

What's the Difference?

Voucher schools, Charter schools, Milwaukee Public Schools

Overview

In recent decades, there has been an expansion of the types of schools in Milwaukee receiving public tax dollars. In some areas, differences may seem slight. In other areas, there are significant differences. This is especially true in terms of students' rights, public accountability, and democratic oversight.

There are **three main types of schools** in Milwaukee that receive public tax dollars:

- **Private voucher schools**, charging tuition but also open to students who receive publicly funded vouchers.
- **Charter schools approved by the City of Milwaukee and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.**
- Schools overseen by the **Milwaukee Public Schools** district.

The voucher schools, by definition, are private schools and do not have to follow the same rules as public schools. Most provide religious-based education and may charge tuition to private-paying students and, in some cases, to high school students receiving vouchers.

The charter schools approved by the City of Milwaukee and UWM are considered public schools, but do not have to follow the same state rules, regulations and public oversight as traditional public schools. They are beholden to a "contract" (or charter), granted significant autonomy, and operate as independent entities. The schools are expected to provide greater academic results and innovation, although this has not necessarily happened in practice. Like all charter schools, they are non-religious and may not charge tuition. They are governed by privately appointed boards of directors.

The MPS district primarily oversees traditional public schools, including both neighborhood schools and a range of specialty schools and citywide schools, from language immersion to Montessori. The Milwaukee School Board also oversees charter schools that are part of the MPS but that have a specific "contract" or charter, often to provide a particular curricular focus. Finally, MPS oversees alternative and partnership schools. All MPS schools are non-religious and may not charge tuition. They are governed by the democratically elected Milwaukee School Board. Most MPS schools also have school-based councils of parents, teachers and community members.

Details

Voucher schools

The biggest difference between voucher schools and charter and traditional schools is that, by definition, voucher schools are private schools and can provide religious-based instruction. There are approximately 22,300 students in Milwaukee receiving vouchers in the 2011-12 school year, mostly at religious schools. In 2011, for the first time Milwaukee students could attend a voucher school located outside the city.

While the voucher program initially began as an experiment promoting "choice" for poor people, a family of four with an income of \$67,050 may now receive vouchers. The median family income in Milwaukee is \$35,921.

Because they are private schools, voucher schools have limited public accountability and operate under different rules than public schools. For instance, voucher schools do not have to follow the state's open meetings and records law. They do not have to provide

information on staff qualifications, student suspensions and expulsions, graduation rates, and so forth to the public. Their meetings are not open to the public.

Voucher schools must accept students who require special education services, but they are not required to meet the students' needs beyond what can be provided with minor adjustments. As a result, many students requiring special services leave voucher schools and attend a Milwaukee public schools. (Less than 2 percent of students in voucher schools are identified as receiving special education services, compared to about almost 20 percent in the Milwaukee Public Schools.)

As private schools, voucher schools do not have to honor constitutional rights of due process when students are suspended or expelled. Nor do private voucher schools have to follow Wisconsin law that prohibits discrimination against students in a range of areas including, sex, pregnancy, marital or parental status, or sexual orientation. Voucher schools, however, must follow federal laws prohibiting discrimination on the basis of race, color or national origin.

Charter schools overseen by the City of Milwaukee and UWM

There are seven schools chartered by the City of Milwaukee and 11 schools chartered by the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. The schools enrolled a total of approximately 6,500 students in 2011-12.

Information on the UWM charter schools can be found on the webpage of the Office of Charter Schools at UWM (http://www4.uwm.edu/soe/centers/charter_schools/). Links on the website provide data such as the name of a particular charter school, its address, when it was chartered, and its email and school website. Detailed data on special education students, racial makeup, curricular offerings and so forth is not easily accessible via the website. A 62-page annual report from 2009-10 is available through the website. The report does not indicate who appoints the staff and leadership overseeing the Office of Charter Schools, nor when and if the office holds meetings open to the public.

The only data available on the City of Milwaukee website specifically regarding charter schools is a

phone number where one can get an application to become a charter school (<http://city.milwaukee.gov/CharterSchoolApplication.htm>). The charter schools are overseen by a "Charter School Review Committee" appointed by city officials. Meetings and decisions by the committee are not available on the City of Milwaukee website, nor is it clear where one can attain such information.

Limited data on individual charter schools, both for UWM and the City of Milwaukee, is available through the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, but not for the schools as a group.

Milwaukee Public Schools

There are 175 schools within MPS in 2011-12, with 80,098 students. Schools include traditional schools, charter schools, and partnership schools. Charter schools include both district-run charters (instrumentality) and independent charters (non-instrumentality).

Information on schools, programs, enrollment and demographics can be found at the MPS website (<http://mpportal.milwaukee.k12.wi.us>). MPS is governed by a nine-member School Board, which each member elected to a four-year term in public elections. The board holds monthly public meetings, in addition to committee meetings, open to the public.

The Milwaukee Public Schools is the city's largest educational institution, and the only one with the commitment, capacity, and legal obligation to serve the needs of all the city's children.

Overall, almost 20 percent of MPS students require special education services, and 10 percent are English Language Learners. The district offers Spanish/English bilingual programs at 24 schools, and Southeast Asian/English Bilingual Programs at two schools. English-as-a-Second Language programs are available at the bilingual schools and an additional 14 schools.

MPS issues an annual Report Card for the district as a whole, and for individual schools. The reports cards are available publicly via the MPS website. Contact information for the Milwaukee Board of School Directors, agendas, meeting calendars and audio records of board proceedings are available at the MPS board governance website.