

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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March 26, 2015

Thomas Johnson  
District Administrator  
Beloit School District  
Kolak Education Center  
1633 Keeler Ave  
Beloit WI 53511-4713

## Re: Take Action to Stop Harmful Voucher Expansion

Dear District Administrator Johnson:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF), a Wisconsin-based national association with 21,500 members, including more than 1,300 state members, regarding serious concerns over the expansion of vouchers in Governor Scott Walker's budget bill. FFRF protects the constitutional separation between state and church, and advocates on behalf of its nonreligious members. We would like to bring relevant information on the budget to your attention and also request that you take action to ensure the vitality of Wisconsin's public schools. **Funding parochial and private schools with taxpayer money will cause direct harm to our state education system and to your District.**

First, we want to thank you for your public service and for providing an education to *all* students. This is exactly what was envisioned in Wisconsin's 1848 Constitution, which provides for our common schools.

As you may be aware, the governor's proposed budget would remove the current 1,000 student cap on statewide vouchers in the Wisconsin Parental Choice program. This would open the floodgates to sending students to mostly religious schools across the state at taxpayer expense.

The impact on the Beloit School District could be devastating. According to the Department of Public Instruction, **the District had 5527 students that qualified for free or reduced price lunch in 2013, which was 77.9% percent of enrollment.<sup>1</sup> These students would be eligible for taxpayer-funded vouchers.** How can your public school system continue to operate if large numbers of students will leave for religious education, taking corresponding state funding with them? Wisconsin's treasured public school system would be destroyed.

Voucher supporters are already salivating over the opportunity to pillage public schools. As part of a future marketing campaign, School Choice Wisconsin recently requested student names, addresses, phone numbers, grade levels, and schools of attendance of every student enrolled in roughly 30 public school districts.

The voucher expansion is merely the next step in an effort to privatize education in Wisconsin. The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, which is the longest voucher experiment in the country, demonstrates the rapid growth of voucher schemes. The Milwaukee program grew from 300 students

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<sup>1</sup> Source: [http://fns.dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/fns/xls/enrollpartoct2013\\_public.xls](http://fns.dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/fns/xls/enrollpartoct2013_public.xls)

in 1990 to nearly 27,000 students this year. If voucher expansion is approved, it will not be long before tens of thousands of students leave public schools to attend religiously segregated schools at public expense.

It is apparent that public school districts will lose already diminished resources and the quality of education will suffer. Legislators fail to understand that the loss of a student to a voucher school does not mean that school districts will see an equal reduction in costs. It should be obvious that public schools must retain essential staff, provide transportation service, maintain building facilities, and provide an education to students with disabilities.

To make matters worse, voucher students are not likely to receive an education on par with that provided by public school districts. Observers of voucher schools in Milwaukee have called into question the qualifications of teachers, the use of outdated books, and whether some schools have any curriculum at all. The problems go beyond the classroom. Some voucher schools failed to provide meals that were compliant with USDA standards and even failed to provide space for children to play outside. If voucher school operators cannot provide healthy meals or a safe playground, how can they be trusted to provide adequate instruction? It is appalling that public school students will attend private schools that offer an unsound education under the guise of “parental choice.”

The Milwaukee voucher program also serves as a warning as to what happens when taxpayer money goes to unaccountable private groups. In the last ten years, taxpayers have given \$139 million to voucher schools that were subsequently barred from the program for failing to meet requirements related to finances, accreditation, student safety and auditing, according to a Wisconsin State Journal analysis published last year. To use the term “incompetent” to describe some voucher school operators would be charitable.

Finally, there are no assurances that voucher educators are answerable to the taxpaying citizens who ultimately write the checks. They are not governed by publicly elected school boards that answer to constituents. There are also no means for the public to review records, attend meetings, or otherwise gather information about school operations. The voucher system puts hundreds of millions of dollars in the hands of unaccountable private schools. Where public funds go, public accountability must follow.

We urge you and other public educators in Wisconsin to take a strong stand against vouchers. A number of school districts in the state have written to elected officials about their serious budget concerns. Several school boards have also adopted resolutions opposing portions of the state budget proposal. However, little attention has gone to the severe voucher expansion, which will have a lasting and disastrous impact on public schools. We request that your District and its school board formally and publicly oppose the expansion of vouchers in Wisconsin. Thank you for safeguarding public education.

Sincerely,



Patrick C. Elliott  
Staff Attorney