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 Education

Voucher and virtual schools

# Evers says he'd accept lifting enrollment cap

## Impending GOP control may make promise a reality

By [Becky Vevea](#) of the Journal Sentinel

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Governor-elect Scott Walker's campaign promise to lift the enrollment cap on Wisconsin's voucher and virtual schools could come to fruition soon, despite opposition from unions.

In an interview this week on the public affairs program "WisconsinEye," State Superintendent Tony Evers said that he is open to lifting the enrollment limits, something Republicans have pushed for in the face of resistance from unions and public school advocates who see the voucher program as draining resources from Milwaukee schools by diverting public funding to private voucher schools.

"I'm steeped in reality. I'm not sure if what I think makes a lot of difference," Evers said, alluding to the impending Republican control of the governor's office and both houses of the Legislature. "People have made clear what their positions are."

Removing the caps on virtual schools or the choice program would not "fundamentally change the way those programs operate, nor will it dramatically increase the enrollments," Evers said.

Howard Fuller, a former Milwaukee Public Schools superintendent and longtime champion of the choice program, favors lifting the caps but raised concerns about accountability.

"I think we should use this opportunity to discuss what are we going to do about schools that are in the program that don't necessarily serve kids well," he said.

Fuller heads the Institute for the Transformation of Learning at Marquette University, which operates the New Schools Approval Board, a governing body implemented in 2009 to authorize schools entering to the voucher program.

For the 2009-2010 school year, the board only approved three schools for entrance to the program, a stark contrast to years before when between eight and 15 were ushered in.

Currently, voucher and virtual schools both must be accredited and participate in state testing, a measure that was implemented for voucher schools just this year.

MPS Superintendent Greg Thornton said Tuesday that the emphasis should be on raising accountability standards for student achievement among all schools and fixing the funding formula that draws \$52 million for the voucher program from Milwaukee property tax payers.

"If enrollment caps are lifted, due to the way the schools currently are funded, city taxpayers will continue to see an unfair burden," Thornton said.

The enrollment limit for the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program is 22,500 pupils, a figure that has never been met since the program started in 1990. For the 2010-2011 school year, enrollment was at 20,996 students, a decrease from 21,062 the previous year.

Union groups strongly oppose the voucher program in its entirety.

"This program is not good for kids in Milwaukee, and the state of Wisconsin needs to invest in public education for all children," said Mike Langyel, president of the Milwaukee Teachers' Education Association.

"The difficulty with the choice program is that it hurt the funding for the public schools," Langyel said. "In addition, they're allowed to choose which students they care to serve, and we think this is a problem."

Virtual schools appeared to butt up against their enrollment cap of 5,250 students last year when 1,756 students were placed on a waiting list, but the list was cleared before the first day of school.

Most virtual schools are affiliated with specific public school districts, but draw students from across the state.

State aid follows a student who enrolls in a new school district with a virtual school through the state's open enrollment public school choice program - an amount estimated at \$6,796 for the current school year.

Parents of virtual school students are [advocating for the removal of the enrollment limit](#).

"It's a cap that serves no purpose," said Julie Thompson, vice president and spokeswoman for the Wisconsin Coalition of Virtual School Families. "Online learning should be accessible to every student."

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