

GUEST OPINION

Governor's voucher funding plan doesn't work for anyone

By Todd Gray

Sometimes, one organization's loss is another's gain. That is not the case with Gov. Scott Walker's proposed voucher funding plan. With this plan, just about everyone loses.

This is not a criticism of vouchers, but rather the current plan to fund them under the state budget proposal. Clearly, from The Freeman's article on March 4, the voucher schools themselves are placed in a very precarious situation, not knowing how much funding they will receive until well into the school year. Those per-pupil voucher funds may vary significantly each year. This is not a good situation for potential voucher schools. As bad as it is for voucher schools, the funding plan is worse for public schools.

In Waukesha, the districts revenue cap formula will not be able to count each student who qualifies for and chooses a voucher school. That initially might make sense, but it's only one part of the plan.

That same student would be counted in the district's state aid formula. The state then would deduct this amount from our district aid funding and send that amount to the voucher school. Here is the real problem: Adding the voucher student to our state aid formula reduces the amount the district can levy for property taxes under the current revenue cap formula. Per the governor's voucher plan, those lost dollars sent to voucher schools cannot be made up via the property tax levy. In the end, we lose both the normal perpupil funding plus we lose a significant amount of aid funding that must be paid to the voucher school. To be perfectly clear, the district not only loses 100 percent funding for the voucher student leaving the district, but we also will have to pay approximately \$4,000 for that student to attend the voucher school. That hurts. Our recent estimates with this proposed plan are alarming. They show that the district will lose slightly more than \$13,700 in funding for each district student who takes a voucher, yet we only receive \$9,815 in funding for each enrolled student.

Over time, this may result in private voucher schools receiving more funding per-pupil than public schools — with a fraction of the accountability that public schools face.

Consider another issue with this proposed funding plan. If a voucher student attending a private voucher school elects (or is forced) to return to a public school, say within a few months after the start of the school year, the voucher school is able to keep the full payment. The public school then would be required to fully educate that student although the educational funding for that student would have been lost.

Do you see where some games might be played with that provision?

We educate all students in the School District of Waukesha. Unlike private voucher schools, we don't have the option of turning away any student, and we never would. We provide a high level

of intradistrict school choice unparalleled by most districts in the state. We have worked very hard to develop many innovative programs, charter schools and magnet schools that provide student choice and promote high academic achievement, college readiness and career readiness.

Our district also has a strong special education program that delivers high-quality education and student services to all exceptional needs students. We also have worked closely with area manufacturing firms, the Waukesha County Business Alliance and Waukesha County Technical College to develop comprehensive skills training programs.

We are committed to providing hands-on skills for those students who want to pursue careers in manufacturing, with a community-minded goal of developing a skilled labor pool that in turn may help attract companies considering relocating to our area. A strong local economic base is good for our community and is good for our public schools.

It is very disheartening to see our work abandoned and unacknowledged in order to fund voucher schools that do not provide any of the resources noted previously. Again, I am not bashing voucher schools or even vouchers, in general. However, the proposed funding plan needs massive changes. As proposed, the plan would be a significant setback for the students and taxpayers in our community.

If Wisconsin is really "open for business," we need sound budget proposals, especially when it impacts our public school systems — the primary providers of the relevant education, skills and labor that our businesses need to grow.

(Todd Gray is the superintendent of the School District of Waukesha.) live.com.)

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