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Habitual Truancy and School Report Cards in Milwaukee Schools



A study of public and private charter schools in Milwaukee shows the negative effects of truancy on School Report Card scores cuts across school type and student demographics. The higher Report Card scores of Milwaukee private charter schools compared to public schools is explained by their bias selection of low truancy students.

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Introduction

Wisconsin has become the epicenter of the education debate in the United States, with the city of Milwaukee serving as the laboratory for self-proclaimed “education reformers.”^{1 2} This study, to the best of our knowledge, is the first to draw a direct comparison between the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) and each of the two existing groups of charter schools in Milwaukee (schools chartered by MPS and “2R” private charter schools) using the state’s School Report Cards as the measure for school performance.

As of 2013, Milwaukee has a total of 49 charter schools, consisting of 29 district charter schools and 20 “2R” private charter schools (“2R” charter schools operate under Wisconsin Statute 118.40(2R) and are chartered by one of four non-instrumentality boards outside MPS³).⁴ The certified enrollment for 2012 was 10,479 in MPS charter schools, and 7,814 in 2R charter schools, for a total of 18,293 in all charter schools.⁵ Certified enrollment for MPS in 2012 was 79,130.⁶ Charter schools now account for nearly 20% of student enrollment in the city of Milwaukee, and a significant taxpayer investment. In 2012, 2R charter schools received state aid payments of \$7,775 per pupil, totaling \$59.8 million.⁷ By contrast, MPS received \$6,442 per pupil, 17% less than charter students. Had the aid to 2R charter schools been diverted to MPS, the state aid amount per pupil would have increased to \$7,198.

In December 2012, Forward Institute released a statewide study of School Report Card scores.⁸ The study was the first to actually quantify the correlation between student poverty and School Report Card scores. The study found that nearly half of the school-to-school difference in Report Card scores could be explained by the variation in student poverty from school to school. Most relevant to the situation in Milwaukee, the study found that in statewide schools of higher poverty, public schools outscored charter schools on Report Card scores. In May 2013, Forward Institute released a comprehensive study examining the relationship between student poverty and funding policy in Wisconsin.⁹ The study showed that public education “opt-out” programs such as charter schools and voucher programs have a particularly negative impact in areas of high student poverty with regard to funding. Student poverty has nearly doubled since 1997, with the greatest rate of increase seen from 2007–present. At the same time, inflation-adjusted state funding of public education has fallen to its

¹ Vinehout, Kathleen, 2013, “Is Wisconsin ready for the corporate reformers of education,” Winona Daily News accessible at http://www.winonadailynews.com/news/opinion/columnists/local/article_361fdb3a-4808-11e3-8795-001a4bcf887a.html

² Policy Staff, 2013, “Racine voucher enrollment doubles in first year without participation cap,” MacIver Institute accessible at <http://www.maciverinstitute.com/2013/11/racine-voucher-enrollment-doubles-in-first-year-without-participation-cap/>

³ Wisconsin State Statute 118.40 accessible at <http://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/statutes/statutes/118/40>

⁴ Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2013, Charter Schools Yearbook accessible at <http://sms.dpi.wi.gov/files/sms/pdf/2012-13yearbook.pdf>

⁵ Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction website accessible at http://sms.dpi.wi.gov/sms_csindex

⁶ Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction database portal accessible at <http://wisedash.dpi.wi.gov/Dashboard/portalHome.jsp>

⁷ Wisconsin Legislative Fiscal Bureau, 2013, “Informational Paper 28 – Charter Schools” accessible at http://legis.wisconsin.gov/lfb/publications/Informational-Papers/Documents/2013/28_Charter%20Schools.pdf

⁸ Wittkopf, Scott, 2012, Wisconsin Report Card Study 2012 accessible at <http://forwardinstitute.files.wordpress.com/2012/12/wisconsin-report-card-study-2012.pdf>

⁹ Wittkopf, Scott, 2013, Wisconsin Budget Policy and Poverty in Education accessible at <http://forwardinstitute.files.wordpress.com/2013/05/wisconsin-budget-policy-and-poverty-in-education-2013.pdf>

lowest level in more than 17 years. On average, schools with higher poverty enrollment levels have experienced per-pupil funding cuts more than two-times the cuts in the most affluent districts.¹⁰

In a time of state funding cuts and increasing student poverty rates, it is necessary to address the question of charter school performance and whether these alternative schools offer any real educational benefit to students in Milwaukee. There has also been a lack of comparative analyses between 2R charter schools and MPS schools since the implementation of School Report Cards, leading to incomplete information¹¹ for city leaders and inaccurate conclusions based on faulty analyses. **This report will show that when controlling for school and community factors, charter schools in Milwaukee do not offer a better educational outcome for students.**

Study Methodology

Data for all 2012 School Report Card scores¹² and school- and teacher-level¹³ data were downloaded in Microsoft Excel spreadsheet form from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) database. Zip code information for each school was derived from the MPS website.¹⁴ Community data by zip code was derived from the United States Census Bureau.¹⁵ All raw data are available on the Forward Institute website at www.forwardinstitutewi.org/research. Multivariable regressions were conducted to determine factors significantly associated with Report Card scores across all schools, and differences in Report Card scores for three separate comparisons by school type adjusting for confounders (factors that differ between school types and may lead to a false association with school type). The comparative groups were MPS public vs. 2R charter schools, 2R charter schools vs. MPS charter schools, and MPS charter schools vs. MPS public schools.

School variables tested: Type of school (public charter, private charter, public), and school percentages of economically disadvantaged (ED; measured as free or reduced lunch rate), habitual truancy (more than five unexcused absences per semester), suspensions, disabled enrollment, minority enrollment, female gender enrollment, and English proficiency.

Teacher variables tested: Percentages of teachers with a full teaching license, teachers with five years or more experience, and teachers with a Masters Degree or higher.

Community-level census data by zip code tested: Percentages of parents with a High School diploma, some college education, Bachelors/Associates Degree, Graduate Degree, median household income (MHI), and poverty.

¹⁰ Wittkopf, Scott, 2013, Wisconsin Budget Policy and Poverty in Education accessible at <http://forwardinstitutewi.org/2013/05/15/wisconsin-budget-policy-and-poverty-in-education/>

¹¹ Milwaukee Charter School Review Committee, 2012, Annual Report accessible at <http://city.milwaukee.gov/ImageLibrary/Groups/DOAAuthors/CharterSchool/AnnualReports/ar2011-12CSRC.pdf>

¹² Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, School Report Card database accessible at <http://reportcards.dpi.wi.gov/>

¹³ Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction database portal accessible at <http://wisedash.dpi.wi.gov/Dashboard/portalHome.jsp>

¹⁴ Milwaukee Public School District website http://mpsportal.milwaukee.k12.wi.us/portal/server.pt/comm/schools/315/schools_list/43847

¹⁵ US Census Bureau database accessible at http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community_facts.xhtml

Results

MPS Public Schools Compared to 2R Charter Schools

The mean Report Card score for MPS public schools was 55.6. The mean Report Card score for 2R charter schools was 64.3. T-test (two tailed for equal variances) shows the 8.7 point difference was significant at $p = 0.003$. **When statistically controlling for confounding (i.e., equalizing the rates of the confounding variables between the two school types), the 8.7 point difference in Report Card score became a 1.8 point difference and was no longer significant at $p = 0.41$. Therefore, there is no significant difference between MPS public and 2R charter School Report Card scores.** Figure 1 illustrates the adjusted scores. Regression analysis determined that the following variables were confounders of the comparison (see Table 1):

Disabled Enrollment (%) – MPS 21.3, 2R Charters 9.7

Teachers with at Least 5 years Total Experience (%) – MPS 87.5, 2R Charters 61.6

Habitual Truancy (%) – MPS 41.1, 2R Charters 16.7

Economic Disadvantaged Enrollment (%) – MPS 85.1, 2R Charters 74.8

Median Household Income (\$1000) – MPS 38.1, 2R Charters 34.9

The variable with the strongest association with Report Card score was the Habitual Truancy rate. Coefficients for all confounders in each comparative group can be seen in Table 1 (the MPS public and 2R charter school comparison is seen in the first two columns of Table 1).

