

Governor Should Veto Last Minute Attempt to Take Cap Off Private Voucher Schools

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This week Senator Kathleen Vinehout's column focuses on voucher schools. In a last minutes amendment included in the Assembly version of the budget, the Assembly majority created a loophole in the agreed upon cap on enrollment in the voucher school expansion. Kathleen explains the impact of this provision and calls for a veto.

MADISON - Senators had debated budget passage for nearly eight nonstop hours. In a little over six hours the two-year state budget would be headed to the Governor.

Assembly Minority Leader Peter Barca beckoned me off the Senate floor. "There's something you need to know," he said. "Something in the budget no one seems to understand."

A few of us gathered in a nearby conference room. "There are two ways a private school can get state tax dollars," Representative Barca explained.

If a "choice" private school is in Milwaukee or Racine, the school can enroll any number of students. The state would pay tuition, up to a new dollar limit, for these students.

New to this budget was a statewide expansion of public money for private schools. Twenty-five schools would be chosen across the state. Together these schools could enroll up to 500 students in the first year of the budget and 1,000 students in the second year.

But, in a last minute amendment, a loophole was created.

A third option allowed any of the 112 “choice” schools in Milwaukee and Racine to move around the state and enroll an unlimited number of public school students in their private school at taxpayers’ expense. These schools would not be subject to the enrollment ‘cap’ of 500/1,000 students.

Listening to the explanation I was concerned this last minute amendment would cost more money, leaving less to our struggling public schools. I also worried private for-profit schools could set up ‘satellite’ schools across the state. Others expressed similar concerns.

Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Evers issued a statement saying, “Without any advance notice or debate, Assembly Republicans passed a last minute amendment that will increase the cap on statewide vouchers by 40 percent in each year.” He pegged the total cost of the state cost of the private school program at \$420 million over the next two years.

Senator Schulz who voted with Democrats to remove the voucher expansion said in a statement, “When my Senate colleagues negotiated the statewide expansion of the voucher program with the Governor and the Assembly, a hard cap on enrollment was the deal breaker. It appears the deal is already broken.”

Public money for private schools has not proven to be an effective use of taxpayer dollars. The over twenty-year-old program should be reevaluated with the same rigor applied to our public schools. Instead a coalition of the politically well-connected sought to expand the reach of private, sometimes for-profit, schools across Wisconsin- beginning with suburban Milwaukee and Racine.

Lobbying groups hired three former Assembly Speakers and, according the Democracy Campaign, spent nearly \$10 million over the past 10 years- much of this in the last election cycle.

Beneficiaries of the expansion include the School Choice Wisconsin Board Chairman, Mr. Andrew Neumann who oversees operations of several voucher schools.

Andrew's father, Mark Neumann started his first "taxpayer-funded school with 49 students and in eight years has mushroomed to nearly 1,000 students in four schools," according to a 2010 *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* article.

The article went on to report that Mark Neumann, a former gubernatorial and US Senate candidate, "operates three religious based schools in Milwaukee, a fourth nonreligious school in Phoenix and has plans to build clusters of schools across the country". By 2010, the *Journal Sentinel* reported, Neumann's Hope Christian schools received nearly \$22 million from state taxpayers.

It's hard for western Wisconsin residents to understand the intense marketing and efforts of enticement that come with public spending for private schools. What once began as an effort to help poorer families escape failing inner city schools has turned into a rush for taxpayers' cash with little oversight or accountability.

I urge the Governor to veto budget provisions that allow taxpayer funded 'franchise' private schools to expand statewide without limits. These majority party efforts to slip changes into the state budget without debate or knowledge by the minority party or the press is a bad practice.

The state budget is already loaded with nearly 100 items of unrelated policy. Like each of those record-breaking number of policy items, this new expansion of private, franchise schools needs its own public vetting.

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