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School choice could expand

Cap on Milwaukee students may rise

By [Patrick Marley](#) of the Journal Sentinel

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Madison — Republicans who will take power Jan. 3 hope to make changes to the school choice program that could include lifting the cap on the number of choice students in Milwaukee and bringing the voucher program to other areas.

Governor-elect Scott Walker and his fellow Republicans in the Legislature said they are interested in making the program more available but had not settled on specifics.

"I think school choice is successful," Walker said. "I think it's worthy looking at expanding it. How do you do that? There's really a multitude of options, not only those being discussed here but being discussed in other parts of the country. And we want to continue to be at the forefront of that."

The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program allows students to receive taxpayer-financed vouchers to attend private schools, including religious schools.

The program is capped at 22,500 students, and this year just under 21,000 students are enrolled in it. Walker supported eliminating the cap during the campaign, but Democrats have raised concerns about the effectiveness of some choice schools and the program's effect on property taxes.

Walker said an expansion of school choice likely would be included in the budget he introduces early next year. Sen. Alberta Darling (R-River Hills), co-chairwoman of the budget-writing Joint Finance Committee, said she would be interested in considering bills on choice even before that.

The other co-chairman, Rep. Robin Vos (R-Rochester), said he would leave it to Walker to decide whether to include it in the budget, but he wants to address school choice at some point in the two-year legislative session.

Both legislators said they initially favored expanding the program to select areas before making it available statewide. They named Beloit, Racine and Green Bay as possibilities.

"I absolutely do not think we have the ability to expand across the state all at once," Vos said.

Vos in 2007 wrote a budget provision that would have expanded school choice to Racine County. The

Assembly, then controlled by Republicans, approved a [version of the budget with that provision](#) but it was taken out in a deal reached with Democrats who ran the Senate.

Susan Mitchell, president of School Choice Wisconsin, declined to comment on what changes her group would like to see in the program.

The plan to expand the program raised concerns from Rep. Tamara Grigsby (D-Milwaukee), who said the state should focus its energy and resources on helping public schools. She believes expanding the choice program would siphon off resources that would otherwise go to public schools.

"At the end of the day, public dollars should go toward public schools," she said.

She added: "I'm very concerned that as we expand it, people come in and get to profit off the backs of our kids."

She said she thought bringing the program to other communities would highlight the "funding flaw" in which Milwaukee property-tax payers pay a greater percentage of the costs for voucher students.

She said she was hopeful that problem could be fixed as choice is brought to other communities.

Walker said he was sensitive to that problem and wanted to make sure expanding choice had minimal effects on property taxes.

Milwaukee's school choice program began 20 years ago. Last year, the law was changed to require schools in the program to give standardized tests and report the results, employ teachers who have at least bachelor's degrees and meet the same minimum hours of instruction as public schools.

The law also was changed to require schools entering the program to get approved by a board run by the Institute for the Transformation of Learning at Marquette University. This past summer, the New Schools Approval Board signed off on bringing three schools into the program, compared with eight to 15 approved annually in past years.

Grigsby said the requirements established last year were essential to keeping choice schools accountable, but Vos said the Legislature should review whether all the provisions are necessary.

Tony Evers, the state schools superintendent, said lawmakers need to look at the performance of choice schools as they examine expanding the program.

"Choice schools have proven to be no more effective and in some cases less effective than Milwaukee Public Schools," he said. "That needs to be part of the debate rather than just emotions."

During the campaign, Walker said he would create a system in which public schools are graded and local officials are given more power to reform failing schools and fire unsuccessful teachers. He is now working out the details of that.

"I begin with the premise that my goal is providing every kid in this state, no matter what ZIP code they live in, with a great education," he said. "So to me school choice is one component of that."

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