

WILL: Non-profit acquires vacant school, plans private choice school for Mattoon, Wisconsin

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The News: A non-profit finally [acquired](#) a vacant elementary school in Mattoon, Wisconsin, subject of a lengthy legal dispute over ownership, and intends to start a private choice school in the underserved community. The Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty (WILL) [represented](#) the non-profit, Shepherd's Watch, in the legal fight over ownership of the building that concluded earlier this year when the Antigo School Board voted to sell the property to the Village of Mattoon and Town of Hutchins, who in turn sold it to Shepherd's Watch.

The Quotes: WILL Deputy Counsel, Anthony LoCoco, said, "We are thrilled Shepherd's Watch finally acquired the empty Mattoon Elementary school and can now work towards opening a private school that offers new options to local families. Rural Wisconsin deserves school choice just as much urban and suburban communities."

Wade Reimer, President of Shepherd's Watch, said, "The community of Mattoon and the surrounding area can only benefit from a Christian choice school. The excitement of this potential radiates throughout the community. Shepherd's Watch continues to pray for leadership and guidance to reach this goal."

Background: Mattoon Elementary in Mattoon, Wisconsin served the local community for over 100 years until the Unified School District of Antigo closed it in 2016. Since then, it has sat vacant. Parents in the community were forced to send their children on long bus rides (90 minutes round-trip) to attend the closest schools in the Antigo School District.

A local non-profit, Shepherd's Watch, announced plans to establish a private school in the vacant building, and the Village of Mattoon and the Town of Hutchins hoped to sell the building to Shepherd's Watch. Unfortunately, the Antigo School District also made a claim to ownership over the former school and a legal dispute ensued.

On January 21, 2019, the Village of Mattoon and the Town of Hutchins filed a lawsuit in Shawano County Circuit Court to obtain a declaration regarding ownership of the property. WILL [successfully intervened](#) in the lawsuit on behalf of Shepherd's Watch. But the Court ruled in favor of the Antigo School District's ownership claim in March 2021.

The story wasn't finished. After the municipalities and Shepherd's Watch appealed the case, the Antigo School Board voted this summer to sell the property to Mattoon and Hutchins, who in turn transferred ownership of Mattoon Elementary to Shepherd's Watch. The non-profit intends to establish a community center and continue toward a goal of having a private school to participate in the Wisconsin Parental Choice Program (WPCP), the statewide school voucher program for low-income and middle-class families modeled off of the successful Milwaukee Parental Choice Program.

Providing the families in Mattoon access to another educational option is important to the community and the growth of school choice across rural Wisconsin. [WILL research](#) has found a lack of high-quality options across rural Wisconsin.

Read More:

- [After winning legal case to block it, Antigo School District agrees to sell vacant school to religious nonprofit](#), Wisconsin Public Radio, October 28, 2021
- [WILL Goes to Court in Rural School Choice Fight](#), January 8, 2021
- [Without a Choice: Wisconsin's High-Performing School Deserts](#), July 2020
- [In Small-Town Wisconsin, Vacant School Is Site Of A Legal Battle Over Community's Future](#), Wisconsin Public Radio, July 23, 2019