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## Alan J. Borsuk | On Education

# Dissecting change in Milwaukee enrollments

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Like a glacier in a warming world, Milwaukee Public Schools keeps melting bit by bit.

But this year, don't blame the private school voucher program as the reason MPS lost another notch when it comes to attendance.

In fact, for the first time since 1997, the number of voucher students in the city is down from a year ago, although only by a small amount.

Look to charter schools not staffed by MPS teachers and to public schools in the suburbs if you want to find the growth markets for Milwaukee students getting publicly funded educations this year.

Milwaukee is one of the places in the nation where the definition of public education is getting reshaped the most. The voucher program, which allows more than 20,000 students to attend private schools, the vast majority of them religious, remains the biggest cause.

But the picture is more complicated than that - and that is likely to increase as a governor and Legislature that are decidedly sympathetic to alternatives to MPS take office in January.

Grasping where kids are going to school is a key to understanding the education scene in Milwaukee - in fact, in the metro area, given the impact of the more than 8,000 children from the city enrolled in suburban public schools. See where kids are going and you see a lot about what parents want, how school finances are being shaped, and even what is going on in classrooms in many schools.

So we offer a brief guide to the half-dozen ways Milwaukee children can use tax dollars to get educated:

•&nbsp;MPS: The good news is the bad news could be worse. As of the official attendance count day in September, the decline in enrollment was less than MPS officials projected last winter. But it was still down, as it has been each year recently.

Think of it this way: A generation ago, if you went to public school in Milwaukee, you went to MPS. MPS had 100% of the market, so to speak. Along come voucher schools, charter schools (independently operated, publicly funded schools), privately operated alternative schools, open enrollment and the state's program of voluntary racial integration between city and suburban schools, known as Chapter 220.

By two years ago, the market share for the conventional MPS schools was 67.6%. A year ago, it was 66.6%. This fall, it was 65.3%.

•&ensp**The voucher program:** Tightening oversight and tightening finances in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program - in which voucher schools get up to \$6,442 per student from the state, about half of what MPS gets - are having an effect. The number of voucher schools this fall is 102. Last fall it was 111, the year before 123. Why? Some just closed. Several large ones have become charter schools, which means they get more money but cannot include classes in religion or religious observances during school. And only a trickle of new voucher schools have been allowed to open, thanks to a change in state law two years ago.

There were 20,996 students using vouchers this fall, down from 21,062 at the same point a year ago. That translates into the equivalent of 20,189.4 full-time students, compared with a cap under state law of 22,500 full-time equivalents. The cap is still in sight, but reaching it is not as imminent as it appeared a year ago. But growth may resume if the new Legislature opens doors to that.

•&ensp**Independent charter schools:** This is where the action has been the hottest. There are three kinds of such schools in Milwaukee - authorized through the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, through Milwaukee city government or through the Milwaukee School Board.

The UWM and City Hall charters have grown by more than 2,000 students in the last two years and now total more than 7,000 kids. The roster includes some of the best schools in the city - Milwaukee College Prep and Bruce-Guadalupe, to name two - but also some schools that have much weaker results.

The School Board has been kind of up and down when it comes to giving charters to schools not using MPS teachers. It currently seems to be up, agreeing recently to take in the Business and Economics Academy of Milwaukee, a decade-old charter that has been with UWM. (There's been quite bit of jockeying among charter school authorizers lately. Why? Each is a long story. Maybe another time.)

•&ensp**Open enrollment:** State law makes it possible for parents to send children to public schools in districts other than where they live (parents have to provide transportation). Using that law, 5,781 city children are going to suburban schools. An additional 2,261 minority children are using Chapter 220 to go to suburban schools. The total: 8,042, up more than 1,000 from two years ago. In some suburban districts, Milwaukee kids make up more than a quarter of the enrollment.

•&ensp**Partnership schools:** The School Board contracts with a roster of private nonprofits for alternative programs. That number has been going down as MPS wants to keep more kids in its own schools. This year, the total is 2,172, down almost a quarter from two years ago.

All together, more than a third of Milwaukee children who are going to kindergarten through 12th grade, using public dollars to pay for their education, are doing so outside of the conventional MPS system.

Is this all good or bad? You're welcome to your own opinion. Are all the changes raising the quality of education in the city? With some specific schools, yes. But overall, there's little evidence you can put much weight behind saying that. But who knows what we'll say in a few years?

Thousands of years ago, glaciers melted in Wisconsin, leaving a much changed landscape, with some interesting highs and curious lows. As MPS melts, it, too, is leaving a changed landscape. We just don't really know yet what contours are emerging.

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