

Executive Summary

School Choice Vouchers in Green Bay: Factors to Consider¹

The education of our citizens has been a priority since our country's founding; it is an important way to ensure that our democracy will continue to flourish. Aside from providing our children for employment, schools help students become effective citizens by teaching them to read, think critically, and work together. Brown County needs strong educational opportunities for all of its children in order to continue to thrive in the future. Currently, Brown County is served by a public and private K-12 educational system that is highly regarded by local residents, according to recent surveys. However, costs are growing and there is interest in finding ways to maintain or improve quality.

In his 2013-2015 budget, Governor Walker proposed funding to expand the "school choice voucher program." Green Bay Area Public Schools (GBAPS), along with 8 other Wisconsin districts, meet his criteria for inclusion in the proposed program. This report presents factual information about the Governor's recent proposal to expand the Choice program, the performance of Green Bay Area Public Schools, and the implications for the Green Bay area's education system. We share key findings from the Milwaukee and Racine Choice programs to consider what we can learn from their experiences.

What is a "School Choice Voucher Program"?

Through the program, eligible students in GBAPS district could use state-funded vouchers to pay up to \$6,444 per student in tuition at a private school, an amount proposed to increase in the governor's budget proposal. Under the proposal, a family of four earning approximately \$70,000 would be eligible to obtain a voucher for one or more of their children. For each student that leaves GBAPS and enrolls at a private school, the student's public school district would receive less state funding (in 2011 dollars, \$7,226 less per student). While giving priority to currently enrolled students and their siblings, private schools are required to use a random selection process to award vouchers to public school students who have applied to receive a voucher. The governor's proposal would limit the number of vouchers to 500 the first year (statewide). In the second year, the Governor proposes to increase the dollar amount available for each voucher and raise the cap to 1,000 students. Thereafter, as in Milwaukee and Racine, the Governor proposes to remove the cap on the number of vouchers available.

What can we learn from the existing Choice program in Milwaukee and Racine?

Choice programs have been implemented since 1990 in Milwaukee and since 2011 in Racine. In Milwaukee, with no caps on enrollment, this year the Choice program enrolls almost 25,000 students in 113 private schools, at a cost to the state of \$154.8 million in 2012-2013. Racine enrolls 520 students in the Choice program this year at a cost of \$3.2 million. Beginning in 2014, the enrollment caps will be eliminated in Racine, so the impacts may be felt much more dramatically. In both locales, last school year, the achievement test scores of Choice students were similar to, and in some cases, lower than scores of their peers in the public schools. One study found that Choice students in Milwaukee graduated from high school on time (four years) at rates four to seven percent higher than public school students. As state funding for Milwaukee Public Schools has declined, local property taxes have increased.

¹ Statistics referenced in the full report at <http://www.uwgb.edu/cfpa/featured/policy-snapshot-study.asp>

How well are students performing in Green Bay Area Public Schools?

Student achievement and graduation rates in GBAPS are somewhat below state averages. Across the district, the rates vary across schools. However, more than half of GBAPS students (10,751 students), are from low income families. On average, these low-income students have school achievement scores much lower than their peers. The GBAPS district also has a large number of English Language Learners (over 4,500), and the district is far exceeding federal standards for English gains among ELL students..

The new School Report Card (SRC) scoring system was used to select Wisconsin school districts for Choice program expansion based on whether schools meet expectations for student achievement, improvement, achievement gaps, test participation, attendance, and high school graduation. The SRC, used for the first time in October, 2012, is being refined by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI). Fourteen GBAPS schools were flagged as “meets few expectations” and four “fails to meet expectations.” These schools have high proportions of ELL and low income students. These schools received significant point deductions related to a technicality in how achievement tests were administered to English Language Learning (ELL) students. The DPI states that GBAPS will not receive those significant point deductions in the coming year, resulting in higher SRC scores for 2012-2013.

What private school opportunities are available in the Green Bay area, how well are students performing?

The 33 existing private schools in Brown County are mostly religious. These schools are likely to have the capacity to absorb the Choice students in the first two years, having seen a 17% decline in enrollment in the past 10 years. In fact, at first, many vouchers would be used by current private school students (whose families currently pay tuition, but whose incomes are below \$70,000). The GRACE Catholic system is the only private school system in the area that reports student achievement, but its achievement test scores cannot be compared to Wisconsin public school achievement scores. In reading, eighth grade students scored at the 89th percentile and fourth grade students scored at the 80th percentile in 2011-2012. The GRACE system reports that all its schools are accredited by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, with all teachers DPI licensed.

How might the Choice program impact the Green Bay Area Public School district?

If the Choice program were implemented in Green Bay, the effects might be seen gradually. If all 1,000 proposed vouchers were used in Green Bay in year two of the Governor’s plan, many of those vouchers would be used by students already attending the area’s private schools (and their siblings). Some students would depart the GBAPS and for every student that does so, the district would receive less state funding. If all 1,000 vouchers were used by GBAPS students, in the second year of the Choice program, GBAPS could see more than a \$7.2 million decrease in revenues using a simple per-student calculation. This number does not take into account additional reductions which would occur based on the school equalization formula, nor the possibility of other state subsidies to GBAPS.

If Choice continued and caps are eliminated as proposed, much larger and longer-term impacts on GBAPS would be likely. Due to revenue limits and freezes put in place in the 2011-2013 Wisconsin budget and 2013-2015 proposed budget, and if many students elected to use vouchers as in Racine and Milwaukee, GBAPS district would see growing deficits. Districts have argued that this is a challenge due to increasing costs of special education mandates, facility upkeep, human resources, technology, transportation, and other costs.

CFPA RESEARCH TEAM

Lora Warner, Assistant Professor, Public & Environmental Affairs
Director Center for Public Affairs

Ashley Heath, Associate Director, Center for Public Affairs

Ashley Skalecki, Research Scholar, Center for Public Affairs

CFPA ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Scott Ashmann, Associate Professor, Education

David Helpap, Assistant Professor, Public & Environmental Affairs

Jenell Holstead, Assistant Professor, Human Development & Psychology