

Poverty less damaging to public schools' scores than charters', report finds

By [Erin Richards](#) of the Journal Sentinel
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Poverty is strongly tied to schools' rankings in a new [state report card system](#), but among low-income schools, traditional public schools have higher achievement scores than charter schools, according to an analysis from a new nonprofit.

The report by the [Forward Institute](#), a nonpartisan, progressive public policy and educational research think tank formed in August, was released at a news conference Wednesday hosted by state Sen. Kathleen Vinehout (D-Alma).

It reinforces what many educators already know and have said in response to Wisconsin's new school report cards: Poverty matters. A lot.

[The school report cards](#) are mostly based on state test score data - where achievement patterns generally trend downward for students who are low-income and/or minority - so the picture of school achievement is about the same as it was under pre-existing measures of school performance, also known as No Child Left Behind.

The study's more controversial finding is that among public schools serving mostly low-income students, the effects of poverty on achievement were less damaging in traditional public schools than in charter schools.

"If you are low-income, you would on average be more likely to score better in a public school than a charter school," said Scott Wittkopf, chair of the Forward Institute, based in Madison. "In schools with high poverty enrollment, the data from the report cards shows that public schools statewide had higher report card scores than charter schools."

Milwaukee Charter School Advocates, a nonprofit, has been vocal about how the new report cards [can unfairly characterize schools](#), especially small charter schools and charter high schools with homogenous populations of nonwhite students.

The report cards offer multiple measures of school performance for the first time, but scores for closing the achievement gap often can't be measured for small schools that don't have enough white, higher-income students to make up a comparison group.

Scores for growth can't be calculated at all for high schools, because the state achievement test is taken only once at that level, in 10th grade. That means some schools' report cards are 75% weighted on their 10th-grade achievement test score results.

"If you're a high school and you bring in students at a sixth-grade level, and you move them up to an

eighth-grade level by the next year, you don't get credit for that" when students take the state test in 10th grade, said Sean Roberts, deputy director of the Milwaukee Charter School Advocates.

Charter schools are public schools given more freedom to experiment with structure and curriculum in exchange for meeting academic targets outlined in a contract with an authorizer.

Roberts said that isolating the scores of a subset of charter schools - independent charter schools that are not staffed by Milwaukee Public Schools - shows scores that are higher on average than scores in traditional MPS schools, based on the latest round of state testing and average accountability scores on the report cards.

The analysis recommends that policy-makers call for a re-evaluation of charter-school performance and that they not tie assessments with direct consequences for schools or teachers, such as educator evaluations, to the results of the report card system.

Find this article at:

<http://www.jsonline.com/news/education/povertys-effect-less-damaging-to-public-schools-scores-than-charters-report-finds-hj7tjjh-182196201.html>

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