2R Charter Schools Compared to MPS Charter Schools

The mean Report Card score for 2R charter schools was 64.3. The mean Report Card score for MPS charter schools was 49.0. T-test (two-tailed for unequal variances) shows the 15.2 point difference was significant at $p = 0.0007$. **When controlling for confounding, the 15.2 point difference became a 3.5 point difference and was no longer significant at $p = 0.30$. There is no significant difference between 2R and MPS charter School Report Card scores** (Figure 2). Regression analysis determined that the following variables were confounders of the comparison (see Table 1):

Habitual Truancy (%) – 2R Charters 16.7, MPS Charters 41.1

Teachers with Full License (%) - 2R Charters 91.4, MPS Charters 84.8

Median Household Income (\$1000) – 2R Charters 34.8, MPS Charters 39.2

Again, the variable with the strongest association with Report Card score was the Habitual Truancy rate. The 2R and MPS charter school comparison is seen in the middle two columns of Table 1.

MPS Public Schools Compared to MPS Charter Schools

The mean Report Card score for MPS public schools was 55.6. The mean Report Card score for MPS charter schools was 49.0. T-test (two tailed for unequal variances) shows the difference to be **not** significant at $p = 0.08$. **When controlling for confounding, the difference actually became significant at $p = 0.004$** (see Figure 3). The following variables were found to be confounders of the comparison (see Table 1):

Disabled Enrollment (%) – MPS Public 21.3, MPS Charters 14.2

Teachers with at Least 5 years Total Experience (%) – MPS Public 87.5, MPS Charters 57.2

Economic Disadvantaged Enrollment (%) – MPS Public 85.1, MPS Charters 79.1

The last two columns in Table 1 detail the associations of the confounding variables with Report Card scores. **It is noteworthy that when controlling for the confounding variables, that school type becomes more significant. This indicates that after statistically equalizing the rates of disabled and economic disadvantaged enrollment and teacher experience between the MPS public and charter schools, MPS public schools have significantly higher Report Card scores than MPS charter schools.**

In summary, when controlling for confounding variables, no significant difference exists in outcome as measured by School Report Cards between MPS public schools and 2R charters. When comparing MPS public schools to MPS charters, clearly MPS public schools have a significant positive effect on outcome as measured by School Report Cards. In the case of the two charter school groups, there is no significant difference in outcome as measured by School Report Cards.

Table 1: Differences in Report Card Scores by Type of School, Unadjusted and Adjusted for Confounders of Each Comparison

	MPS Public v. 2R Charters		2R Charters v. MPS Charters		MPS Public v. MPS Charters	
	Unadjusted	Adjusted	Unadjusted	Adjusted	Unadjusted	Adjusted
Intercept	55.6	77.2	64.3	58.9	55.6	83.5
School Type	8.7**	1.8	-15.3***	-3.4	-6.6	-7.2**
Habitual Truancy (%)		-0.3***		-0.4***		
Teachers with Full License (%)				0.2*		
Median Household Income (\$1000)		-0.08		-0.2		
Disabled Enrollment (%)		-0.02				-0.3*
Teachers with >=5 yrs Total Experience (%)		0.07				0.1**
Economic Disadvantaged Enrollment (%)		-0.2***				-0.4***

Table 1 notes:

School Type denotes the difference, positive or negative, of the “0” school group (MPS Public, 2R Charters, and MPS Public in consecutive school groups) mean score subtracted from the “1” school group (2R Charters, MPS Charters, and MPS Charters in consecutive school groups) mean score in the analysis.

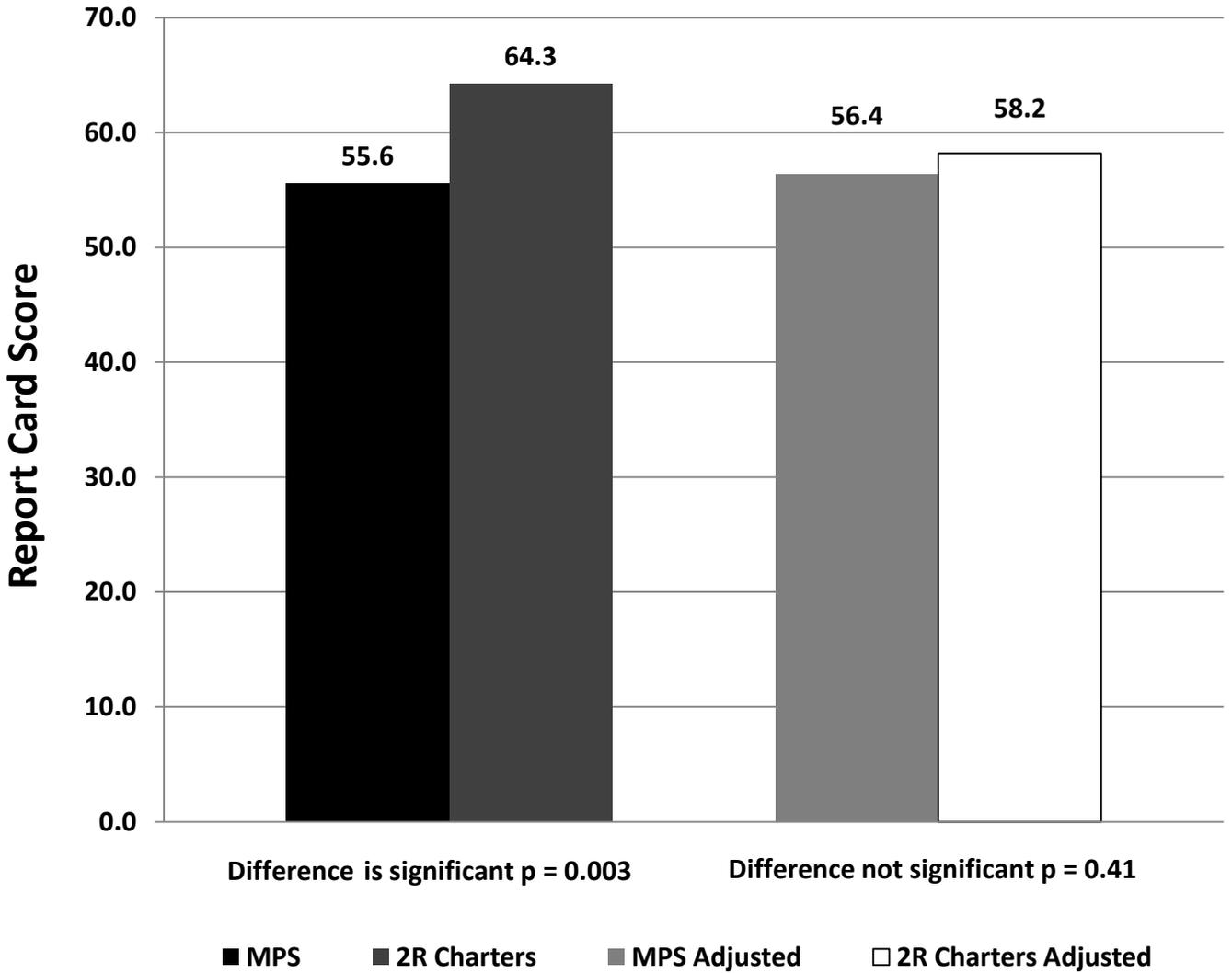
Additional variables included in each adjusted model were confounders of the respective school type comparison. These coefficients indicate the variable’s positive or negative association with Report Card scores.

