

Will Flanders and Collin Roth: School Choice is needed in rural Wisconsin

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Some might be surprised to learn that the lowest performing school district in the state according to the most recent state report card isn't Milwaukee Public School district, but rather rural Cambria-Friesland—population 767—located between Madison and Fond du Lac in Columbia County. In this district, proficiency rates in math and language arts substantially lag state averages. A staggering 63% of the district's eight graders scored in the lowest proficiency category on the Forward Exam.

Sadly, Cambria-Friesland is not an outlier. And while the education reform debate in Wisconsin too often focuses solely on Milwaukee, rural and small town Wisconsin face similar challenges of poverty and poor education that must be addressed.

The solution put forward by policymakers to address the challenges in rural and small town districts is, unsurprisingly, an influx of more money. But there is little evidence that increasing funding leads to better student outcomes. And funding to rural Wisconsin school districts has increased by more than \$2,000 per student over last decade despite declining enrollment.

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There is another avenue with a proven track record of success. The Wisconsin Parental Choice Program (WPCP), the statewide private school choice program, exists to provide parents of limited means throughout the state with the opportunity to send their child to a private school of their choice. Studies that make “apples to apples” comparisons of students have found higher academic achievement, higher

graduation rates, and even a reduction in crime can result from school choice. WILL's recent research found significantly higher ACT scores among WPCP participants relative to their peers in traditional schools.

Skeptics might suggest that private school choice can't work in rural areas because of an insufficient supply of private schools to choose from. But approximately 82% of all private schools in the state have addresses outside of Milwaukee, and one fifth of those schools are in rural counties.

The single biggest impediment to the statewide school choice program are unfair regulations that prevent a student in Wausau from accessing the same types of education alternatives available to students in Milwaukee or Racine. Enrollment caps allow only one percent of kids in a particular district access to a voucher, leading to waiting lists and lost hope. Moreover, income caps, below those in the Milwaukee and Racine programs, deny access to families of low and moderate incomes.

Removing these limitations on growth would go a long way to fostering an educational marketplace within the WPCP. The incentive to compete for students would be expected to raise performance in choice and public schools. Access to a larger pool of new students would incentivize high performing private and charter schools to expand into new areas of Wisconsin, providing families with choices they may never have imagined.

If lawmakers bring the standards of the WPCP in line with those of programs in Milwaukee and Racine, the accident of a child's zip code will no longer determine their access to a high quality education alternatives. The evidence is mounting that school choice works, and there is little reason to expect that fostering an education marketplace in rural areas will be any less effective than it has been in Milwaukee.

— *Flanders, PhD, is research director at the Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty. Collin Roth is a research fellow at WILL.*