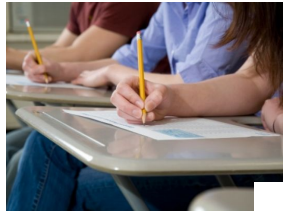


# Most voucher students came from private schools

Patti Zarling, Press-Gazette Media, and the Associated Press 4:47 p.m. CDT October 23, 2014



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MADISON – The vast majority of students receiving a taxpayer-subsidized voucher to attend private school this year did not go to a Wisconsin public school last year.

Data released Thursday by the state Department of Public Instruction shows that just over 19 percent of the 538 students who entered the statewide program this year attended a public school last year.

Over the two years of the program, just under 20 percent of those receiving a voucher came from a public school.

The voucher program is promoted by its supporters as a way to help students escape poorly performing public schools.

But the numbers show most students were already in private school before they got the voucher, fueling arguments from opponents that the program is really about subsidizing private school education.

That holds true for the Green Bay School Board, which has long argued against the voucher program.

"The state is essentially funding a second school system," School Board President Brenda Warren said Thursday. "This is a taxpayer-funding scholarship program with no accountability to the taxpayers."

"We may have only lost a student or two, but the basis of my concern is we're losing funding for public schools across the state."

The statewide program was capped at 500 students last school year and another 500 was added for 2014-15, and families must meet income limits. A push to lift caps has Warren concerned.

"There's only a finite amount of money," she said. "Will less go to public schools to fund these scholarships for private schools?"

The head of the pro-voucher group School Choice Wisconsin said the numbers don't tell the whole story.

Most of the students in private schools who accepted a voucher were receiving needs-based scholarships, School Choice Wisconsin president Jim Bender said. When they move into the voucher program, it opens up the scholarships for others to leave public school for a private school education, he said.

Bender said he did not have an exact figure for the number of students who took a voucher that had been on a scholarship.

The Green Bay Area Catholic Education system, or GRACE, divided its nine schools into three regional sections before applying for vouchers.

This school year, GRACE East has 44 voucher students, GRACE South has 41 and

GRACE West has 10. Notre Dame Academy has 23.

The vouchers are worth \$7,210 for students in elementary school and \$7,856 for those in high school.

To qualify for a voucher, a single parent with three children can earn up to \$44,177 per year. For a married couple with two children, the cutoff is \$51,177 annually. Once in the program, families no longer need to meet the income requirements.

Gov. Scott Walker is campaigning on the promise that he will expand the program, while Democratic challenger Mary Burke wants to do away with vouchers outside of Milwaukee and Racine, where they have been in place longer.

Bender has said his organization would like to see caps lifted, and for the state to create one unified program.

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