*p < 0.05

**p < 0.01

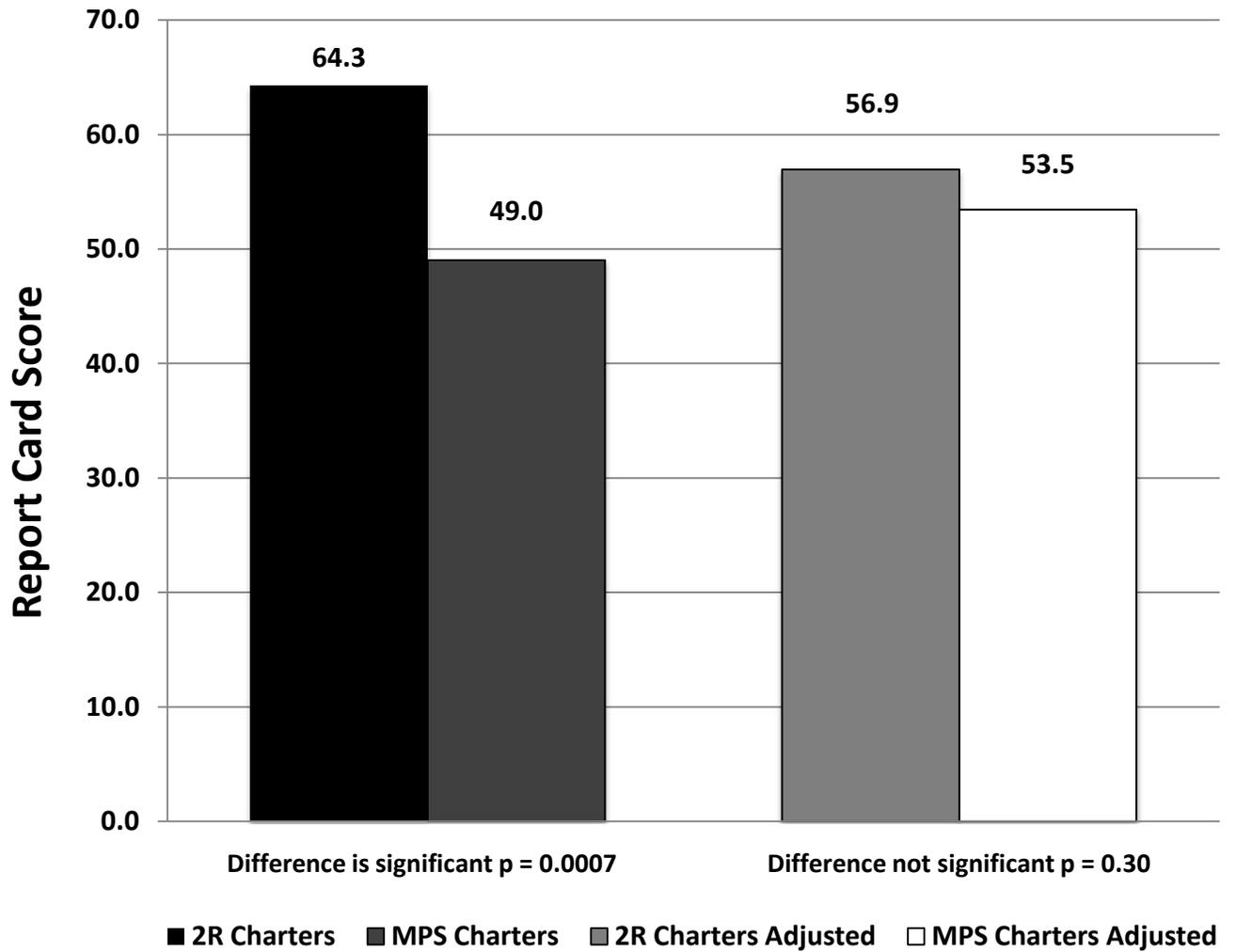
***p < 0.001

Figure 1: MPS Public and 2R Charter Schools Mean Score Compared to Adjusted Mean Score



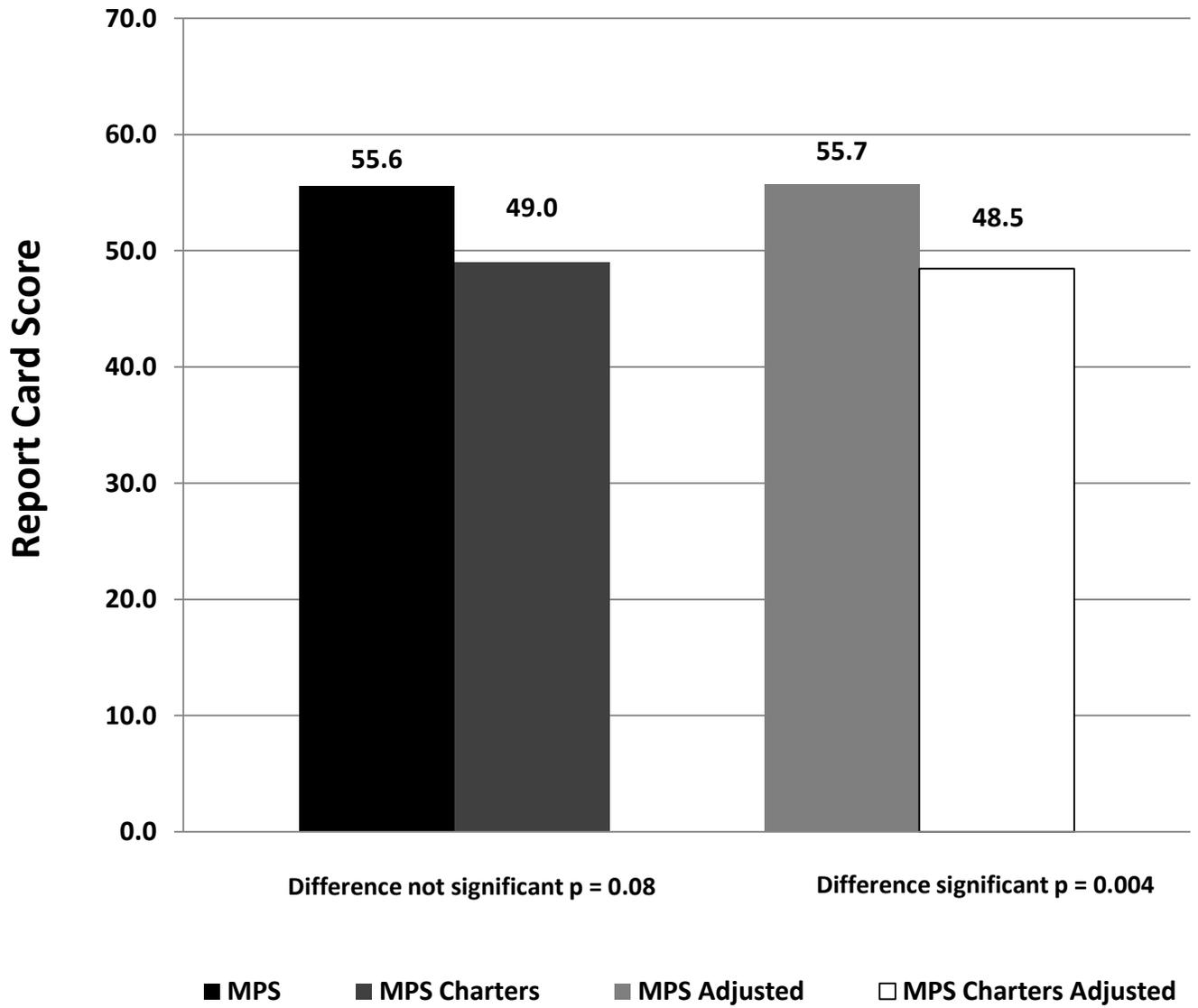
Note: Adjusted scores calculated at mean values of the confounding variables in Table 1.

