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Religious Schools Are a Top Choice

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Expansion of vouchers has resulted in unprecedented level of public funding of religious education

Fourth of 7 parts

Three sentences bring home one of the most significant impacts of Milwaukee's groundbreaking private school voucher program.

One: On doors throughout St. Margaret Mary School, at N. 92nd St. and Capitol Drive, there are small printed signs that say: "Be it known to all who enter here that Christ is the reason for this school."

Two: More than 10,000 students - over two-thirds of the total using publicly funded vouchers to attend private schools in Milwaukee this year - were attending religious schools.

Three: Wisconsin is putting money into religious schools in Milwaukee in ways and amounts that are without match in at least the last century of American history.

It was clear to Journal Sentinel reporters who visited 106 of the 115 schools that participated in the voucher program this year that without vouchers, there would be fewer religious kindergarten through eighth-grade schools left in the city. And aside from several strong parochial high schools that serve large numbers of suburban students, there wouldn't be many high schools, either.

Almost two-thirds of students who attended private schools in the city this year did so with vouchers. Because vouchers are limited to low-income families, few of these students could have done so without them. Most of the schools are religious.

Is it a public good that religious education is so widely available in Milwaukee at no cost to low-income families?

Many say it adds to the vitality of life in the city. Some schools have played key roles in strengthening neighborhoods. Proponents also point out that there is some precedent, that the G.I. Bill gave public money to use for education, with no regard to whether a school was public or had a religious affiliation.

Others say it's not right - that public money should not be used to pay for religious schools, period.

What cannot be debated is that thousands of parents are choosing religious schools for their children because they want the influence of faith in their children's education. Voucher payments to religious schools - now running about $60 million a year - have given new life to old Catholic and Lutheran schools and brought about the creation of more than 20 Christian schools run by African-Americans and serving almost all-black student bodies.

Thirty-five Catholic schools; 12 Wisconsin Synod Lutheran schools; 11 Missouri Synod Lutheran schools; 22 other Christian schools, some affiliated with specific denominations and others not; three Muslim schools; and one Jewish school are part of the program.

The percentage of voucher students in specific schools ranges from 2% to 100%. Overall, 60% of students in Catholic kindergarten through eighth-grade schools were attending on vouchers. The figure was about 66% for both groups of Lutheran schools.

For many schools, the voucher payments are 80% to 100% of their income. That simple math, combined with shrinking congregations in many urban Catholic and Lutheran churches, leaves many principals to acknowledge that they would not exist without vouchers.

No 'strange-type' schools
June 10, 1998 was the pivotal date in the history of religious schools and the voucher program.

On that day, the Wisconsin Supreme Court ruled that including religious schools in the program was constitutional - the first decision by any state Supreme Court upholding school vouchers.

On a 4-2 vote, the court held that as long as voucher payments were based on parents' choices of schools, paying money to religious schools was not an impermissible form of state support for religion. It also held that there shouldn't be "excessive entanglement" between the state and the schools, which, in practical terms, has meant that the state has almost no power to tell a school what should go on in its classrooms.

The U.S. Supreme Court turned down an appeal of the Wisconsin decision, in effect letting it stand, then voted 5-4 in 2002 that a similar voucher program in Cleveland was constitutional.

The voucher movement has had limited impact nationally since then.

When the doors of the Milwaukee voucher program were opened to religious schools, some critics predicted that schools practicing extreme forms of religion - "some real strange-type schools," as then-state schools superintendent John Benson put it - would open. That has not happened. The religious schools speak to the mainstream of American life, not the fringes.

If you've ever been in a Catholic or Lutheran school, chances are you'd find visiting most of those schools - and they make up half the schools in the voucher program - a familiar experience.

They are traditional in their educational programs and conservative in their approaches to behavior. Most require uniforms such as light-colored polo shirts and dark pants or skirts. Their teachers are licensed, atmospheres are structured, and they generally have small classes meeting in buildings that haven't changed much in years.

Several Lutheran and Catholic schools are moving outside the traditional mold. In some ways, they are being even more traditional. St. Marcus Lutheran, the Hope School and Hope Christian School are each Lutheran schools that are taking a highly structured, no-compromises approach to academics and behavior, including drills and homework, rigorous enforcement of rules, and a strict dress code (ties and coats for boys at Hope School).

