

# Jay P. Greene's Blog

## Cheeseheaded Arguments Against School Choice

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Enrollment in Wisconsin's voucher program doubled for the second year in a row and members of the public education establishment are not happy.

“Private school vouchers aren't making our kids smarter — but they are spiking our property taxes and siphoning money away from our kids' public schools,” Mary Young, president of Support Our Schools Wauwatosa, said in a statement.

If the vouchers aren't making kids smarter, then neither are the district schools. A longitudinal study found that they score about the same on test scores, with advantages for the voucher students in some years. The major difference is that the voucher students graduate at a higher rate and cost about 40 percent less per pupil — important facts that somehow didn't make it into the *Journal-Sentinel's* coverage.

The Legislative Fiscal Bureau estimated this year that the [school voucher] expansion could shift \$600 million to \$800 million from public schools over the next decade.

State Schools Superintendent Tony Evers said at the time that the plan would hurt public school budgets and students.

“You lose two or three kids, it doesn't mean you can lay off five teachers,” Evers said. “It will have major negative impacts.”

First, it must be the case that Evers was misquoted. There's no way he actually believes that a school losing “two or three kids” will suffer “major negative impacts.” If two or three kids moved out or town or started homeschooling and the resulting fiscal impact was anything approaching “major,” the town should fire the principal and impeach the school board for gross incompetence.

But wait, what about that “\$600 to \$800 million” that will shift “from public schools over the next decade”? Isn't that a lot of money?

Well yes... and no. Here the *Journal-Sentinel* reporter yet again fails to provide the crucial context: how much the state and local governments currently spend on education. According to the latest figures from the National Center for Education Statistics, the Wisconsin public school system cost more than \$10.6 billion per year (about half of which is state spending). Even assuming no growth in spending, that's more than \$106 billion over the next decade. In other words, the voucher program expansion is projected to result in a reduction of about 0.56 percent to 0.75 percent of public spending on district schools. (The precise amount may vary slightly

depending on the data source and growth assumptions, but we're still talking about a fraction of one percent.)

Moreover, this calculation does not factor in the reduction in costs associated with students who leave the system. Plus, as Marty Lueken recently detailed at the Friedman Foundation blog, under the current school funding formula, "school districts that lose students to the parental choice program actually end up with more revenue for each student who remains in their schools."

In summary, the projected fiscal impact of the voucher expansion on district schools is minuscule overall and district schools may even see an increase in their per-student funding. Of course, that's not the impression that a context-free mention of "\$600 to \$800 million" gives, which is why providing that context is so essential. Readers who don't crunch the numbers themselves aren't just uninformed, they're misinformed. Failure to provide that context is journalistic malpractice.

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