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UNITED STATES
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

December 11, 2014

Gene Dodaro
Comptroller General
United States Government Accountability Office
441 G St. NW
Washington, D.C. 20528

Dear Mr. Dodaro,

The Milwaukee Parental Choice program, a program which for 24 years has allowed students in Milwaukee to attend private schools using publically funded vouchers, recently served as the model for an expanded, state-wide Wisconsin Parental Choice program. At the same time that this program is being expanded state-wide, alarming allegations of potentially discriminatory practices occurring within the program continue to surface. Specifically, the U.S. Department of Justice is currently investigating allegations that schools participating in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program discriminate against students with disabilities by intentionally blocking them from school admission, and that some students with disabilities have been expelled or forced to leave voucher funded schools as a result of school policies that do not accommodate their needs.

The current DOJ investigation is not the first time that the Milwaukee Parental Choice program (MPCP) has been the subject of federal interest: in 2001 the GAO released a report^[i] that, among other questions, examined the student characteristics of those participating in the Milwaukee voucher program compared to public school students, and examined what was “known about student academic achievement within [the] voucher [program].”

In the thirteen (13) years since that GAO report, data regarding the student characteristics and academic achievement of students within the voucher program, as well as information about how, if at all, the voucher program’s existence has served to increase academic achievement of all students in Milwaukee, including those in the Milwaukee public school system, has continued to grow. For example, under Wisconsin Act 28, adopted in 2009, all private schools participating in the MPCP must be evaluated on par with their public school counterparts for the first time in the program’s history, thereby providing researchers with rich data to draw sound student achievement-based conclusions^[ii].

The promise of improved academic achievement was the stated purpose for expanding the Milwaukee program state-wide, despite the lack of data on the impact of such an expansion. However, independent studies such as those conducted by the Public Policy Forum^[iii], state Legislative Audit Bureau,^[iv] and the National Education Policy Center^[v] reveal that the voucher schools do not deliver on the promise of significantly improved academic performance, enroll a demographically different student body, and have been accompanied by a lack of transparency and accountability for public funding.

Since the 2001 GAO report was released, the federal interest in voucher programs has also continued to grow. Private school voucher and tax credit programs have proliferated across the country, Members of Congress have introduced numerous proposals to voucherize federal education funding, and the DC Opportunity Scholarship program was created in 2004. The DC voucher program, which has been the subject of multiple GAO reports^[vi] that found glaring transparency and accountability failings, further emphasize the need for additional study of the impact of school voucher programs.

In light of the strong federal interest in determining whether school voucher programs are successful, and the fact that the Milwaukee Parental Choice program has many years of data that may be examined, I respectfully request that GAO address the following questions regarding the Milwaukee Parental Choice program:

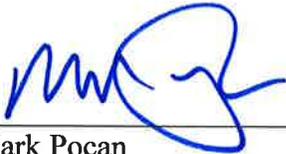
1. Has the Milwaukee Parental Choice program significantly increased academic achievement for students who use the voucher to attend private schools when compared to students with like characteristics in public settings
2. How does academic achievement data reported by MPCP voucher schools differ from reporting requirements for public school counterparts? Specifically, how are student characteristics such as socioeconomic status, special education and ELL accounted for in MPCP academic achievement data?
3. What, if any, demographic changes in the enrolled MPS student population have occurred since the inception of the MPCP?
4. How many students with disabilities does the MPCP serve and how are students with disabilities identified? How does this identification process differ from how students are identified in the public school system?

What records to participation MPCP schools keep on disciplinary measures (suspension and expulsion)? How many students (disaggregated by disability) are suspended or expelled annually?

5. What is the rate of “churn” or turnover among students attending voucher schools? Where do these students return to school and within what timeframe?
6. How do the program’s internal controls ensure accountability for publically funded vouchers? Have there been instances of fraud or misuse of public voucher monies? If so, how much money? How have the agencies responsible for implementing and overseeing the program performed their stated roles and responsibilities?
7. To what extent does the transparency and accountability for public funds, or lack there of, in the Milwaukee Parental Choice program contribute to or impede the public’s ability to knowledgably evaluate both the pros and cons of the program?

Thank you for your assistance with this request. Please direct your staff to coordinate GAO’s response with Alicia Molt on my staff (Alicia.molt@mail.house.gov, 202-225-2906).

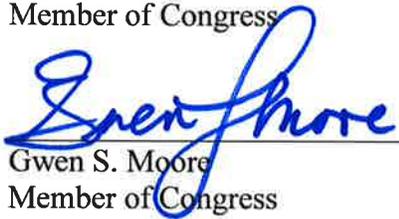
Sincerely,



Mark Pocan
Member of Congress



David Loeb sack
Member of Congress



Gwen S. Moore
Member of Congress

^[i] GAO-01-914, *Publically Funded Programs in Cleveland and Milwaukee*

^[ii] <http://epa.sagepub.com/content/early/2014/06/05/0162373714534521>

^[iii] <http://publicpolicyforum.org/research/significant-growth-school-choice-more-schools-more-students-fewer-limits-income-eligibility>

^[iv] <http://legis.wisconsin.gov/lab/reports12-14full.pdf>

^[v] <http://nepc.colorado.edu/thinktank/review-Milwaukee-Choice-Year-5>

^[vi] GAO-08-9, *District of Columbia Opportunity Scholarship Program: Additional Policies and Procedures Would Improve Internal Controls and Program Operations*, (2007);

GAO-13-805, *District of Columbia Opportunity Scholarship Program: Actions Needed to Address Weaknesses in Administration and Oversight* (2013)