Figure 2: 2R Charter and MPS Charter Schools Mean Score Compared to Adjusted Mean Score



Note: Adjusted scores calculated at mean values of the confounding variables in Table 1.

Figure 3: MPS Public and MPS Charter Schools Mean Score Compared to Adjusted Mean Score



Note: Adjusted scores calculated at mean values of the confounding variables in Table 1.

Milwaukee Public and Charter Schools – Factors Associated with Report Card Scores

In each of our three cases, there are *confounding variables* which have a positive or negative association with School Report Card scores and whose frequencies greatly differ between the types of school. In the Milwaukee charter school “experiment,” the hypothesis put forth by education “reformers” was that the type of school (the independent variable) can affect student performance (the dependent variable). Since students were not randomized to MPS public or charter schools, any study seeking to test this hypothesis needs to identify the “confounding variables”—the variables that must be brought to light to prevent a false correlation between the dependent and independent variables.

Since school type was not associated with Report Card score after adjusting for confounders, we determined what factors have a significant association with scores, and a multivariable regression was conducted to discern those factors. The result of that regression can be seen in Tables 2 & 3.

Amongst all Milwaukee public and charter schools, **we can explain 72% of the school-to-school difference in Report Card scores by the differences between schools in economic disadvantaged (ED) enrollment rate, habitual truancy rate, and percentage of teachers with at least 5 years of experience** (Table 2). A higher ED enrollment rate is associated with a lower score, and higher rate of teacher experience is related to a higher score. **The factor most strongly associated with Report Card score is the habitual truancy rate with three times the effect size as both ED enrollment and teacher experience.** For each 1% increase in truancy, Report Card score declines by 0.33 points, versus a 0.1 point score change for each 1% increase in ED or teacher experience. Effect sizes from the regression for each variable individually can be seen in Figures 4, 5, and 6.

Figure 7 shows the association of Report Card scores with ED enrollment for schools above and below the median truancy rate (36%). In schools below the median truancy (red diamonds), we see the previously discussed association of lower Report Card scores with higher ED enrollment. In contrast, **the figure clearly demonstrates that the schools with high truancy (yellow circles) are clustered in the low Report Card score range, regardless of their ED enrollment. Even those high truancy schools with a mid-range ED enrollment have worse outcomes.** With regard to the 2R charters, the vast majority falls in the low truancy group (blue diamonds); only three schools have above median truancy (green diamonds). This visually reiterates what was noted above that **MPS public schools have a 41.1% truancy rate while 2R Charters have only a 16.7% truancy rate.**

Table 2: Significant Variables in Milwaukee School Report Card Scores

<i>Regression Statistics</i>		
Multiple R		0.85
R Square		0.72
Adjusted R Square		0.72
Standard Error		6.53
Observations		153
	<i>Coefficients</i>	<i>P-value</i>
Intercept	67.15	< 0.0001
Economic Disadvantaged Enrollment (%)	-0.10	< 0.001
Habitual Truancy (%)	-0.33	< 0.001
Teachers with at Least 5 years Experience (%)	0.11	< 0.001

Table 3: Significant Variables Excluding Habitual Truancy in Milwaukee School Report Card Scores

<i>Regression Statistics</i>			
Multiple R	0.60		
R Square	0.36		
Adjusted R Square	0.35		
Standard Error	9.92		
Observations	153		
		<i>Coefficients</i>	<i>P-value</i>
Intercept	78.99	< 0.001	
Economic Disadvantaged Enrollment (%)	-0.40	< 0.001	
Teachers with at Least 5 years Experience (%)	0.12	< 0.001	

Figure 4: Habitual Truancy Association with Milwaukee Report Card Scores

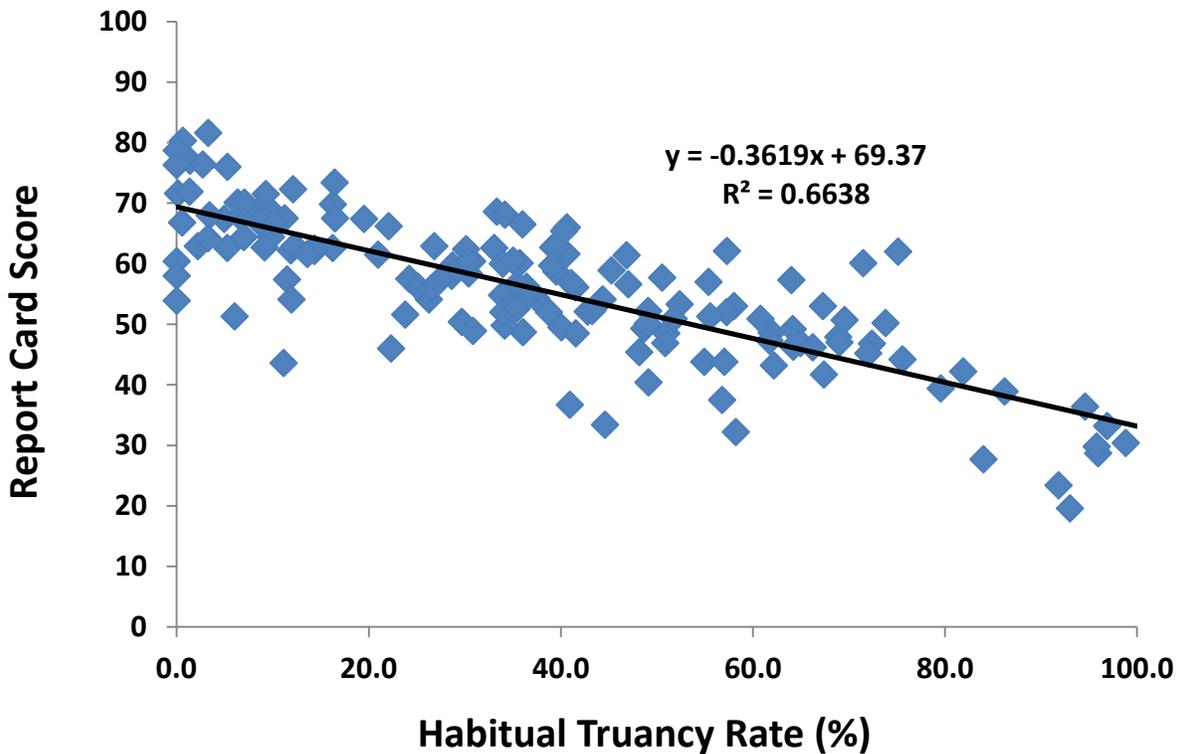


Figure 5: Economic Disadvantaged Enrollment Association with Milwaukee Report Card Scores

