

**From:** Jean Knab [JKnab@mathematica-mpr.com]  
**Sent:** Tuesday, September 07, 2010 2:49 PM  
**To:** WhatWorks  
**Subject:** FW: concerns about WWC review  
FYI

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**From:** Mark Dynarski  
**Sent:** Tuesday, September 07, 2010 3:46 PM  
**To:** Witte@lafollette.wisc.edu  
**Subject:** Re: concerns about WWC review

I have asked the Clearinghouse's Quality Review Team to look at the issues you raise below, to determine whether the WWC correctly applied its standards. I will forward the team's response when it is available.

If you have other concerns or issues with the review, it's efficient to raise them at this time and the quality-review team will look at all of them. You can send them to the same e-mail address used in your response below.

Sincerely,  
Mark Dynarski  
Director, What Works Clearinghouse  
Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.

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**From:** Witte, John [mailto:Witte@lafollette.wisc.edu]  
**Sent:** Tuesday, September 07, 2010 11:17 AM  
**To:** What Works  
**Cc:** Patrick Wolf; Cowen, Joshua; David J. Fleming (david.fleming@furman.edu)  
**Subject:** RE: What Works Clearinghouse Quick Review of Study

We strenuously object to the original email and timeframe you sent us. I got to the email one day before your one week deadline. We are active researchers and professors and cannot respond in that short a period. So I did not respond. But I find it unbelievable that your query had to do with attrition but your complaints have to do with inadequate baseline matching and students in existing voucher schools when we began. The first complaint is completely incorrect. You are responding to the third report on this project. The first report (and the second), which you ignored, went into great detail on the baseline estimates. The second complaint is factually correct, but seems odd in that both samples had ongoing students. Both of these complaints are largely mitigated by the fact that we control for baseline test scores, and many other variables, in our various models. What is even more surprising is that our national board and outside reviewers for this and prior reports, had no difficulty with these complaints.

If this is published as is we will formally complain through whatever sources we can use.

John F. Witte  
Professor of Political Science and Public Affairs

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**From:** What Works [mailto:whatworks@mathematica-mpr.com]  
**Sent:** Tuesday, September 07, 2010 8:34 AM  
**To:** witte@lafollette.wisc.edu  
**Subject:** What Works Clearinghouse Quick Review of Study

Dear Dr. Witte:

We are emailing to inform you that a What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) quick review of your report, "The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program Longitudinal Educational Growth Study Third Year Report," will be posted on the WWC website Wednesday, September 8, 2010. As part of this process, we are sharing with you a courtesy copy of the quick review (attached). **This quick review is embargoed until Wednesday, September 8, 2010, at 10am Eastern Time and cannot be circulated until that time.**

Quick reviews examine evidence published in a study (supplemented, if necessary, by information from author queries) to assess whether that study's design meets WWC evidence standards. Quick reviews rely on the effect sizes and significance levels reported by study authors. The WWC rating applies only to the summarized results, and not necessarily to all results presented in the study.

To learn more about WWC quick reviews, you can visit the WWC quick review page at:  
<http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/publications/quickreviews/>.

Because of the volume of correspondence the WWC receives, questions regarding WWC reports and quick reviews should be submitted to the Help Desk at [info@whatworks.ed.gov](mailto:info@whatworks.ed.gov). Your questions will be forwarded to the appropriate staff member on the WWC team and you will receive an e-mail response.

Sincerely,

The What Works Clearinghouse Team

8 September, 2010

Mark Dynarski  
Director, What Works Clearinghouse  
Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.

Dear Dr. Dynarski:

I write today to object formally to a report released by the What Works Quick Review series in your department on September 8, 2010. The What Works team reviewed a report on the Milwaukee Parental Choice (voucher) Program (MPCP)<sup>1</sup> for which I was lead author. Their review is simply a blurb without any substantive backing that we can find. No links to follow, no longer report. But it castigates our report as not meeting their standards of evidence. I object to a series of factual inaccuracies in their description of the study and to their summary conclusion. I request that the posting be removed and be reinstituted only with a revised summary conclusion as indicated below. I have sent a letter, very similar to this letter, to Dr. John Easton, director of the Institute for Education Sciences

The What Works report on the face of it, without considering anything else, is questionable. It is the third report in a planned five-year sequence. They ignored the first two reports, but yet take up the third? This is like reviewing a 12 chapter novel after starting to read on chapter six. I would also note the project for which this report is only one part, has issued 19 reports, with three more coming out this fall.

The team did send me a letter dated August 3 by electronic mail. Being summer and having a rigorous writing schedule as well as family time, I did not open this until some days later and by that time it was past their deadline of one week for a response. I wondered what was the rush on a report that had been released in April? Further if they had sent it to the other five authors one of them clearly would have noted it. This is what they asked in the letter:

On p. 5 of the report, you state that in the first year report (Witte et al., 2008), after matching, the MPS and MPCP samples were demonstrably similar in terms of baseline test scores and other observable characteristics. The report under review again compares test score outcomes of MPS and MPCP samples, but two years later than in the first year report, and there seems to have been attrition from the sample in first year report. Could you please provide evidence of equivalence of the MPS and MPCP samples included in the main impact analyses for the report under review (i.e., those presented in Table 4)?

The answer to this question, which becomes the basis for one of their major critiques, was covered in eight dense pages, with an additional six pages in a technical appendix, in our 2008 baseline report. That report was cited twice on page 5 of the 2010 report they reference in their letter. The Quick Review even cites that baseline report of 2008, which contains all of the evidence of the baseline equivalence of the samples, when describing how we matched the

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<sup>1</sup> "The MPCP Longitudinal Educational Growth Study: Third Year Report, available from the University of Arkansas, School of Education, <http://www.uark.edu/ua/der/SCDP/Research.html>.

students, but then claims that we never demonstrated baseline equivalence. Clearly the reviewers only glanced over our crucial baseline report and failed to see that most of it provides exactly the evidence of equivalence that they claim the study lacks. The attrition issue cited in the letter seems to have been dropped, perhaps because they got around to reading the appendix of the current (2010) report that clearly indicates no difference in baseline test scores for students missing from both samples.

