

Milwaukee could become first American city to use universal vouchers for education

Current program sets limits based on income

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Milwaukee's private school voucher program has broken new and controversial ground often in its 21-year history. Now, it is headed toward what might well be another amazing national first.

If Gov. Scott Walker and leading voucher advocates prevail, Milwaukee will become the first city in American history where any child, regardless of income, can go to a private school, including a religious school, using public money to pay the bill.

Universal vouchers have been a concept favored by many free-market economists and libertarians since they were suggested by famed economist Milton Friedman more than half a century ago. Friedman's theory was that if all parents could apply their fair share of public money for educating their children at whatever school they thought best, their choices would drive educational quality higher.

Coming soon (fairly likely): Milwaukee as the biggest testing ground of Friedman's idea.

But not only is it hard to figure out what to say about the future of vouchers, it's not easy to know what to say about the past of Milwaukee's 21-year-old program of vouchers limited to low-income students except that it has been popular (more than 20,000 students using vouchers this year to attend more than 100 private schools) and there is not much of a case (except in some specific schools) that it has driven quality higher, both when it comes to many of the private schools specifically and when it comes to the educational waterfront of Milwaukee.

A fascinating coalition was behind the events that made the Wisconsin Legislature the first in the country to approve an urban voucher school program and the Wisconsin Supreme Court, in 1998, the first high court in the country to find constitutional a program involving public money paying for operation of religious schools.

The coalition always included different camps. For some, the core motivation was the Friedman free market concept. For others, such as Howard Fuller, the former Milwaukee school superintendent who became the most prominent advocate of the program, the focus was on giving poor families the chance to go to private schools that more well-to-do people could choose.

That coalition is pretty much kaput. Fuller strongly opposes universal vouchers, so much so that he said in an interview, "I'm off of the boat if they do this." He believes such a step would lead eventually to low-income children being cut out of better schools. Those schools, he fears, might well want to take less challenging middle-class kids in the pursuit of better overall results, especially if middle-class kids bring voucher money with them. He said backers of the idea "are hijacking the programs in ways that

are unacceptable."

He also warned that adoption of the idea would end bipartisan support or, at least acceptance, of vouchers. His message to backers of the idea: "You better hope, if you do this, that there's never a switch in power again, because if there is, this program will be gone."

Susan Mitchell, president of School Choice Wisconsin, which advocates for the program, takes a much different view. Mitchell and her husband, George, worked closely with Fuller until two years ago, when a major rupture occurred over political strategy and accountability measures for private schools. Mitchell has become a key adviser to Walker on education policy.

She said vouchers for all would make Milwaukee a more attractive place for families with incomes that are middle class or higher. A couple where one is a firefighter and one is nurse, for example, make too much money to get vouchers for their kids now, but too little to afford private schools. A voucher would be something they could get by living in Milwaukee and not in the suburbs, she said, adding that there is no income-test to get into independent charter schools in the city and that doesn't cause any problems.

"Why not make it more attractive to stay in the city?" she asked. "People in Milwaukee want this. They think it's a successful program, they want more of this." Broadening participation would broaden political support and benefit low-income children by making the long-term prospects for the program better, she said.

Generally, a voucher student brings \$6,442 in public money to the private school the child attends. Only children from homes with incomes of no more than 175% of the federal poverty line (about \$39,000 for a household of four) currently qualify, and the vouchers can be used only at schools within the city.

Walker's proposal would keep payments at \$6,442 and keep participation to city residents only, but he would expand the eligible schools to all of Milwaukee County. That could add a substantial number of students. More than 20 suburban private schools are looking into the possibility. Walker also wants to eliminate the current 22,500 upper limit on the number of voucher students.

Even if it passes, the change to vouchers-for-all won't happen overnight. Only new students entering private schools will be entitled to vouchers regardless of income. It would take six to eight years for the idea to take full effect. Under the proposal, families with incomes of more than 325% of the federal poverty limit (about \$72,000 for a household of four) could be charged tuition by a private school, on top of the voucher payment.

It also won't happen without a fight. The voucher program still has lots of opponents, people who vehemently feel it is wrong, it is harming Milwaukee Public Schools unfairly, and that it hasn't proved it is improving overall educational achievement. Even some Republicans, in this time of cuts, may balk at giving public money to families that are not poor and haven't been getting it in the past.

Milton Friedman died in 2006. He never warmed up fully to the Milwaukee voucher program because it was limited to low-income families, instead of it being universal. Fuller said he discussed the universal voucher idea with him personally. "I disagreed with Milton Friedman," he said. That hasn't changed. What has changed is the political scene in Madison and the willingness of Friedman admirers, starting with Walker, to push ahead.

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