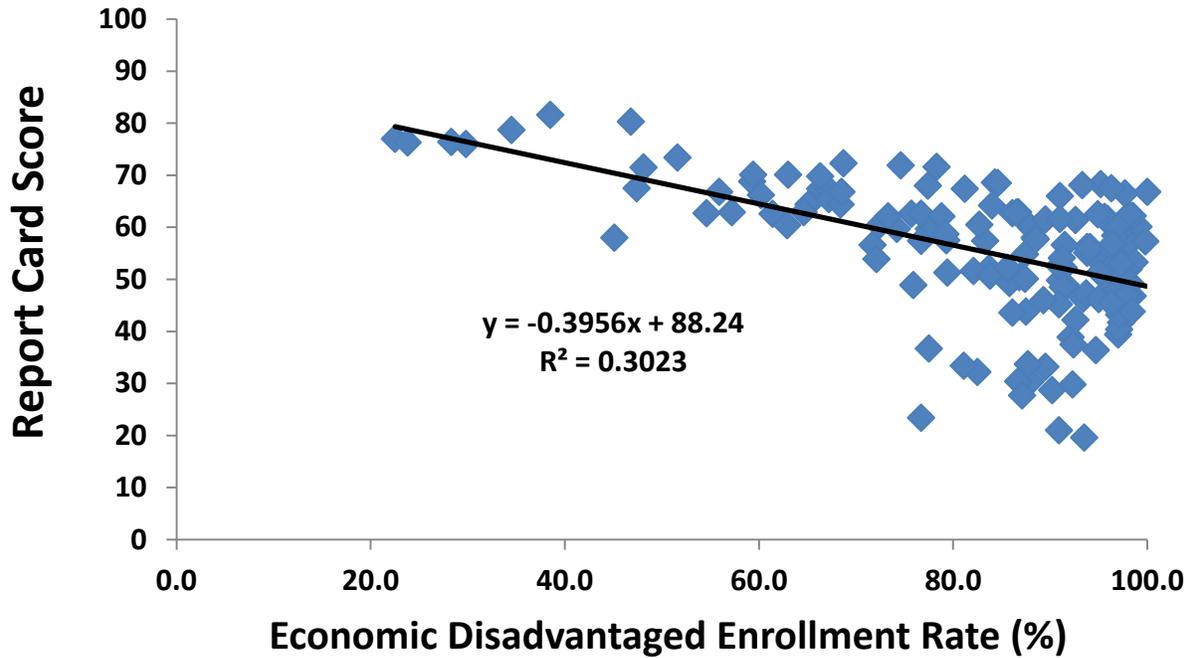


Figure 6: Percent of Teachers with at Least Five Years of Experience Association with Milwaukee School Report Card Scores

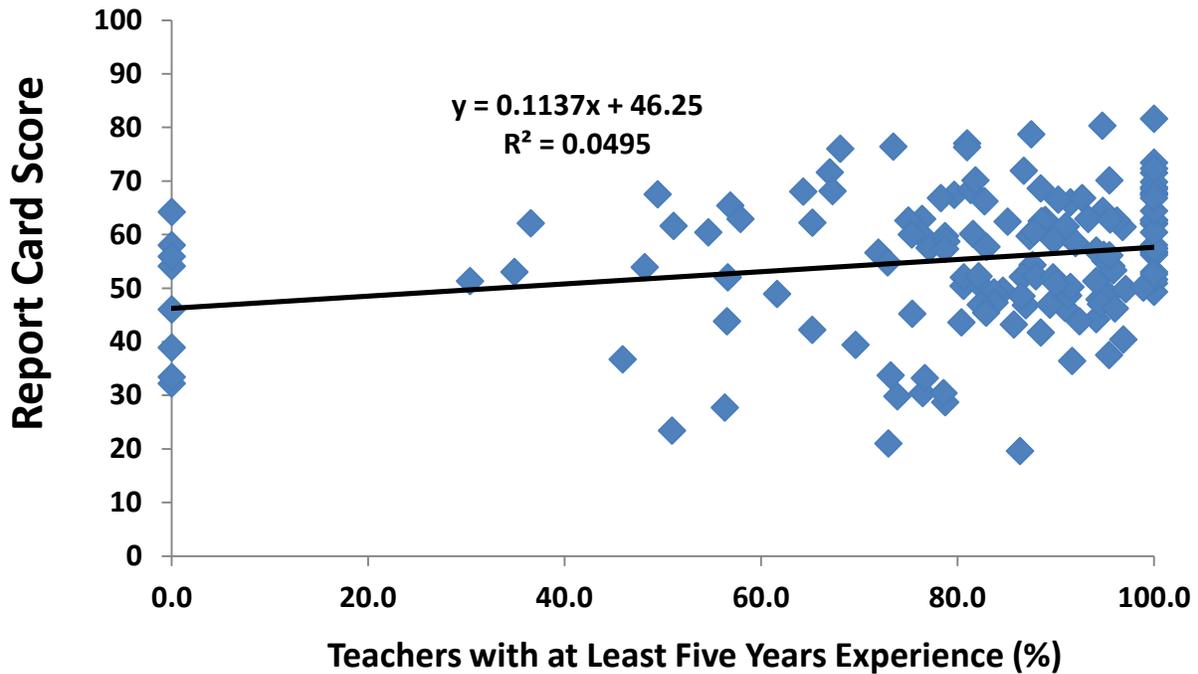
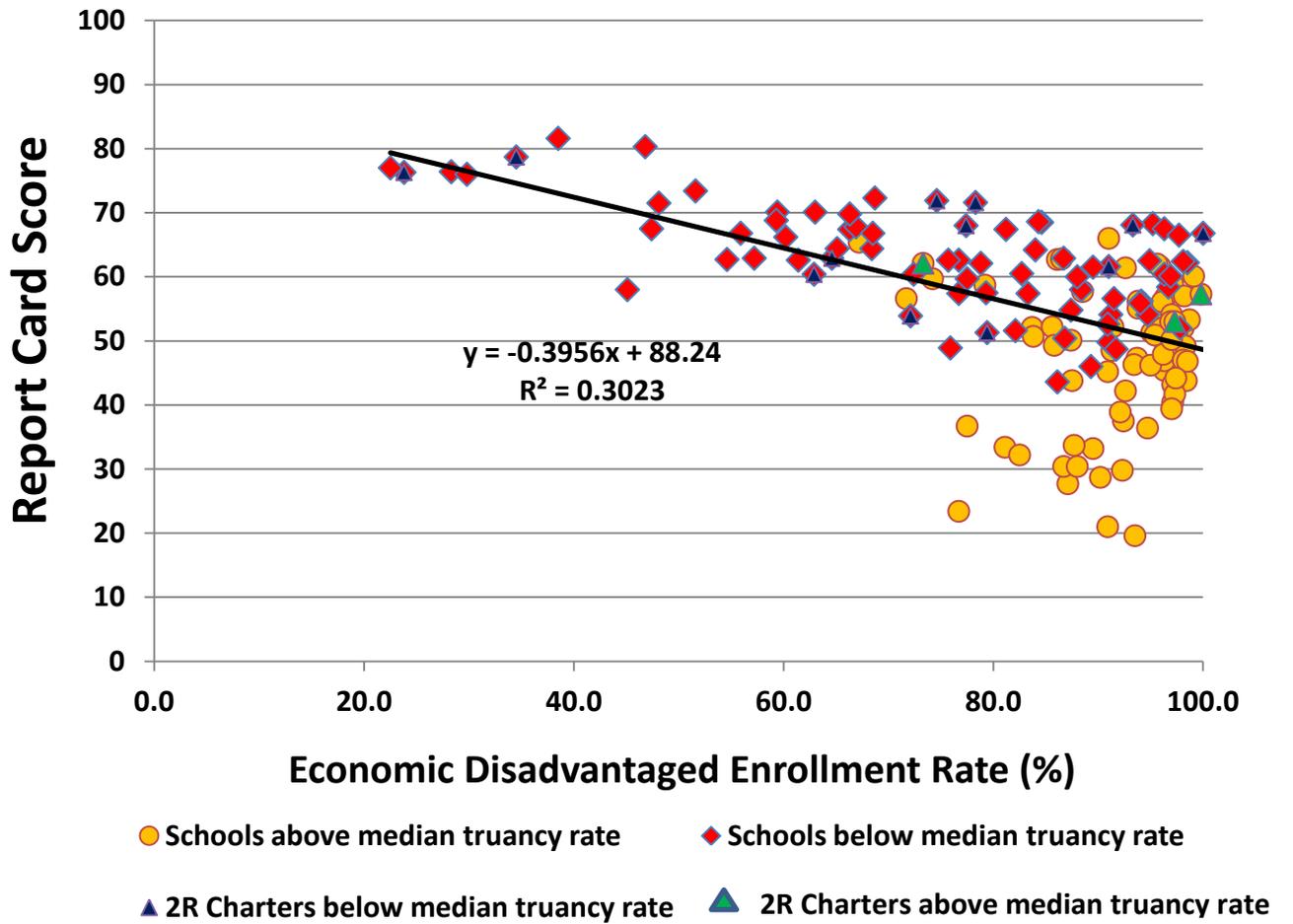


