Education



Parents increasingly want kids in independent charter and parental choice schools – but face obstacles

By Patrick McIlheran

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2027

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Reforms would ensure all parents have options they clearly favor

Wisconsin families are choosing independent public charter and parental choice schools in growing numbers, even as overall student enrollment declines. These schools empower parents by giving them more options for their children's education, and they have a record of producing strong outcomes for students. Unfortunately, these schools face funding inequities and policy barriers that limit both their ability to meet demand and the ability of many parents to access options outside of the traditional district system. The next Legislature and governor should remove these barriers and ensure that more families can access the education that best serves their children.

Key findings:

- Demand for school choice continues to grow. Independent charter and parental choice schools now educate approximately 80,000 students, or 9.6 percent of Wisconsin's publicly funded students. Their combined enrollment has increased by 317 percent over the past 20 years, while enrollment in district-run schools has declined by about 13 percent.
- Choice and charter schools receive substantially less funding per student. Average per-pupil funding for parental choice students is $11,929 this school year, while independent public charter schools receive $12,369. District schools averaged $18,746 in 2024-25, the latest figures available. Funding gaps constrain choice and charter schools' ability to expand.
- Research finds strong educational outcomes. Studies have found higher graduation rates among Milwaukee parental choice students than among comparable district students. A 2026 study found that students in parental choice schools gained approximately an additional year of academic progress over four years compared with demographically similar district students. Independent charter schools also show faster growth in language and math scores than district-run schools.
- Access to funding for parental choice depends on household income and geography. Eligibility is generally limited to families earning less than 300 percent of the federal poverty level in Milwaukee and Racine, but only 220 percent elsewhere in Wisconsin.
- Additional policy barriers disadvantage independent schools. Funding arrangements link choice and charter enrollment to local property taxes. Many schools outside the district-run system are excluded from certain career and technical education grants, while independent charter schools face additional obstacles involving authorization, teacher licensing and facilities funding.

Recommendations

- Decouple choice and charter funding from local property taxes. Fund students directly through the state, extending the funding approach already used for Milwaukee's parental

choice program to other choice programs and independent public charter schools.

- Achieve real funding parity. Address disparities in per-pupil funding across district, parental choice and independent public charter schools.
- Make parental choice universal. Eliminate income caps. If universal eligibility cannot be achieved immediately, raise the statewide income limit to match the limit in Milwaukee and Racine.
- Establish a truly independent statewide charter authorizer. Replace the Office of Educational Opportunity with an authorizing body outside UW-Madison and independent of the University of Wisconsin System's board of regents.
- Provide equal access to education grants. Make parental choice and independent charter schools eligible for Career and Technical Education Incentive Grants, Technical Education Equipment Grants and similar programs.
- Improve access to charter school facilities. Establish facilities funding and borrowing opportunities for independent public charter schools. Strengthen and extend statewide the requirement that vacant, unneeded district school buildings be offered for sale to independent schools.

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Introduction: How things stand

In October 2026, the core strength of Wisconsin's system of independent charter and parental choice schools was illustrated when the Department of Public Instruction released the results of its annual student headcount.

That "third Friday in September" count found that while the number of children attending schools run by traditional school districts fell by more than 20,000 from the year before, the number of children attending an independent public charter school or one of the private schools taking part in Wisconsin's parental school choice programs rose by more than 6,000.

In other words, even as the total population of school-aged children is in a long decline, alternatives to district-run schools are seeing enrollments rising steadily. This trend is occurring despite the fact both independent charter and parental choice schools are funded at per-child rates far below that of traditional public schools. Parental choice programs, for instance, receive 36 percent per student less than the average school district.

These independent schools, choice and charter, now educate about 1 in every 10 publicly funded Wisconsin students, about 80,000 of them, but face both legal and policy obstacles.

This chapter will examine the details of this landscape for school choice and recommend action parents and students need from the next Legislature and governor if they, regardless of political leanings, are to continue to have access to the schools they increasingly desire.

Enrollment trends

As of the third Friday of September 2026, the DPI reports, there were 835,147 students receiving a publicly funded elementary or secondary education in Wisconsin. That's 52,614 fewer than 20 years previous, representing a decline of 5.9 percent.

Of those publicly funded students, 755,100, or 90.4 percent, were in a district-run public school, whether a traditional neighborhood school, a "magnet" school, a selective-admission high school in Milwaukee, or a charter school run by a school district. That figure, 755,100, was down 113,464 from 20 years before, a drop of about 13 percent.

