

Is Wisconsin Ready for the Corporate Reformers of Education?

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Republicans in Madison have pushed through changes to Wisconsin's education system, to expand private choice and charter schools and provide state tax dollars to these private entities. The loss of state aid strikes at our cash strapped public schools.

ALMA - "I just don't understand vouchers, choice, and charter schools," the man told me. "Could you explain?"

Public education is undergoing a radical change. What was predominately a local school governed by a locally elected school board is poised to become a plethora of choices: private religious schools, independent privately operated charter schools, voucher schools, for-profit schools, virtual schools, and public schools.

All paid for with tax dollars.

State officials recently announced enrollment information related to statewide private school vouchers. Lawmakers who supported the state budget voted to expand the payment for private schools with public money, known as voucher schools. The information released shows four out of five students who received public money for private tuition were already enrolled in a private school.

Data on the performance of these alternatives to public schools is inconclusive, poor or not

available.

According to the recently released 2012-13 report cards for virtual charter schools, half of virtual school students were receiving their education from a school that did not meet expectations. Virtual charter schools are on-line schools paid for with public money.

Twenty years of experience with private vouchers in Milwaukee shows no major differences in the performance of private voucher students with public school students. The Legislative Audit Bureau in 2011 reviewed the final of five years of study to conclude students in Milwaukee who attend private schools with vouchers show few differences on standardized tests than their cohorts in public schools.

The 25 private schools in the new statewide voucher expansion received state money – over \$7,000 per student – but are not required to conduct standardized state required testing for several years. Several of my Senate colleagues and I urged accountability for private schools similar to that of public schools but so far this hasn't happened. Instead lawmakers are heading in the opposite direction

Efforts in the Senate Education Committee would expand another type of choice: a charter school that could be operated by a private out-of-state company; again paid for with public money.

This legislation -Senate Bill 76 - would allow charter schools to expand even if the school board that authorized them did not want the expansion.

All this change in public education has many people confused. Most of Wisconsin hasn't seen the use of taxpayer money for private education. Many public schools have cut back to the bones. Parents, school board members and superintendents are asking me, "Why fund these unaccountable, private schools at the cost to our public schools?"

Data released by state education officials report almost half of public school districts will see further cuts in state money. The deepest cuts – limited to 15% by law- will go to 64 mostly rural

schools. After the 15% cuts are taken out, schools then must pay their share of the independent charter schools in the Milwaukee area. Local school boards tell me this is simply not fair.

The push away from funding local public schools is part of a national effort to privatize public education. This effort is detailed in a new book by Diane Ravitch. She was appointed to public education positions by both President George H.W. Bush and President Clinton and is critical of both President George W. Bush and President Obama.

Ravitch describes efforts to transform education into “an entrepreneurial sector of the economy”. These efforts are “funded to a large degree by major foundations, Wall Street hedge fund managers, entrepreneurs and the U.S. Department of Education.”

She describes this movement to “eliminate the geographical based system of public education as we have known it for the past 150 years and replace it with a competitive market- based system of school choice – one that includes traditional public schools, privately managed charter schools, religious schools, voucher schools, for-profit schools, virtual schools and for-profit vendors of instruction.”

Few of the details Ravitch mentions are part of public discussions among policy-makers. Yet observing the action of the Legislature, the influence of those who seek education transformation is undeniable.

Wisconsin must wake up to the forces behind changes in schools. Once folks know details, I suspect few would support education funds to unaccountable schools created as investment opportunities.

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