

## Private schools

# Pro choice

*With Republicans resurgent, school vouchers are back*



Print edition | United States

Feb 12th 2015 | MILWAUKEE

ON THE desk of Zeus Rodriguez, the president of St Anthony School in Milwaukee, a mini Republican primary is underway. A signed photograph of Scott Walker, the governor of Wisconsin, competes for space with snaps of Rand Paul and Jeb Bush—all three of them presidential hopefuls. St Anthony's is popular among conservatives because it has more pupils taking advantage of government-funded vouchers than any other private school in America.



inRead invented by Teads

### Upgrade your inbox

Receive our Daily Dispatch and Editors' Picks newsletters.

Email address

Sign up now

**Subscribe:** 12 weeks for \$12

or sign up to enjoy 3 articles free

Retail sales, producer prices, wages and exchange rates

Get full access to *The Economist* via print, online and our apps or

Foreign reserves

sign up to enjoy 3 articles free.

Why commodity prices are surging

THE ECONOMIST EXPLAINS

Subscribe: 12 weeks for \$12

+ receive a free notebook

See all updates

Sign up: 3 articles per week

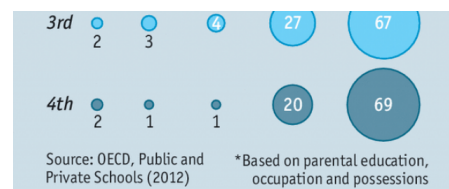
elections in November, several are pushing to increase the number and scope of school voucher schemes. In a budget unveiled on

Governor Walker called for the expansion of Wisconsin's three voucher schemes, though he left the details

fuzzy. In each of the 24 states that have vouchers, lawmakers propose to make more children eligible, says Robert Enlow of



amendment to the federal constitution banning public funding for religious schools. The proposal failed, but many states passed their own version of a Blaine amendment and currently three-quarters of states ban directly spending public money on religious institutions. The ban on publicly-funded Catholic schools spurred the creation of lots of privately-funded ones.



Economist.com

The second wave came after the desegregation of public schools in the South following *Brown v Board of Education*, when recalcitrant whites set up private schools to keep their children apart from black ones. The third wave has been underway since 1990, when Milwaukee's pioneering school-voucher programme began.

No two voucher schemes are the same, which makes comparing them hard. Ohio alone has five, all with different criteria for eligibility. Most began life as schemes to help families in predominantly black neighbourhoods with failing schools find something better, and were then extended to children in foster care and those with



system. This is consistent with the federal government's evaluation of the voucher scheme for poor parents in bad school districts in Washington, DC, which found no statistical difference between children who were given vouchers and those who were not in reading and maths.

This is not the end of the story for vouchers, however. In both Milwaukee and Washington, voucher schemes get similar results to the public schools but with much less money. Under the DC scheme, each voucher is worth \$8,500 a year, compared with \$17,500 to educate a child in the public school system. In Milwaukee the difference is smaller but still amounts to several thousand dollars. Another consistent finding from voucher schemes is that parents like being given a choice, which explains why vouchers, once granted, are hard to take away.

Though Milwaukee's experience overall has been mixed it still has lessons for elsewhere. If one includes private schools, charter schools and open enrolment at public schools (which means parents may enroll their children in a school that is not in the neighbourhood where they live), around 40% of parents in Milwaukee exercise some kind of choice over their children's education, an unusually high



incarceration for St Marcus's alumni are below the national average for all races.

“No one has yet found the secret button to push that makes all the schools better,” says Alan Borsuk of Marquette University, who has been following Milwaukee’s experiment since 1990. In their first quarter-century, voucher schemes have faced fierce opposition and coped despite much smaller budgets. For their fans, that is reason enough to pursue the idea further.

## You’ve seen the news, now discover the story

Get incisive analysis on the issues that matter. Whether you read each issue cover to cover, listen to the audio edition, or scan the headlines on your phone, time with *The Economist* is always well spent.

Enjoy 12 weeks’ access for \$12

+ receive a free notebook