The religious schools vary widely in how intensely they teach the faith. In many instances, such as in a large number of Catholic schools, specific religious practices are not as front-and-center as they are elsewhere. People of other Christian faiths, even non-Christians, are comfortable there.

In other cases, the religious mission of the schools is so pervasive it would be illogical for someone who does not adhere to the school's belief system to attend.

Why would someone who isn't intent on Christianity attend a school named Believers in Christ? Why would anyone who isn't an Orthodox Jew attend a school such as Yeshiva Elementary School, where students spend about half of each day in such things as Talmudic study?

The answer is, they don't, although legally they have the right to.

The voucher law permits students to "opt out" of religious education in school - a major issue when the state Supreme Court found the law constitutional. Many religious schools worried that the opt-out rule would create difficult situations in school; that was one of several reasons some schools, particularly Lutheran schools, were slow to join the program after the 1998 decision.

In reality, opting out has been a non-issue. Except for isolated instances, it doesn't happen much.

Michael Brown, principal of St. Philip Neri Catholic School, 5501 N. 68th St., said: "People are smart. They're not going to send their kids to a religious school and then opt out of religion."

He estimated that only about 10% of the school's 183 students are Catholic, but said all take part in the religious aspect of the school, including daily prayer, weekly Mass and daily religious classes.

Brown said that several years ago, a couple of non-Catholic families said they did not want their children taking part in a specific religious program and that was no problem.

Numbers still falling

Even with the rise of the voucher program, the number of students attending private schools in the city has continued to fall in recent years and is now at the lowest level in a generation or more, according to the annual census of children in the city conducted by Milwaukee Public Schools.

MPS figures show that 21,829 children 4 to 19 years old were in private schools as of June 30, 2004, down from 27,723 in June 1998 - when the state Supreme Court opened the way for religious schools to get vouchers - and 49,306 in 1967.

That was a period when the religious schools in the city were much larger and stronger, before so many congregation members moved to the suburbs. Some had classrooms of 50. It is common to walk through a parochial school today that seems like it is fairly full when a couple hundred kids are present, then to be told that 500 or more used to attend the school.

In that era, the churches paired with the schools were much stronger and able to provide almost all the support a school needed. That is rarely the case in Milwaukee now. School enrollments are down, church support is a fraction of the budget and voucher money is, in many cases, the name of the financial game for religious schools, especially in high-poverty neighborhoods.

Serving African-Americans

If the No. 1 impact of school choice when it comes to religion has been to keep Catholic and Lutheran schools going in the city, an important second impact has been to open the door to the creation of religious schools connected to African-American churches.

Visitors to Holy Redeemer Christian Academy in recent years have included President George W. Bush and basketball legend Michael Jordan. Combine that high visibility with a large, beautiful new building at W. Hampton Ave. and Mother Daniels Way (N. 35th St.), and the school, which had 309 voucher students in January, is the one many people think of first on this score.

But Holy Redeemer is part of a broader picture. More than 20 Christian schools, with more than 2,300 students using vouchers, have arisen out of African-American community churches or have been started by people who wanted to head a Christian-oriented school serving African-Americans.

It could be said that one of the signs of being a vibrant church in the black community is to have launched a school connected to your church.

• Annie Oliver worked for Milwaukee Public Schools for 26 years, including six as an assistant principal of Washington High School. She says she left when her frustrations with MPS mounted and she felt there were better ways to reach children. In 1997, Mount Zion Assembly of the Apostolic Faith, headed by Bishop Earl Parchia, opened Early View Academy of Excellence with five students and Oliver heading its education program.

She says that within three years, the school had 300 students. For the last two years, the school has operated in a former budget movie theater at 7132 W. Good Hope Road, purchased and remodeled at a cost of more than $3 million. It now has kindergarten through 10th-grade classes with about 265 students, all but a dozen or so on vouchers. Its education program includes the highly scripted Direct Instruction method of teaching reading, and textbooks for general curriculum subjects put out by a Christian publishing company.

