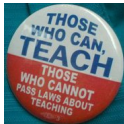


## Wisconsin GOP Plan Unveiled to Gradually Privatize Public Schools

Posted on Feb 03, Posted by [Kathleen Vinehout, State Senator 31st District](#) Category [Wisconsin](#)



Senator Vinehout writes about a bill on school accountability that completely changes the current system used to report the progress of students attending with public money. The bill makes it easier for private charter school management companies to take over public schools that are considered 'failing' and they would not be required to answer to locally-elected school boards. In the end, there is little evidence converting a public school to a charter school will improve the achievement of poor performing students.

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MADISON - "If I was going to write a bill to privatize public schools," the Senate staffer told our small group, "this is what it would look like."

We were reviewing a new version of a bill to test students attending private schools using state tax dollars. By this sixth version, the bill morphed into something entirely different.

The latest version of the bill was crafted behind closed doors; unlike three years ago when a wide-ranging group developed a system to test and report the progress of all students attending school with public money. Private school advocates publically agreed to the same public school accountability standards but privately lobbied for something different.

The bill reversed current law requiring all students be tested using the same type of exam. This bill allowed private schools to choose their own type of assessment and even choose the students who took the test – allowing them to game the system.

Concealed in the bill was a way to gradually close more and more public schools or turn them over to independent private charter operators.

For the next several years, 5% of public schools must be named as failing – even if those schools weren't failing by current standards. With few exceptions, schools that failed for three years would be required to close or be operated by an independent private charter management company with a minimum five-year contract. Local school boards would have little authority over this company for five years. For Milwaukee, this change would apply to schools that failed for just one year.

It's important to remember the strong relationship between poverty and low school performance. More resources are needed to lift scores of low performing pupils. Students from poor families need small class sizes and personal attention of highly skilled educators. Private schools can succeed when they provide the resources – but it is the resources, not the private setting, that helps poor children match performance of their better-off peers.

There is little evidence that closing a poor performing school or giving privately run charter companies control results in better performance than the locally controlled public school.

Yet this new bill required DPI to name a steady 5% of "F" schools. As more schools were closed or reopened as privately operated charter schools, the score for "F" got higher and higher for the remaining public schools – giving the private charter management organizations steady pickings of where to head next.

The bill was a dream for out-of-state charter management companies.

I remembered testimony given by local school superintendents at a recent public hearing in Pepin. Superintendents spoke of dwindling state funds and local people unable to pay higher property taxes. Teachers taught multiple subjects, schools reduced or shared staff, administrators served as teachers, districts combined sports, and maintenance was deferred – even as poverty skyrocketed and special needs students increased.

In Independence, primarily Spanish speaking students doubled in three years; three out of five students attending school live in poverty. Fifteen years ago Arcadia taught no English Language Learners. Now every third student primarily speaks Spanish. Poverty is over 50%.

I wondered what another influx of poor, Spanish speaking students would do to test scores. Many of these students had no opportunity to attend good schools in their home country. Yet the students are tested and their scores contribute to the report card. Some Arcadia schools currently hover a few points above failing. With a big influx of students in need, a school could become 'failing' through no fault of its own.

Under the bill, failure to turn this school around during the next two years could result in closure or reopening operated by a private charter management company – unanswerable to the locally-elected school board. I couldn't imagine people in Arcadia or Independence wanting a company from California running their local schools.

People want schools accountable. However, this process is rapidly turning into a backdoor for private companies to take over local schools. With different standards for public and charter schools, no locally-elected control and even no consequences for poor performing privately operated charter schools for several years, the accountability legislation has become anything but accountability to those footing the bill.

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