

Some students may be turned away from Racine voucher program

By [Erin Richards](#) of the Journal Sentinel

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The new private school voucher program in Racine has received more student applications than the 250-student first-year cap on enrollment will allow, meaning some interested pupils may be turned away this fall.

New figures from the state Department of Public Instruction show the number of applications received for the new Racine program includes 246 from low-income students and another 43 from students of higher economic means.

Low-income students who qualified for a free or reduced-price lunch last year have priority to enter the program, which for the first time will allow pupils from Racine to attend private schools with a taxpayer-funded voucher worth up to \$6,442.

New legislation signed by Gov. Scott Walker allowed for the creation of the Racine voucher program and expanded the 21-year-old Milwaukee voucher program.

The new law raises the income limits to allow middle-income students to qualify for vouchers, allows participating private schools to be located outside the Milwaukee city boundary and drops the 22,500-student cap on enrollment in Milwaukee.

The Racine program is limited to 250 students in the first year and 500 in the second year. There's no cap on Racine's enrollment after that.

For enrollment purposes, the applicant group of 246 students in Racine translates to the equivalent of 231.2 full-time students, and the group of 43 higher-income students translates to the equivalent of 41 full-time students.

Fractions enter the picture because some students attend school part time.

That brings the number of full-time equivalent applicants in Racine to 272.2.

Matt Kussow, executive director of the Wisconsin Council of Religious and Independent Schools, said Wednesday the vast majority of seats in the new Racine program will be filled with the group of low-income student applicants.

"It's likely that most of them will get in," Kussow said. "But some of the students in (the higher-income group) may not be able to get a voucher because of the cap."

Kussow said most of the students entering the Racine voucher program are likely coming from the Racine Unified School District, which could contribute to an enrollment drop in the state's fourth-largest school district.

DPI will soon finalize the number of low-income student participants, and then allot the leftover seats to children in the higher-income group.

Eight private schools in and around Racine have indicated they intend to accept students on vouchers this fall.

More schools join

Movement to take advantage of the new law has been less frenetic in Milwaukee's program.

According to the DPI, 107 schools have indicated they intend to participate in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, or voucher program, for the coming school year.

Of those, 11 are new to the program and nine are located outside Milwaukee, including St. Thomas More High School on the Milwaukee-St. Francis border, Hillel Academy in Fox Point, Torah Academy of Milwaukee in Glendale and Saint Martin of Tours Parish School in Franklin.

None of the schools outside Milwaukee would have been able to accept voucher students under the old rules.

Patrick Gasper, spokesman for the DPI, said his office wouldn't have preliminary application numbers for students intending to enter the Milwaukee program until later next week.

Some leaders of private schools that could be involved or expand their involvement in the Milwaukee voucher program appear to be watching the developments and using this year to plan.

Wisconsin Lutheran High School, at 330 N. Glenview Ave., already has 281 voucher students, 92 of whom are freshmen.

"We are already anticipating a huge increase in applications for next year," said Ned Goede, principal of the private Wisconsin Lutheran. "We're spending the whole semester with our faculty and board looking at what our school will look like in the next five years. The new ruling is forcing us to do that."

The new legislation also allows participating voucher schools to charge higher-income parents a fee for tuition on top of the \$6,442 voucher payment from the state.

For years, high school leaders in the voucher program have complained that a payment of approximately \$6,500 doesn't come close to covering the cost of educating secondary school students, and some leaders said it made more sense to reduce the number of voucher students they accept.

That could soon change. Goede said he expects voucher applications at Wisconsin Lutheran to double next year.

"Next year is an open field," he said. "It's going to be a huge year."

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