Figure 7: Economic Disadvantaged Enrollment Association with Milwaukee Report Card Scores for Schools Above and Below Median Truancy Rate



Habitual Truancy and Report Card Scores

Our previous School Report Card study¹⁶ showed a significant relationship between student poverty and Report Card scores statewide. The Milwaukee school analyses demonstrate that there also exists a strong relationship between high truancy and low Report Card scores. As we already know that statistical relationships exist between habitual truancy, ED enrollment rate and Report Card score (Figure 7), we tested whether habitual truancy mediates the effect of ED enrollment on Report Card score. That is to say, discern whether the large negative association between ED enrollment and Report Card score exists partially due to higher truancy.

Observing the coefficient changes in Tables 2 and 3 (pages 10 and 11) shows that habitual truancy does partially mediate the effect of higher ED enrollment on lower Report Card scores. The ED enrollment coefficient in Table 3 is -0.40 (without habitual truancy in the regression). When habitual truancy is included in the model in Table 2, the ED enrollment coefficient becomes -0.10. **The result of the analysis shows that in Milwaukee, 75% of the negative association of ED enrollment with Report Card scores is due to the negative association of truancy with Report Card scores. This is a significant finding for public policy and education, and has broad implications for addressing the impact of poverty in all Milwaukee schools.**

Noteworthy in this analysis is that a significant negative association of ED enrollment with score remains (Table 2), along with a significant positive association with teacher experience. The significance of positive teacher experience also has important implications for education policy. It is important to underscore that the overall analysis shows us that the negative association with truancy is equal across school types.

Concerning is the significantly lower truancy rates in the 2R charter schools as compared to both MPS public and charter schools. While 2R charter advocates might suggest that low truancy rates are due to academic success of the 2R charter program, we have not seen evidence in the data to support this claim. In fact, the 2R type of school had no significant positive association with Report Card scores.

It is our hypothesis that the data presented in this study provide additional evidence of two factors that may have a large impact on school and student performance in the 2R charter schools – student selection bias or “skimming” by the schools and a parental “placebo effect.” We forward the theory that this study, combined with other research and data, provide strong evidence that private “opt-out” education programs are “skimming” students who have a high pre-determination for academic success (especially in attendance factors). In addition, the private charter schools provide parents with a process and promise that lends itself to a strong, psychological “placebo” effect. It is highly likely that the successful student in question would succeed just as well in a public school.

Discussion - Exploring Selection Bias in Private Charter Schools

There are two types of selection bias which we hypothesize are occurring in 2R charter schools. The first is “skimming” or student selection bias on the part of the schools themselves. The second is parental, and results in a psychological “placebo” effect. This effect causes parents whose children attend 2R schools to hold such a strong “belief” in their opted school (and what it promises/messages) that their commitment is greater than the actual effect of the school. As we will connect, the habitual truancy and ED enrollment data largely supports this theory. The combined effects of these biases paint

¹⁶ Wittkopf, Scott, 2012, Wisconsin Report Card Study 2012, accessible at <http://forwardinstitute.files.wordpress.com/2012/12/wisconsin-report-card-study-2012.pdf>

a deceptively positive picture of 2R school performance, and serve to segregate predictably higher-performing students out of community public schools – to the detriment of other students.

Student Selection Bias – “Skimming”

One piece of skimming evidence is the significance of truancy on student and school outcome presented in this study. A school which depends primarily on meeting contractual performance measures for its fiscal survival would do well to mitigate the factor with the greatest negative association with student outcome - truancy. In an urban area of increasing student poverty, high truancy, and deep recession, 2R charter schools have seen a nine year reduction in truancy rate that is five times greater than the more affluent and economically insulated schools statewide (see Figure 8). To summarize, 2R charters have seen a 44% reduction in truancy since 2004. By contrast, MPS has seen a 4% increase, while Wisconsin public schools have seen only an 8% decrease. In the context of truancy and Report Card scores, it is highly unlikely that a school program is so effective that it virtually eliminates truancy without demonstrating a statistically significant positive association with School Report Card scores.

Additional evidence of skimming can be seen in the comparisons between 2R charter schools and other community schools in the same zip code. Comparing schools in the same zip code allows us to observe schools in similar income and demographic communities. Stratifying by zip code demonstrates that 2R charter schools do not function as community schools based on strikingly different truancy and ED demographics. Further, they also appear to be skimming students more likely to have academic success. Seven zip codes in Milwaukee have enough schools and at least one 2R charter school to allow for a comparison (see Table 4).

