

# Most vouchers go to students not in public schools

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MADISON, Wis.—Nearly 80 percent of students who received a taxpayer-subsidized voucher to attend private school this year did not go to a Wisconsin public school last year, data released Tuesday showed.

The voucher program is touted by its supporters as a way to help students escape poorly performing public schools. Opponents, primarily Democrats and public school advocates, say the program is unaccountable to taxpayers and takes resources away from others who need it.

Gov. Scott Walker and Republicans who control the Legislature expanded the program statewide for the first time this year, with enrollment capped at 500 students. Vouchers previously were available only in Milwaukee or the Racine area.

Final enrollment figures released by the state Department of Public Instruction showed that 21 percent of those receiving vouchers attended a Wisconsin public school last year. The vast majority, 73 percent, went to a private school last year. Just over 3 percent didn't attend school, and 2.4 percent were homeschooled.

"These numbers expose the expansion of the unaccountable private school voucher program for the scam that it is," said Scot Ross, director of the liberal anti-voucher group One Wisconsin Now. "It's not about helping kids; it's a far-right-driven effort to privatize schools and satisfy the wealthy campaign contributors and well-connected special interests behind it."

Supporters of the program point to the fact that more than 2,400 students applied this year as evidence that it's needed. Because the enrollment cap was exceeded, only 25 of the 48 schools or school systems that applied were admitted in the program. All 25 that were admitted are religious schools. Of the 48 that applied, 47 were religious.

"The good news is that 500 students were given the opportunity to participate in the program," said Jim Bender, president of School Choice Wisconsin, a group that advocates for voucher schools. "The bad news is that nearly 2,000 students, including hundreds of public school transfers, were turned away."

The statewide enrollment cap increases to 1,000 next year. The cap is for areas outside of Milwaukee and Racine, which have no limits on enrollment. Advocates plan to lobby the Legislature to loosen or remove the cap statewide in future years.

Information released Tuesday showed how many voucher students each of the participating schools received. They were guaranteed 10 each, with the rest being allocated through a lottery. Participating private schools in Appleton and Green Bay/De Pere had the highest enrollment with 53 full-time equivalent students each.

While the cap on the program was 500 students, there are actually 512 receiving a voucher because 4-year-old kindergarten students are counted as roughly half of an older student.

Income requirements must be met in order to receive a voucher, regardless of whether the applicant had been attending public or private schools the prior year. Income eligibility is 185 percent of the federal poverty level, which is \$43,752 for a family of four. Married couples with two or more children can earn up to \$50,752 and still qualify.

The statewide voucher program costs about \$3.2 million this school year.

Democratic state Rep. Sindy Pope, of Middleton, said the Legislature should be focused on improving public schools, not subsidizing private schools.

"Asking public schools to do more with less while increasing the amount of tax dollars unaccountable, low-achieving private voucher schools receive will not address the economic and social woes of our state," she said in a statement. "It's time we try a different plan."