



2013-15 STATE BUDGET EXPANSION OF PRIVATE SCHOOL VOUCHERS, CREATION OF SPECIAL EDUCATION VOUCHERS ISSUE PAPER/TALKING POINTS

WASB Positions:

- **Remove the proposal to expand the voucher program from the budget bill and debate it as separate legislation.**
- **Remove the proposal to create a statewide special education voucher program from the budget bill and debate it as separate legislation.**

Background

Under the voucher program, state funds are used to pay for the cost of children from low-income families who reside in the City of Milwaukee or the Racine Unified school District to attend participating private schools. State funds are provided as vouchers to the schools these low-income students attend, hence the reference to a “voucher” program. The program began in the 1990-91 school year.

To be eligible to attend a voucher school for the first time, a pupil's total family income must not exceed 300 percent of the federal poverty level (\$70,947 for a family of four; \$77,947 if the child's parents or legal guardians are married.) A pupil attending a voucher school may remain eligible to participate in the voucher program if his or her family income does not exceed 220 percent of the federal poverty level.

Overview of Provisions in Proposed State Budget

The 2013-15 biennial budget bill (2013 Assembly Bill 40) proposes the following changes:

- Expands the parental choice (voucher) program for eligible school districts by expanding eligibility for a voucher program to those public school districts with an enrollment of at least 4,000 pupils and having two or more schools in the district placed in a performance category of “fails to meet expectations” or “meets few expectations” on a school report card published by DPI.

If, after a school district has been identified as an eligible school district, at least 20 pupils who reside in the school district apply to attend private schools under the parental choice program, the eligible school district becomes a qualifying eligible school district and qualifying pupils who reside in that school district may attend a private school under the parental choice program. (In the 2013–14 school year, no more than 500 pupils residing in qualifying eligible school districts may participate in the expanded parental choice program. In the 2014–15 school year, participation cannot exceed 1,000 pupils.)

clear how much of that increase will be skimmed off to fund voucher programs and independent charter schools.

- The school report cards on which eligibility for voucher expansion would be based is designed to improve student achievement, not to make high-stakes funding decisions and expand vouchers. The data on which schools were placed into performance categories was translated from the state's former proficiency standards to the so-called NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) standards. Any errors in translation that went undetected could affect a district's ranking.
- Broadly expanding vouchers is a significant policy decision that should not be buried in a 1,100 page bill that lays out a \$67 billion spending plan. Voucher expansion deserves public scrutiny and public debate. That will not happen if voucher expansion is addressed solely through the state budget process.

Oppose Creation of a Statewide Special Education Voucher Program

- Private schools accepting taxpayer-funded special education vouchers would not be required to have certified special education and related services professionals on staff to provide the special education services called for in the child's IEP and could negotiate away requirements to fulfill the child's IEP.
- These special education vouchers would be completely funded by deducting general school aid from the resident school district (i.e., the "home" district where the voucher student resides). The resident school district would not be permitted to levy for the lost aid. Such vouchers could be awarded to up to 5 percent of the total number of children with disabilities residing in this state in the previous school year, as determined by DPI
- Although, the net fiscal impact of these vouchers on the state is \$0, the impact on districts losing students under this program would be great. Not only would a district lose aid if a student with a disability left the district, but the district would still be subject to federal maintenance of effort (MOE) requirements, meaning that it would have to maintain the same level of special education spending even though it would have lost the student with disabilities to the voucher program. This could force districts to reduce spending for regular education programs in order to maintain special education spending levels.
- The creation of special education vouchers is a significant policy change with no net fiscal impact to the state. This non-fiscal policy change deserves public scrutiny and public debate. That will not happen if the creation of special education vouchers is addressed solely through the state budget process.