We assert that the deep truancy rate disparity between 2R and public schools in census areas with similar demographics cannot be a function of school efficacy. If the low truancy rate were a school function, we would expect to see a higher number of 2R charters in Figure 7 below the median truancy rate performing at a higher score level, since the improved results would translate into better outcomes for all students, not just truant students. Only four “below median truancy rate” 2R schools scored above 70 on School Report Cards and two of those have relatively low student poverty rates, at 35% and 24%.

In addition, if 2R schools had a significant educational effect to counter truancy, we would expect 2R charter Report Card scores to be relatively insulated from the effects of truancy. A comparison to the 2013 Report Card data (released as this report was being written) shows this is not the case (see Table 5).

Figure 8: Nine Year Trend in Mean Truancy Rates by Type of School

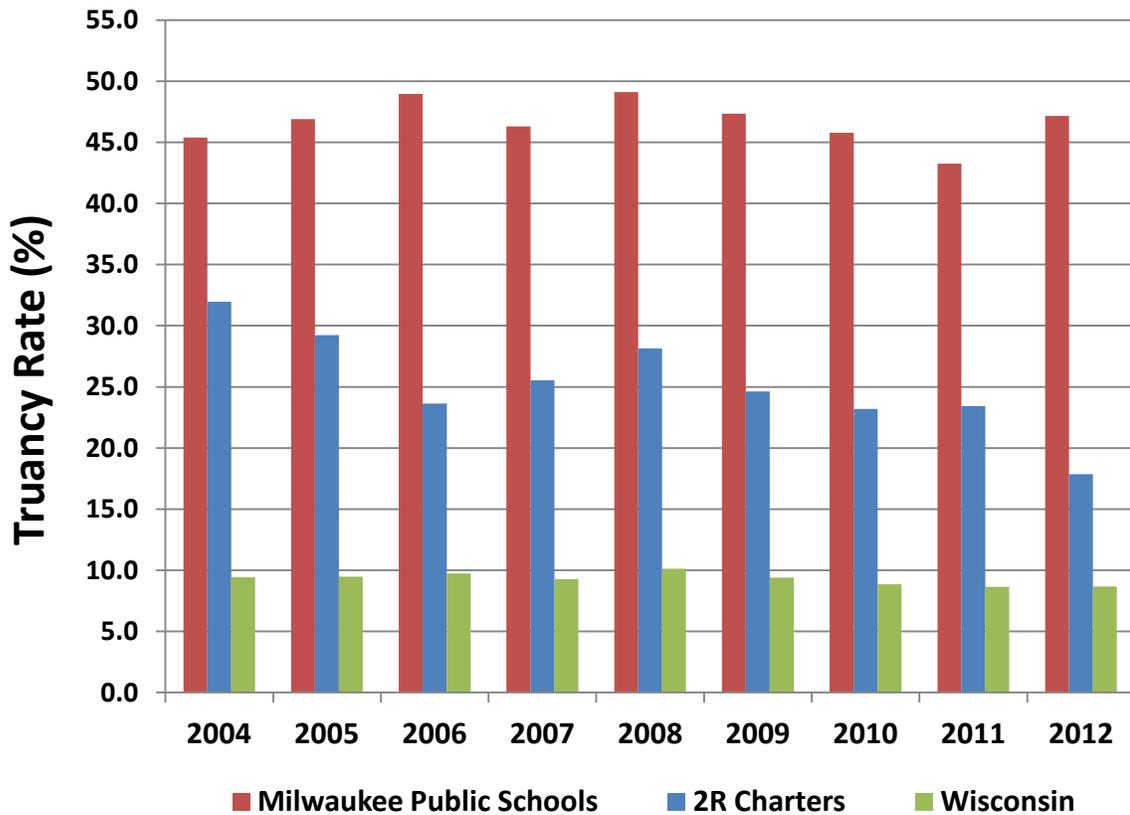


Table 4 : 2R and Public School Comparisons of Report Card Scores, Truancy, and Economic Disadvantaged Enrollment by Zip Code

Zip Code	Score Mean		Truancy Mean (%)		ED Mean (%)	
	2R	Public	2R	Public	2R	Public
53204	71.6	50.7	0.1	51.7	78.3	95
53207	78.7	63.2	0	26.2	34.5	66.1
53210	71.9	49.3	1.3	56.6	74.6	87.2
53215	67.4	54.1	2	30.3	88.7	89.5
53222	60.4	61.4	0	17.5	62.9	62.9
53223	53.9	43.5	0	42.1	72.1	81.4
53224	61.6	48.6	13.6	51.3	91	89.8
Combined Means	66.5	53.0	2.4	39.4	71.7	81.7

Table 5: 2012 - 2013 Comparisons of Report Card Scores, Truancy, and Economic Disadvantaged Enrollment by School Type

	Score Mean		Truancy Mean (%)		ED Mean (%)	
	2012	2013	2012	2013	2012	2013
MPS	55.6	55.7	41.1	41.8	85.1	84.5
2R	64.3	62.4	16.7	18.4	74.8	78.6
MPS Charters	49.0	56.9	41.1	32.9	79.1	78.8

From 2012-2013, MPS public schools see little change in truancy rate and ED rate, and therefore see little change in Report Card score. 2R charter schools see a slight increase in both truancy and ED rate, and actually see a reduction in Report Card scores. MPS charters see a relatively large decrease in truancy rate (with little change in ED rate), and see a nearly eight point increase in Report Card scores. This is further evidence of the negative impact of truancy on all schools, and that 2R schools are not countering low truancy through educational efficacy. Instead, we submit that 2R charter schools achieve low truancy through student selection, resulting in deceptively higher scores. We will provide evidence from academic research and the 2R charter schools themselves to support our assertion in the next section. This evidence also contributes to our theory of a parental placebo effect acting to bias reported and perceived school effectiveness. The two bias factors are interactive, with one facilitating the other.

The Parental Placebo Effect

In addition to our evidence pointing to student selection bias by 2R schools, the 2R school admission process also suggests a selection bias for students, and parents, who are pre-determined to be academically successful. Virtually all 2R schools that post the admission process and/or application online require parental interviews as part of the pre-screening process. In addition, most require parental contracts committing to maintaining regular attendance for both the student and parents at school functions. Most schools also require parental permission to review prior attendance and academic records as part of the pre-screening process (examples available at www.forwardinstitutewi.org/research).^{17 18 19}

While the application, taken without context, appears to be informational only, there is a growing body of research that supports the theory of a parental bias being supported by the school selection bias (“skimming”).²⁰ While there is also research asserting that there is no “skimming” effect of education “opt-out” programs,²¹ a 2008 Doctoral dissertation addresses the issue, and correctly points out the issue we raise in this report:

“In a universal school voucher environment where schools can legally choose students and determine their own admissions mechanisms the incentive to “cream-skim” the applicants may actually turn into practice. Schools have the ability to screen parents at the application stage not only

