

## Editorial: Voucher program expansion should not be in budget

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### SCHOOL VOUCHER PROPOSAL

In Gov. Scott Walker's budget, he would allocate \$94 million to expand the voucher, or [school](#)

choice, program to schools that qualify. Of that, \$21 million would go to a voucher program for special needs [students](#).

The program allows public school students to apply for a voucher to attend private or faith-based [schools](#). It is [currently](#) used in Milwaukee County and Racine.

The voucher program expansion would apply statewide to districts of at least 4,000 [students](#) with two or more [public](#) schools that were rated as "fails to meet expectations" or "meets few expectations" under a state Department of Public Instruction report.

Nine school districts — Green Bay, Beloit, Fond du Lac, Kenosha, Madison, Sheboygan, Superior, Waukesha and West Allis — would qualify under the criteria. If at least 20 students in those districts apply to a choice school, vouchers could be issued.

The governor's plan caps the number of students who can participate for the first two years, but lifts it in the third year. It sets participation level at 300 percent of the poverty level, which is about \$70,000 a year for a family of four. The state cost for the voucher payments to the private and religious schools "would be partially offset by a net reduction to the general aid that would otherwise be paid to the districts in which a choice program operates," the Legislative Fiscal Bureau reported.

The Green Bay School District, with out 20,000 students, estimated it would pay \$3.1 million if 500 students apply for vouchers to private schools.

Choice schools would receive a maxium of \$6,442 per [student](#) next year and \$7,050 for kids in grades K-8 and [\\$7,856](#) for high schoolers in 2015-15 and thereafter, according to the Fiscal Bureau.

Two years ago the Joint Finance Committee tried to include the Green Bay School District in the expansion of the voucher school program. The inclusion wasn't part of Gov. Scott Walker's 2011-13 budget proposal; the committee added it late in the process. It was eventually removed after loud, bipartisan opposition.

This time, expansion of the program is part of the governor's proposal and not a late add-on from Joint Finance, giving it more clout than the way Green Bay was added two years ago and setting it up for passage because it's part of the overall \$68 billion spending plan.

The Press-Gazette Media editorial board hasn't outright dismissed the voucher school program in the past and it doesn't now. But there are some concerns about accountability, funding and [education](#)

policy.

Any private school receiving state funds should fall under the same guidelines as public schools. They need to be held accountable. But that's not the case because as private entities they are not subject to the same levels of transparency as public schools nor the same regulations. Private schools don't have to enroll all who apply; public schools must take everyone. [Teachers](#)

don't face the same standards.

Plus, parents who want to move their children already have that option. Through open enrollment they can apply at any school, whether yours is "failing" or not.

If you want to send your child to a private school, you can, but you'll have to pay. The state is required to provide public education so state money should be directed to public schools that can be held accountable.

If the Green Bay district ends up part of the voucher program, then a student from any of its schools can apply for vouchers; it's not just limited to students from the so-called failing schools. That makes no sense if you're trying to help students who supposedly aren't getting a quality education from their low-scoring school.

Paying for the expansion gives us pause, too. Public schools need more than the current funding levels proposed by the governor. Walker's proposal provides \$129 million for gross general school aids. But he essentially froze spending by prohibiting districts from increasing revenue through state and local property taxpayers for the next two years, meaning that \$129 million would be used to lower property taxes rather than go to schools.

The recent news that the budget surplus grew by \$500 million and some Republican support for increasing the per-pupil aid might resolve some of the school funding. But public education took a \$1.6 billion hit in the last budget. Parents, teachers and students have felt that in the reduction of programs and jobs.

The Green Bay School District has many very good schools and to characterize it as failing is unfair. Sure there are some schools where graduation rates or test scores aren't where they should be, but if you look at school report card scores and levels of poverty, maybe the problem is also socioeconomic and not just educational.

The bottom line is that this is public money going to private institutions that aren't required to provide the full disclosures that public schools must give. Despite some money being tied to this proposal, it is a major policy change that would have a great impact on our public education system.

It requires a full debate, which is why it shouldn't be in the budget. It should be a separate piece of legislation with public hearings throughout the state.

That way state taxpayers, school districts, and private schools could have their say, and we could see which legislators support expansion of the voucher program instead of seeing which ones voted for the overall budget.

Many policy items have been included in this budget, such as DNA collection and changes in rent-to-own laws, and they are put there for a reason — to be passed without the scrutiny that a separate piece of legislation would get.

Two years ago we editorialized on the proposal to expand school vouchers to the Green Bay School District. We believed then, as we believe today, that such a profound change in the way public education is funded deserves time for a full debate.

Until then, the Joint Finance Committee should remove it from any spending plan until it's been discussed as a change in policy.