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April 7, 2009

Senator Mark Miller, co-chair
Joint Committee on Finance
Room 317 East
State Capitol
Madison, WI 53707-7882

Representative Mark Pocan, co-chair
Joint Committee on Finance
Room 309 East
State Capitol
Madison, WI 53708

VIA FACSIMILE

Dear Senator Miller and Representative Pocan,

It's time to implement an exit strategy for the failed and wasteful private school voucher scheme in Milwaukee. As you may know, the American Civil Liberties Union of Wisconsin has long been an advocate of providing an adequate public education to all of our state's schoolchildren. As such we have long been dubious of the dual taxpayer-financed school system in Milwaukee. Although we sued to prevent the voucher program's expansion in 1995, activist justices on the Wisconsin Supreme Court unfortunately allowed it to proceed. Since then, the school choice experiment has gone on for nearly 15 years with little evidence that it will deliver on the exaggerated claims of the special interests promoting it. Research we have now shows the voucher program did not deliver.

Voucher promoters long argued that the voucher program had to be free from transparency and accountability. When the program was expanded in 1995 the Legislature eliminated the then-existing modest evaluation program. Only since 2005 have private schools that accept vouchers been required to provide any performance related information for review - and even then, that information went to a pro-voucher think tank

The public is now finally privy to the reports of the School Choice Demonstration Project at the University of Arkansas. The authors of these reports have determined that “The primary finding in all these comparisons is that there is no overall statistically significant difference between MPCP and MPS student achievement growth in either math or reading one year after they were carefully matched to each other.” These reports confirm that more than 120, mostly small, Milwaukee schools that taxpayers support with tuition vouchers are performing at or below the levels achieved by comparable students attending Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS).

Unfortunately, the current reports have a number of deficiencies. This pro-voucher research organization also contends – without considering changes originating with MPS - that competition from voucher schools somehow explains improvements at public schools. They do not examine what works and what doesn’t work to improve educational outcomes for children in individual schools and classrooms – “the drivers,” as Cory Nettles, former Wisconsin Secretary of Commerce, recently put it at a forum. The reports are also less helpful to policy makers, because the school by school performance data available to the researchers is currently unavailable to the public. The public should have access to this data.

After all the hoopla around vouchers why aren’t the taxpayers (especially Milwaukee property taxpayers) getting better results for our children? If we continue to prop up failing schools by giving them taxpayer-funded vouchers we only make it harder and more expensive to undo the harm later

The Milwaukee Public Schools system is suffering from a diversion of resources to often-failing voucher schools. It is also being forced to assume a disproportionate share of the time, expenses and resources of educating students with special needs and English language learners. At the same time the racial gap in performance among students persists, and compared to gaps in the rest of the nation is worsening. The new reports show that the voucher program has not reduced this disparity. Continuing to subsidize private schools that underperform relative to MPS only exacerbates the problem.

If the State is to meet its constitutional obligation to provide an adequate education to all its children, taxpayer support for establishing and continuing schools that perform worse than MPS must end. In addition, the relatively few well-performing schools that accept vouchers don’t need the program to prosper. They are often subsidized by religious groups, or can charge higher tuition to wealthy parents and provide non-taxpayer-funded scholarships to low income children.

Therefore, on behalf of the members of the ACLU of Wisconsin and supporters of real education reform across Wisconsin, I urge you to end the so-called Milwaukee Parental Choice Program. In this budget you can begin to phase out the program in a way that will not harm current participants at the few private schools that are doing as well or better than the average MPS school. Please do the following:

1). Adopt the proposed budget provisions designed to increase accountability in the voucher program, such as accelerating accreditation, expanding teacher and administrator certification, or making private school governance more transparent. These measures may, but will not necessarily, weed out the worst private voucher schools. As long as children remain in failing schools or are deprived of the resources they need, we aren't doing them or their parents or ourselves any favors.

2). Reduce enrollment immediately by attrition and as students advance from elementary, middle or high school, and do not accept any new voucher students or schools this year. The goal should be complete elimination of the program by June 2011, the end of the 2010-11 school year.

3). Reallocate the \$135 million plus spent on the voucher schools to help fix the school funding system in Wisconsin, so that all our children will receive an adequate public education. Put resources into the public school system as expeditiously as possible to provide the educational services and supports particularly needed by children living in poverty, those with special needs, and English language learners, and ensure that the per-pupil funding for Milwaukee Public Schools students is at least comparable to that of suburban districts. An adequately-resourced MPS could also more easily absorb students who leave the voucher schools for MPS.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Chris Ahmuty
Executive Director