

Report Cards for Voucher Schools?

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This week Senator Kathleen Vinehout writes about school accountability in Wisconsin, says YES to Report Cards for Voucher Schools!

MADISON - Report cards are coming out. Not for the children, but for schools.

These report cards help us know how our schools are doing and how schools can improve to help all students learn.

Should private schools that operate with tax dollars have the same report cards? What if that school is funded 100% or near that with tax dollars?

This question was the topic of a recent Senate Education Committee hearing.

Each public school will soon release a report card given by the state. The school earns a score based on performance in four areas including student achievement in reading and math, student growth, closing gaps with students with different needs, and career and college readiness. Factors like graduation, attendance and ACT participation are included in the last category.

State officials at the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) first released the report cards last year as part of a statewide school accountability system.

The system was developed two years ago in a task force chaired by, among others, the Governor and the Superintendent of Public Instruction. At that time leaders of both public schools and private schools who receive public money wrote about the importance of accountability.

We believe that every school enrolling publically funded students – traditional public schools, charter schools or private schools in the choice program – should be part of this new accountability system. (July 9, 2011 Milwaukee Journal Sentinel)

Parents of students who attend private schools with state tax dollars will not read the school's report card this year, or next year. Private schools are not yet required to complete the testing and other data collection used for the report card.

The state budget created a loophole to not require testing of these voucher students for many years.

Education Committee Chairs Senator Olsen and Representative Kestell want to change this. They introduced legislation to make good on the promise to keep all publically funded private schools accountable. They worked hard to bring uniformity to the measures used in the report card. They even asked the Legislative Audit Bureau to make sure all measures were uniformly and appropriately applied to all schools.

Despite earlier promises to the contrary, private school lobbying groups balked at turning over student test and other data to DPI.

Private school representatives complained collecting student test scores, graduation rates, absenteeism and other data would be burdensome. These groups called the accountability requirement "onerous and invasive" and expressed concerns over student privacy.

Senator Olsen told the committee, "No matter if you are public, choice or charter, if you get a

check you need a check-up.” He explained both small public and private schools have privacy issues. For this reason federal requirements state if a group is smaller than 20 students no test score will be released.

Some Senators wanted to go farther in requirements for voucher private schools. Senators Lehman and Shilling wrote a bill to add a number of public school requirements to publically funded private schools. These measures include background checks, teacher licensure, similar graduation requirements, building inspections, and adherence to the state’s open records law.

Senator Lehman argued that both “inputs” -what goes into a child’s education, and “outputs” -that child’s performance - are the types of accountability taxpayers expect.

Senator Vukmir expressed concerns private schools were “ceding all power to DPI”. Senator Cullen responded by saying if a school is failing for six years it doesn’t make sense to put that school in charge of policing itself.

Most publically funded private schools are in Milwaukee. DPI testified 78% of students in Milwaukee private voucher schools are attending with taxpayer money.

It’s time taxpayers learned how well these schools are doing.

Lawmakers and the Governor should make good on their promise to hold all schools accountable. Soon you will see the report card for the local public school. Let’s make sure you can also see how well the students with taxpayer-funded vouchers are doing at the private schools.

As Heather Ross, a mom who testified at the hearing said to our committee, “Whoever pays the piper, calls the tune.” If taxpayers are footing the bill, they deserve to see the results.

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