

Expanding Statewide Vouchers would Cost Taxpayers and Local Schools

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A statewide expansion of the voucher program as touted by the Governor and majority party legislators could cost over \$600 million in state tax dollars. □ Money from the same pot as funding for public schools which already have experienced a cut of \$1.8 billion over the past four years.

MADISON - “Your information is always thorough, concise and very readable,” Carol wrote to me. “Today I heard that [Governor] Walker said he would lift the cap for vouchers if he wins re-election. What would that do to our public schools? The state budget? I hope you will research this and publicize your opinion.”

Whether to cut back or expand state-funded subsidies for students attending private schools is a hot topic of debate. Passage of the most recent state budget started a process many see as the beginning of a statewide, unlimited opportunity for students to attend private schools with state tax dollars – or an unlimited drain on public school funding – depending on one’s perspective.

With passage of the last state budget, children attending private schools could use tax dollars through the form of a ‘voucher’. This state-funded subsidy is \$7,210 per year for a primary and middle school student attending a private school and \$7,856 for a high school student attending a private school. (Many public schools receive far less per pupil state funding.)

The budget was written so state-funded vouchers were paid first and had an unlimited drawn down on public school funds. I likened this – in my farmer vernacular – to a bucket full of water

with a garden hose attached to the bottom with a valve to slow the flow.

The valve, of course, is the limit on the number of vouchers.

The rules, established by the 2013-15 state budget, limited the program to 500 students in the last school year and 1,000 students statewide this school year. These numbers do not include the Milwaukee and Racine voucher students.

Removing the cap – as suggested by the Governor, the Speaker of the Assembly and many candidates – would get rid of the valve altogether.

The justification for this dramatic change in school funding is rhetoric implying the failure of public schools and the superiority of a private education. But after 24 years of experimentation in Milwaukee, research shows no significant achievement benefits for students attending tax-funded private schools over public education.

In western Wisconsin public schools have a stellar record of achievement – despite dwindling resources.

This spring the Eau Claire Leader-Telegram reported local public schools scored above the average on statewide testing in math and reading while most Eau Claire private voucher students “bow[ed] out of state tests.” Statewide “private school voucher pupils fared poorly compared to those in public schools,” the paper’s headline read.

So how much would unlimited statewide expansion of vouchers cost Wisconsin taxpayers? In the 2013-14 school year there were approximately 120,000 private school students. Of these students, 92,400 students pay privately for tuition. State taxpayers fund 27,400 private school voucher students.

The nonpartisan Legislative Fiscal Bureau estimates an average per student voucher cost of

\$7,333. Subsidizing just the current private school students at this rate would cost taxpayers \$677 million. This assumes no public school students go to private schools and no income limits are set for student's families.

Statewide expansion could, presumably, affect all 900,000 students not currently in the state subsidized voucher program. But recent experience shows 75% of statewide voucher students already attended private school.

Public schools that lost students to private schools lost state aid. School districts that don't have students attending state subsidized private schools also lose state aid. Often, districts must go to property taxpayers to make up lost aid.

There is no way to know how many private school parents would choose a voucher or how many public or charter school parents would send their children to state subsidized private school.

Public schools already suffered a cumulative \$1.1 billion loss in general aid over the past four years. These cuts came at a time of increased overall state spending. In the last four years the budget grew by \$4.5 billion. Revenue is dwindling now because of a series of tax cuts – putting public education at risk for a new round of cuts.

It's foolishness to think Wisconsin can afford unlimited taxpayer subsidized vouchers, keep our high quality local schools and lower taxes. Actions have consequences. Cuts to local schools hurt students and raise property taxes.

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