

# Not Just an Urban Problem

As the school voucher program expands, its impact on public schools across the state is felt more prominently

**SESSION:** *Impact of Vouchers/Charters on Wisconsin Public Schools* | **Presenters:** Jerry Fiene, executive director, Wisconsin Rural Schools Alliance; Marc Duff, deputy chief financial officer, Racine Unified School District

As a member of the state Assembly, Marc Duff, now deputy chief financial officer of the Racine Unified School District, voted in favor of a measure to expand the school voucher program. Today, in his position with the school district, that is a decision he regrets.

Jerry Fiene, executive director of the Wisconsin Rural Schools Alliance, laid it out very clearly.

“The expansion of school vouchers is directly harming the financial support of our local public schools,” he said.

The original intent behind expanding the school voucher program was to give low-income students in public schools an option to attend private school. It was supposed to empower parents and provide a better opportunity for students. However, several years into the school voucher program, neither is the case.

Most students enrolled in the school voucher program already come from private schools. And, most notably, Duff said, there is no indication that the program has helped students.

“Vouchers were supposed to improve student achievement,” Duff said. “There really isn’t any evidence of that. There is no research to back that up.”

Before the school voucher program came along, a lot of private schools in the state were actually losing students and struggling to keep their doors open.

“This has allowed many of them to stay open or, in some cases, expand,” Duff said.

At first, the school voucher program started small. However, at last count, \$212 million in state aid went to school vouchers. In Milwaukee alone, there are 109 schools participating in the voucher program. In Racine, voucher schools have contributed to higher transportation and special education costs.

“We’ve already closed a school, we will probably have to close more,” Duff said. “We’ve also had to reduce staff.”

Duff warns school leaders not to think of this as only an urban school district problem. Schools accepting students via the voucher program are now all over the state.

“I think there was a feeling that, ‘That’s a Milwaukee problem, I don’t have to worry about vouchers,’” Duff said. “Well, we’re all in it now.”

Duff explained that there really are two different kinds of schools participating in the voucher program. There are the traditional parochial schools and then there are private schools run by “entrepreneurial groups.”

“These private, entrepreneurial groups can swoop into a community,” Duff said. “These are a little harder to deal with.”

For instance, a group can come into a community, open a voucher school and, suddenly, Duff says, the local public school loses 100 students. “In a smaller school district,



that’s a big hit,” he said.

To retain students, Duff said school districts need to be innovative. For instance, the Milwaukee Public Schools have long offered magnet and immersion schools.

“We need to adopt these kinds of innovations in our public school districts across the state,” Duff says. “There is a lot you can do to treat parents like a customer.”

In addition, public schools can highlight what they can do better than private schools. Duff says, the Racine Unified School District has the ability to put technology in students’ hands and to implement it effectively into its schools – something that a smaller private school might not have the resources to do.

Additionally, Fiene and Duff encouraged school leaders to tell their lawmakers how the voucher program is directly taking funding from the public schools and, ultimately, putting more pressure on local taxpayers.

“What’s basically being developed is a dual school system where we’re all going to be competing for resources,” Fiene said. ■