As indicated in all our reports, our basic study design rests on an innovative matching process that first matches Milwaukee Public School (MPS) and MPCP students by neighborhood and baseline (2006) test scores. Demographers have long noted that neighborhoods tend to contain similar people, thus helping us control for measurable and unmeasurable family differences. The list of MPS matches for each MPCP student was then reduced to a single match using propensity scores that were estimated by including a wider set of student characteristics. As it turns out, well documented in our initial report, this algorithm created a sample far superior to a random sample of MPS students not only on prior tests but also on other important student characteristics. We, and our national advisory board and outside reviewers, are proud of the advance this method makes in observational studies.

As to the one-page report, it is hard to believe so many errors could be made in so few words. Here are some from the descriptive paragraphs:

1. "In 2006, the study's authors matched each voucher participant with one comparison student from Milwaukee Public Schools." False, we drew a representative sample of voucher students in grades 3-8 and the census of students in grade 9 and matched those 2727 students to a similar sized MPS panel of students. If we had matched each voucher participant to an MPS student, we would have a total of 38,000 students in our study!
2. "Math and reading scores of a subsample of these matched students were measured through fall 2008..." That is highly misleading, suggesting the we only tracked a small subgroup of our panel. We tracked them all and obtained valid test scores from over 80 percent of them which is very good and well above the IES standard of 70 percent.
3. We didn't compare "achievement", as they say, we compared "achievement growth," which renders their major objections irrelevant.

As to the substance of their claims for categorizing the report as not meeting standards of evidence, the first problem they note is: "The authors do not provide evidence that the subsamples of voucher recipients and public school comparison students analyzed in this study were initially equivalent in math and reading achievement." If they had read the first year (2008) report that cited in the review they would have found that the baseline matches were not significantly different in any of the six grades in reading between the MPS-matched and MPCP samples. In math there were differences in three grades, but those differences were minor and in all cases our matching algorithm was far superior to taking a grade-stratified random sample of MPS students as the match. And in any event, we control for baseline test score differences in our multivariate analyses, so that the minor math differences at baseline would not affect the growth measures we estimated.



The second claim is that: "Also some voucher participants had been in private schools for several years before matching occurred." This is true, but of course it is also true for the MPS-matched sample. Given our controls, which also include grade-level dummies, this is also very unlikely to have impact on our growth estimates. Since our outcome estimate is of achievement growth, and not achievement levels as falsely indicated in the WWC Quick Review, the fact that some study participants had been in their respective school sectors for some time prior to baseline is largely irrelevant to the comparison of future average achievement growth trends that are the focus of our actual analysis.

What may be more troubling in the long run is that this claim is directly attributable to the narrow, RTF-biased standards. In clinical trials the study begins with the first pill. But this study is a policy evaluation similar to thousands done every year by such agencies as GAO. Often it is impossible to do RTFs and impossible to evaluate a program from its startup. Our study is clearly a modal study approach and one that I am proud tries to push observational studies forward in using our algorithm to attempt to control for unmeasured variables of all kinds. However, to suggest this biases our results given the many methods of comparison we employ is at the very least wild speculation.

Based on the WWC's own standards for rigor, this careful matched-panel study, which included an entire baseline report demonstrating the approximate test score equivalence of the samples at baseline, should have been rated "meets evidence standards with reservations" instead of "fails to meet evidence standards."

I truly hope this does not have to go beyond the IES office, but both the project and the reputation of all the authors are at jeopardy and I will do whatever it takes to protect both.

Sincerely,

John F. Witte  
Professor of Political Science and Public Affairs  
University of Wisconsin-Madison

From: Witte, John [mailto:Witte@lafollette.wisc.edu]  
Sent: Wednesday, September 08, 2010 6:56 PM  
To: Jill Miller  
Subject: FW: MORE concerns about WWC review

I got an out of the office reply for Mark. I want this taken care of before September 13. Please get it to him or to someone who can handle it. Easton already knows about it.

From: Witte, John  
Sent: Wednesday, September 08, 2010 5:47 PM  
To: 'Mark Dynarski'  
Subject: RE: MORE concerns about WWC review

Please see the attached letter.

John Witte

From: Mark Dynarski [mailto:MDynarski@mathematica-mpr.com]  
Sent: Tuesday, September 07, 2010 2:46 PM  
To: Witte, John  
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Mark Dynarski

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Professor of Political Science and Public Affairs

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The What Works Clearinghouse Team



**From:** What Works  
**Sent:** Thursday, October 07, 2010 10:19 AM  
**To:** 'Witte@lafollette.wisc.edu'  
**Subject:** What Works Clearinghouse (QR2010016)  
**Attachments:** QR2010016.pdf; AuthorQuery\_MPCP.doc

Dear Dr. Witte,

I am following up on the issue you raised in your email on September 7<sup>th</sup> about the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) quick review of your report, "The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program Longitudinal Educational Growth Study Third Year Report." The quality review team has reviewed the study, the WWC quick review, and your concerns. Attached is a letter with their findings and the next steps we will follow. In addition, we have attached another form requesting more information about the study.

If you have any additional questions or concerns, please send them to this email and we will respond quickly.

Sincerely,  
Jill Constantine  
Director, What Works Clearinghouse  
Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.

The What Works Clearinghouse was established by the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences to provide educators, policymakers, researchers, and the public with a central and trusted source of scientific evidence of what works in education. For more information, please visit <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/>.