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Summary

Thousands of low-income children have attended private schools in Milwaukee, Wisconsin through a citywide voucher program. The program has also spurred improvements in the city's public schools.

Word count: 618

“Today, there are over 11,000 low-income children receiving vouchers to attend religious and non-secular private schools in Milwaukee.”

Let private schools help with public education

By Brother Bob Smith

Over a decade ago courageous politicians, business leaders and educators in Wisconsin decided that the traditional approaches to public school reform were not working. It was time to consider systemic change.

A bipartisan coalition in the legislature passed the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, which zeroed in on the state's largest and most troubled school district. Low-income families gained access to private schools using publicly funded tuition vouchers. As president of Messmer Catholic Schools I have been fortunate to participate in this remarkable program.

Since 1998 Messmer has served more than 2,000 low-income students using voucher funds. Our student body is 85 percent black and 10 percent Hispanic, with 60 percent of the children from single-parent families and a similar number below the poverty line. Messmer boasts a graduation rate in the high 90s and a college attendance rate of over 80 percent. We do all of this with about half of the per pupil money that our public schools spend.

Religious schools like Messmer were not included in the fairly limited original voucher legislation, which passed in 1991. That changed thanks to public pressure, particularly from Milwaukee's business community, which was frustrated with the quality of local job applicants and believed allowing more students and schools to participate in the voucher program would improve Milwaukee's entire education system.

Some questioned this expansion to religious schools. School choice does nothing to promote religion, however. In fact, the money does not go to “support schools,” it goes to support families. It is the parent or guardian that chooses the school. And if they are not happy they may choose another – including a public school. This is true freedom.

Most of the students at Messmer are non-Catholic and are allowed, by law, to opt-out of religious services. To date not a single student has chosen to do so at Messmer or any other voucher school. When a parent or guardian chooses a school they generally choose all aspects of the school.

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Today, there are over 11,000 low-income children receiving vouchers to attend religious and non-secular private schools in Milwaukee. We know that private schools have successfully educated these thousands of low-income students, but we're also learning that Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) is improving because of competition from private schools. Last year Milwaukee superintendent Spence Korte said, "Like many other monopolistic operations, you get a little bit complacent when you're the only game in town... We needed to be able to compete, to really get better, and to be more sensitive to what parents are telling us they need."

According to a January 2002 report by Milwaukee school board member John Gardner, "Eleven years of expanded school choice in Milwaukee have coincided with: enrollment growth in MPS schools; improvement in MPS's fiscal condition; and increased academic achievement by MPS students."

For each child that participates in the voucher program, Milwaukee Public Schools retains the difference between that student's voucher amount and the district's per pupil spending. Participating private schools receive a *maximum* of \$4,950 per student as part of the school choice program that leaves the district with \$4,000 of the district's more than \$9,000 per pupil expenditure.

Between 1990 and 1999 the Milwaukee public school system received exactly what it requested: more money and smaller classes. Yet, it still has a 50 percent graduation rate, and of that number, the average grade is a D-plus. In my opinion, that is a crisis.

Fortunately, vouchers are moving us closer to my vision of a quality school system. I envision schools that want to work together – public, religious and non-sectarian. I see students who will graduate with diplomas that mean something, and parents and guardians who are part of their children's educational journey.

Brother Bob Smith is president of Messmer Catholic Schools. On April 22 and 23 he will speak at events organized by Cascade Policy Institute, a Portland, Oregon think tank. Please call (503) 242-0900 or visit cascadepolicy.org for more information.

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