Standardized Tests & School Choice
Questions & Answers

What is a standardized test?
Standardized tests measure a student’s knowledge in such areas as math, reading, science, and social studies. A student’s performance allows for a comparison with a representative sample of students who took the same test. For example, a percentile score of 80 means that a student’s score exceeded 79 percent of other students’ scores.

Is there only one test?
No. Several different testing companies have developed reputable standardized tests. Public schools around the nation and most private schools select from among these tests. More than 90 percent of schools in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP) use one of the available standardized tests.

Why are test scores not available for students in the MPCP?
Schools in the MPCP make results available to parents. But all or most choose not to release the results publicly. One reason is that many of these schools believe teachers’ unions would misuse the data to suggest the school choice program “isn’t working.”

How would the data show choice is “not working”?
A large number of students in the choice program leave the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) because of low academic achievement. Choice schools routinely find that entering students are several years below grade level. Public release of scores from those students would confirm that students are leaving MPS with low levels of academic achievement. But the teachers’ unions would likely twist this information to support their ongoing effort to discredit the school choice program.

Further, it would be meaningless to release raw test score data from a range of different standardized tests, given in different subjects and different grades. Scores from different tests aren’t comparable. The public would not get a reasonable idea of how students in school choice program are performing.

Why not make schools in the MPCP use tests mandated for public schools?
Many schools in the MPCP already use those tests. Others choose different standardized tests. Requiring the use of only one test would be inappropriate. Individual private schools should not be mandated to use a single test any more than they should be mandated to follow a single educational curriculum. This would deprive parents of real choice. It likely also would be unconstitutional; the State Supreme Court has barred the Legislature and Governor from “excessive entanglement” in the operation of schools in the choice program.
The public deserves to know how choice is working. How will they learn?

A longitudinal study — in other words, a study tracking progress over a number of years — of the MPCP would be a better way to get reliable information to the general public. Such a study is planned by scholars at Georgetown University. Members of the study team include UW Prof. John Witte, the original evaluator of the MPCP, and the Milwaukee Public Schools. The multidisciplinary team includes scholars from several different universities. Many members of the team were selected in a national competition to evaluate the District of Columbia voucher program.

How can the Georgetown team make sense out of scores on different tests?

One part of the Georgetown study will be an analysis whereby data from different tests are converted into apples-and-apples scores. This would provide a baseline measure in 2006 of how students are performing. Once a baseline is established, the five-year study will track progress of choice students. The key is to measure whether they make gains. This approach is similar to the way MPS is measuring academic achievement.

Why is MPS involved in the Georgetown study?

MPS is helping with a key part of the study. This involves comparing students in the MPCP with a similar group of MPS students. To do that, a representative sample of students in the MPCP will take the same test as MPS students. MPS will work with the Georgetown team to assure that similar groups of students are compared.

How will the public get this information?

Legislation co-sponsored by Rep. Vukmir and Sen. Darling directs the Legislative Audit Bureau to make public reports on the study’s findings. In addition, the Georgetown team will issue reports. If a similar bill passed in 2003 – AB 126 -- had not been vetoed, such data already would be available.