

26 years ago, Wisconsin lawmakers started the Parental Choice Program in Milwaukee, the first Taxpayer-subsidized private schooling. It started with just over 300 students, now there are more than 30,000. Today, private schools are getting 20% more state aid per student than the public schools educating everyone else's children. Why?

ALTOONA, WI - Some 26 years ago, Wisconsin lawmakers blazed a new trail by creating the nation's first scholastic welfare program. It started in Milwaukee, expanded to Racine, and then was taken statewide. It started small, with just over 300 students. Now there are more than 30,000 in the program.

It's officially called the Parental Choice Program. If there were truth in labeling, it would be called what it is: **Taxpayer-subsidized private schooling**. The small number of families getting the subsidies already had a choice. In fact,
most of them
were exercising their option to have their children privately schooled before handouts were ever offered.

So here's what this boils down to: People who showed they have the means to send their children to private schools are now able to continue to send them to private schools but have the rest of us taxpayers pay their tuition for them.

The real kick in the teeth for taxpayers is that the value of the public-funded vouchers for private schooling is considerably higher than the amount of state aid for each student attending a public school in Wisconsin. The state is spending $236 million this school year on the Milwaukee, Racine and statewide "Parental Choice Programs," and is cutting state aid to public schools by $75 million to help pay for it. Next year, the cost of the vouchers that scholastic welfare recipients receive will rise to $258 million and $83 million will be taken from the public schools to help cover the cost. This year, each voucher is worth $7,210 for elementary and middle school students and $7,856 for high school students. Next year, taxpayers will be picking up the tab to the tune of $7,323 for each elementary and middle school student and $7,969 for each high schooler. Meanwhile, when you look at all the different forms of state aid to public schools, the

amount being spent on each of the more than 870,000 students attending public schools is less than $6,000.

Let that sink in for a moment. The private schools serving scholastic welfare recipients are getting roughly 20% more state aid per student than the public schools educating everyone else's children are getting.

The lobbyists who sold Wisconsin lawmakers on this scheme a quarter of a century ago insisted at the time that the program would create competition and ultimately boost student achievement. It hasn't. Students getting taxpayer-subsidized private schooling are doing no better than their public school counterparts. If anything, they actually are doing somewhat worse. And that holds true in other states that followed Wisconsin's lead.

So why does Wisconsin keep throwing good money after bad? Scholastic welfare is a raw deal for taxpayers and a decades-long failure as an educational policy, but it has been very good for the campaign coffers of state politicians.

And why is so much money thrown at politicians to keep expanding a program that has never delivered on its promises? This is all about propping up private and parochial schools whose enrollments have been plummeting nationwide. Sure enough, while private school enrollments in Wisconsin were falling statewide, they were increasing in the counties where the scholastic welfare program was started. Keeping failing private schools alive is the one thing this program has succeeded in doing. That's why the program was expanded statewide in 2013.