percent of their students, versus 33 percent in the voucher schools.

Did differences in socioeconomic status account for these dramatic results? Actually, only poor kids are allowed into Milwaukee's choice program, and research shows that participants are also more likely to be minorities and to come from broken homes -- and that they have below-average test scores when they enter the program.

Greene took the analysis one step further. He compared Milwaukee's six selective public high schools that segregate out the city's best students with the voucher schools. These six elite schools had dropout rates of 59 percent, far worse than the 36 percent of the voucher schools.

More astounding still is that Milwaukee's voucher schools are funded at only about 60 percent of the per-student spending of its public schools. Wisconsin's taxpayers spent less on their voucher schools, but got more.

There is still one last tiny flaw in the argument that school choice dramatically improves dropout rates. One could theoretically argue that Greene's study was not randomized by a flip-of-the-coin assignment of students to public or private schools, like the kind of truly scientific study the FDA would require for an approval of a new drug. One could argue

that these results might therefore be due to the higher motivation of the low-income families in the schools of choice.

That's a theoretical possibility, but it's the longest of long shots. The victory of this ragtag bunch of kids from the wrong side of Milwaukee's tracks and their freedom schools is so totally leave-'em-in-the-dust that it is inconceivable that future studies will question who won.

We Americans cherish freedom of choice, and even if school choice didn't improve test scores and dropout rates, the right to choose would still be a compelling argument for why we should break up the government's monopoly on K-12 schools. But with this extraordinary evidence of how choice keeps kids in school, Americans everywhere have new reason to let freedom ring.