¹⁷ Seeds of Health Elementary application available at www.forwardinstitutewi.org/research
¹⁸ Downtown Montessori Academy Enrollment application available at www.forwardinstitutewi.org/research
¹⁹ Capitol West Academy Student application available at www.forwardinstitutewi.org/research
²⁰ Schneider, M., P. Teske, and M. Marschall. 2000. Choosing Schools: Consumer Choice and the Quality of American Schools. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
²¹ Howell, W.G., P.E. Peterson, P.J. Wolf, and D.E. Campbell. 2002. The Education Gap: Vouchers and Urban Schools. Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.

based on academic merit, but also based on other criteria. Hence, schools may construct screening mechanisms such as parental interviews, either formal or informal, to pick the “desirable” students and parents.”²²

There is additional research which indicates our findings in regards to student outcome and truancy/poverty are consistent with a predilection for academic success. These high academic performance predictors (low truancy, high parental participation, low student poverty) are indeed a factor in 2R student enrollment patterns. A review of research literature for a study of school voucher programs in North Carolina found universal commonality amongst students and parents who opt out of public education:

“Several studies examine the characteristics of students who opt out of public schools for private schools (Epple, Figlio, & Romano, 2004; Fairlee, 2006; Figlio & Stone, 2001; Long & Toma, 1988; Lankford, Lee, & Wyckoff, 1995). These studies universally find that student ability, family income, and parent education are each positively correlated with the decision to attend private school. These results suggest private schools tend to cream skim, particularly in areas with concentrations of disadvantaged students.”²³

The research supports the predilection for higher achieving students and more advantaged students to attend a non-public school and accept a voucher. As we have made the connection between low truancy and higher achievement in Milwaukee, this supports a theory that skimming is occurring:

“...(more) advantaged students and high achievers are more likely to use choice to opt out of schools with concentrations of disadvantaged students to attend high achievement schools than are disadvantaged students and low achievers.”²⁴

The concern must be addressed that this practice leads to a parental “placebo effect” and has a negative impact on the students who remain in higher disadvantaged schools, as the research shows those are the schools hit hardest by the skimming process.²⁵ Based on our analyses and supporting research, we can predict that the benefits to the 2R charter schools will have a negative impact on MPS neighborhood schools:

“The results of our analyses suggest that any benefits of expanded school choice that accrue to those able to take advantage of it, might come at the expense of poorer learning environments for those left behind.”²⁶

The full picture of the data presented in this study, along with cited academic research, supports our theory that 2R charters (basically a private “opt-out” education program) are skimming students who would succeed in virtually any school setting, thanks to parental factors and commitment. The extraordinarily low truancy rates speak to this factor, as does further research:

²² Erisen, E., 2008, School Vouchers: Choice, Competition, and Accountability, SUNY-Stony Brook accessed at <http://dSPACE.SUNYCONNECT.SUNY.EDU/bitstream/handle/1951/45448/000000375.sbu.pdf?sequence=3>

²³ Bifulco, R., Ladd, H., Ross, S., 2009, The Effects of School Choice on Those Left Behind, *Peabody Journal of Education*, Volume 84, Issue 2

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Ibid

“Having a mother with a higher average level of education and parents who attend more parent-teacher conferences both increase the probability of applying for a voucher.”²⁷

It goes without saying that higher parental participation and education will result in lower truancy, and therefore, is a good pre-determining factor for student success. In the case of 2R charter schools, we can only observe and theorize about the full cycle of skimming and the parental placebo effect based on existing evidence. 2R charter schools create a selection process which pre-selects students and parents for success, which in comparison to other Milwaukee schools, can be largely predicted by attendance, or non-truancy. The cycle continues with parents who are, or become, vested in the education process as an active participant. Neither of these factors have any correlation with academic quality or pedagogy at the school, but they are both more important factors to positive student outcome. It is also highly likely that the same student, given the same parental participation, would have an equal or better outcome at a Milwaukee public school. Further study and research on this subject specific to Milwaukee is necessary before we can draw a definitive conclusion.

Conclusion and Summary

The aim of this study was to answer two significant questions in the education debate. First, do any of the three school groups examined (MPS public, 2R charter, and MPS charter) have any positive or negative association with School Report Card scores beyond measurable school, community and teacher factors? Second, if the answer to the first question is “no,” what factors do have a significant positive or negative association with School Report Card scores?

Analyses relevant to the above questions raised subsequent questions regarding whether 2R private charter schools have a student selection bias (or “skimming”), and whether parents participating in 2R charter schools have their own selection bias (parental “placebo” effect) which overstate the educational efficacy of 2R charter schools. The answers presented in this study have significant education policy implications. The following points summarize our responses to the above questions within the scope of this study:

1. When statistically controlling for confounding variables:

- **There is no significant difference between MPS public and 2R charter School Report Card scores.** See Table 1 and Figure 1.
- **There is no significant difference between 2R charter and MPS charter School Report Card scores.** See Table 1 and Figure 2.
- **MPS public schools have significantly higher Report Card scores than MPS charter schools.** See Table 1 and Figure 3.

2. The most significant factor in the school-to-school difference in Milwaukee School Report Card scores is habitual truancy. For each 1% increase in truancy, Report Card score declines by 0.33 points. In addition, we can explain 72% of the school differences in Report Card scores by three significant factors – habitual truancy rate (higher truancy is related to lower scores), ED enrollment (higher ED is related to lower scores), and the percent of teachers with at least five years of experience (higher teacher experience is related to higher scores).

²⁷ Campbell, D., West, M., Peterson, P., 2003, Participation in a National Means Tested School Voucher Program, Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management, Washington DC

3. High truancy (above the median of 36%) schools perform worse on Report Cards even if they have moderate ED enrollment. Seventy-five percent (75%) of the negative association of ED enrollment with Report Card scores is explained by habitual truancy (mediation).

4. The data presented in this study along with other cited research indicate a strong likelihood of student selectivity (“skimming”) by 2R charter schools. Student “skimming” in turn leads to and reinforces a parental bias (“placebo effect”). These two factors create perceived positive effects which are overstated and unrelated to quality or efficacy of the educational differences between 2R and other Milwaukee public or charter schools. Further study is required on this topic and hypothesized effects.

5. The negative association of truancy with outcome is equal across schools, as is the positive association of non-truancy. No school type counters these effects through educational efficacy.

6. Teacher and socio-economic factors as presented in this study have significantly stronger positive or negative associations with school performance than any school pedagogy.

7. Two bias factors, student skimming and parental placebo effect, are theorized to have a negative effect on the students left behind by an opt-out system which functions as a new form of segregation based on student achievement, parental participation, and schools picking “desirable students.”

8. Students demonstrating success in opt-out or voucher-type programs would fare as well or better in public schools, as their success is more likely a result of parental, economic, and student factors than any school educational factor.

It is our continued position that any public policy which seeks to improve upon the educational opportunity for all students must address a broad range of socio-economic, parental, and student issues in collaboration with teachers and administrators who are engaged in the classroom. Any education policy that ignores or denies the factors addressed in this report will be ineffective, as it cannot address the core issues of childhood education. Children must be free to learn, and must have support from parents, the community, teachers, legislators, schools and administrators, who in turn must all be supportive of each other. The vast experience, research and history of education in the United States indicates that only through a dedicated investment in public education will the necessary improvement occur, as only public education is dedicated to equal access to educational opportunity for ALL children. This educational opportunity is fundamentally necessary to assure that every child has the freedom to pursue a prosperous and fulfilling life.