• The influential Christian Faith Fellowship Church at W. Good Hope Road and N. 86th St. started the Darrell L. Hines Academy as a voucher school. That school became a charter school, authorized to operate by City Hall, several years ago. It had to drop religious content from its program at that time, but it remains in the same set of buildings as the church.

• King's Academy Christian School is connected to Christ the King Baptist Church, 7798 N. 60th St., headed by Pastors John and Marilyn McVicker. Now a school of 100 (with 80% of them using vouchers), it will move into a new multimillion dollar building this fall.

On the other end of the spectrum, some of the African-American religious schools are small, not connected to churches with resources, and housed in converted offices, storefronts, homes or other unconventional space. They include several schools that did not allow Journal Sentinel reporters to enter and raised some of the strongest questions about quality of any schools in the choice program.

Schools that did not allow reporters to visit include Greater Holy Temple Christian Center and Texas Bufkin Academy.

Grace Christian Academy, Sa'Rai and Zigler Upper Excellerated Academy and Dr. Brenda Noach Choice School were among those that were visited and which appeared to have substantial weaknesses in their academic programs.

High schools differ

School choice has largely been an elementary and middle school program, with fewer students at the high school level. One reason for that: While some of the best private high schools in the city consider it part of their mission to admit some low-income students, these schools are at capacity and highly competitive on admissions.

Marquette University High School and Divine Savior Holy Angels High School have capped participation at 2% of their student bodies; Pius XI High School had 236 voucher students - 18% of its student body - this year; and about 9% of Wisconsin Lutheran High's 900 students are attending on vouchers.

On the other hand, at Messmer High School, which is often spotlighted as an example of the voucher program at its best, nearly three-fourths of the 575 students attend on vouchers. St. Joan Antida High School also serves a large number of low-income students - about 63% of its 320 girls were attending on vouchers this spring.

Religion permeates content

No matter the faith of the school, the long-term goals of the religious schools are to inculcate their students with the values, morals and sometimes the specific practices that the school espouses.

Carrie Miller, principal of Mount Calvary Lutheran School, at N. 53rd and Locust streets, said she emphasizes the school's goal of making the students "Christ-like witnesses" to parents considering sending their children there.

The school wants students to learn how God wants people to act and relate to each other, and wants religion to be an element not only in specific classes on the subject but in everything done in the day, she said.

Like many other principals, she said the voucher program has allowed the church "to become even more of a mission/outreach environment."

Benjamin Clemons, principal of Risen Savior Lutheran School, 9550 W. Brown Deer Road, said, "We have an obligation to reach out to people with the word."

That worries Elliot M. Mincberg, legal director of People for the American Way, a Washington-based group that has played a leading role in opposing vouchers, especially for religious schools.

Nothing about how things have unfolded in Milwaukee changes his view that it is "a fundamental founding principle that taxpayer money should not go to support religion and religious institutions in that way."

"The reason religion is so strong in this country," he said, "is because of the careful efforts to avoid interference with religion and to avoid government promotion of religion." Vouchers threaten that in a way that people may regret 50 years from now, he said.

Like many others working in religious schools, Clemons said he uses religion in setting standards for behavior and discipline. God's word is "an extremely powerful and potent tool" for dealing with kids, he said.

In many schools, religious and non-religious content blend together in classes.

One winter morning, first-graders at Community Vision Academy, an elementary school that is part of Community Baptist Church at N. Sherman Blvd. and W. North Ave., copied down the following sentences from the blackboard as part of their writing work for the day:

"Today is Monday. Jan. 31, 2005. It is cloudy and cold. This is the last day of January. Jacob was tricked and married Leah. Jacob had to work seven more years to marry Rachel his real love."

Even when the religious content is not overt, religion should be part of everything that goes on in a school such as hers, said Brenda White, principal of St. Margaret Mary School.

"What makes Catholic schools Catholic is how strongly what they're teaching in the classrooms is connected to their mission," she said.

And clearly, that's what a large number of parents want.

Yolande Lasky, principal of Our Lady of Good Hope Catholic School, 7140 N. 41st St., asked if any families in the school resist the religious content, said, "If anything, it goes the other way."

Parents choose the school because they want religion for their kids.