

Accountability: the Missing Piece of Voucher Expansion

The voucher expansion deal voted on in the dark of night by the Joint Finance Committee and later approved by both legislative chambers and signed into law by the governor sidestepped a critical element — accountability. Legislators have promised to establish a comprehensive accountability model to include public, charter, and voucher schools. Public school advocates would be wise to keep legislators' feet to the fire on this promise of long overdue taxpayer accountability for voucher schools.

Senate leaders indicate they plan to move voucher accountability legislation during the fall session while Assembly leaders have been mum. (Two years ago, when another midnight budget deal inadvertently threatened to expand vouchers to Green Bay, legislative leaders and the governor promised corrective legislation in the fall of 2011. The corrective bill passed the Senate that fall, but languished in the Assembly until the waning days of session in the spring of 2012 before last-minute passage and signature by the governor.)

Governor Scott Walker is pushing to bring private voucher schools under a state report card system. He recently told the *Wisconsin State Journal*, "If the students are performing at or better than they were in the schools they

came from, then that would be a compelling case to offer more choices like that to more families across the state. If the majority (of students) are not performing better, you could make a pretty compelling argument not to."

In his budget veto letter to Walker, WASB Executive Director John Ashley wrote, "(W)e encourage you to take a more active role in ensuring that all schools that receive public funding are subject to an appropriate and rigorous accountability system. The WASB participated constructively and collaboratively in a task force you convened in 2011 to develop the current accountability system for public schools."

Time for Accountability

Voucher school accountability has been problematic for years. In a July 2011 opinion piece in the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* when the Accountability Task Force was convened, Walker, Ashley, and Jim Bender, president of School Choice Wisconsin, along with other signatories to the piece, stated, "We believe that every school enrolling publicly funded students — traditional public schools, charter schools, or private schools in choice programs — should be part of this new accountability system." It is time to make good on that pledge.

The chairs of the legislature's education committees seem confident a measure will pass this session.

"We're definitely headed in the right direction," said Steve Kestell (R-Elkhart Lake), Assembly Education committee chair and former school board member. "The final product will have issues that don't make either side (voucher proponents and the Department of Public Instruction) happy. That's inevitable if we're going to have a good product. It won't be easy to accomplish, but it will be well worth it."

Luther Olsen (R-Ripon), Senate Education Committee chair and also a former school board member, said accountability is instrumental to the credibility of the voucher program going forward.

"The voucher people want a bill like this because they're only as good as their weakest school," Olsen said. "For years, the only people held accountable for their actions were the kids. Now, the teachers, administrators, schools and districts will be looked at closer. We live in an accountability world."

Olsen said the state's attempts to receive a waiver from the federal government on the No Child Left Behind Act's accountability measure (the Adequate Yearly Progress requirements) waylaid any efforts to advance a comprehensive accountability bill last session.

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While public school advocates support a compatible, “apples-to-apples” assessment of public and voucher school students, Olsen offered such comparisons might not be possible.

“We can’t just say, ‘You’re not doing well, you’re going away,’” Olsen said. “You have to look at the school’s mission,” suggesting a school working mostly with credit-deficient students would have to be evaluated differently than a traditional school.

“We haven’t really looked at (student) growth. When you take kids that are way behind — well, (the teachers) aren’t miracle workers,” Olsen said. “It’s sort of like public schools; would you hold a special needs student to the same standard as regular ed? No.”

Olsen believes if choice schools are not being successful, they could

still operate, but shouldn’t receive tax dollars.

Kestell had a somewhat different take.

“You want the (accountability) system to be fair and credible,” he said. “The trick is to get an ‘apples-to-apples’ picture so it makes sense. Once we get everyone taking the same test, you can collect the data to match with different schools. It’s got to be compatible. The current voucher schools want to be compared ‘apples-to-apples’. That’s the goal.”

Olsen said uncertainty about the Student Information System, a linchpin to making the accountability system open and transparent, is concerning. The resolution of the competing bids of the Wisconsin company Skyward and Minnesota’s Infinite Campus to manage the SIS remains in limbo (see sidebar).

Kestell said, “The whole focus is to

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give taxpayers and parents a fair and accurate accounting of their schools — both public and private.” ■

Accountability Hurdles

What hurdles block bringing voucher schools into an accountability framework similar to what exists for Wisconsin’s public schools?

Three main issues overshadow discussions about voucher school accountability:

- **What student performance data** should be gathered and reported from voucher schools?
- **How is this student performance data** to be collected?
- **What consequences, if any,** should consistently low-performing voucher schools face?

The first question is should data from all students in a voucher school be reported or just data from voucher students? Private schools are generally free from regulation by the state Department of Public Instruction (DPI). Not surprisingly, private schools accepting voucher students argue they remain fundamentally private in nature and their students who do not accept vouchers cannot be required to take state assessments.

Without assessment data for these students, can meaningful comparisons be drawn with either public schools or other private voucher schools? For those private school students that do accept vouchers, the ease and ability of

parents to “opt-out” voucher students from such testing, leaves a potential for huge gaps in the data that are collected.

With respect to data collection, the 112 voucher schools currently operating in Milwaukee are essentially independent — each with different record-keeping systems. In short, voucher schools lack a system for transferring student information, including achievement data, to the state.

While voucher schools likely will eventually be part of the statewide student information system (SSIS), action by the Legislature has slowed that process. The Legislature’s action bars the state superintendent from establishing a student information system, unless the DPI’s proposal for a multi-vendor SSIS is approved by the Joint Finance Committee (JFC). If the DPI’s proposal is approved by the JFC, the state superintendent must ensure that within five years, every private school participating in a voucher program uses either the SSIS or a system that is compatible with the SSIS.

The final issue is whether the state superintendent should be empowered to withhold state payments to compel better performance by chronically underperforming voucher schools or even shut down such schools. Shutting down poor performers is a basic principle of the charter school movement, but is strongly resisted by many voucher supporters. □