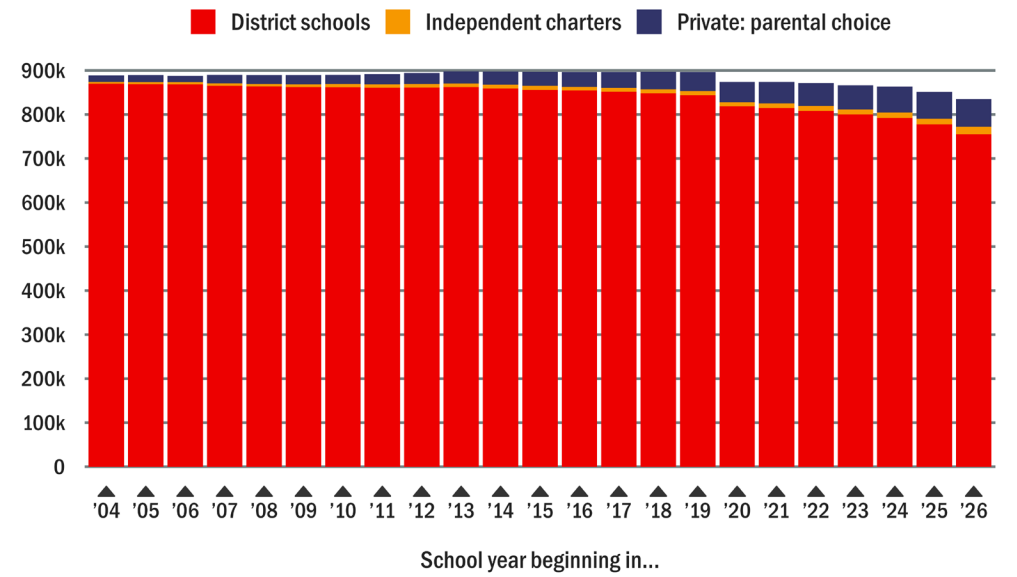
Although the vast majority of students still attend district schools, the share

of families choosing alternatives is increasing. Back in 2006, 97.8 percent of students attended district run schools.

Back in 2006, the other 2 percent of publicly funded students outside of district schools were children attending either an independent public charter school — that is, a public school entirely free of district control, regulated by the state but free to innovate new ways of teaching under the supervision of a chartering authority, such as a university — or they were children using a school choice "voucher" to take their state aid with them to a private school. These two options constitute what is usually meant by "school choice" in Wisconsin, and now, their enrollment is 80,047, or 9.6 percent of publicly funded students. That's an increase of 317 percent from 20 years ago.

Independent charter schools are the smaller part of this. There are 28* such schools, according to the DPI, and this fall they enroll 16,730 students. That's a leap of about 3,900, or 30 percent, from the year before. Much of that is because two large schools joined the program. Milwaukee College Prep and the Carmen Schools of Science & Technology had each long been what are called "non-instrumentality" charter schools, operating under the Milwaukee Public Schools' fiscal umbrella. Both became independent charter schools this year because the relationships with MPS had soured and they thought they would have more

School choice grows as total student enrollment shrinks



Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

*The count varies between the DPI's enrollment count and its list of schools by charterer, entirely because of the first list combines schools with multiple locations and the second list does not. This figure follows the headcount's method. The count of independent charters' campuses is 41.

stability and opportunity with another authorizer.[1]

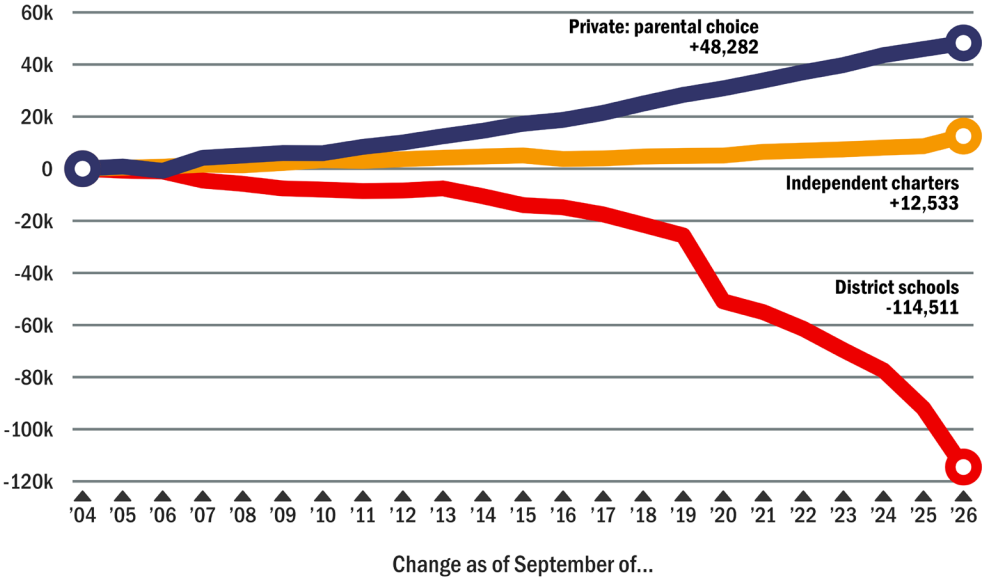
The much larger portion of school choice are the parental choice programs that let children attend any one of 432 participating private schools. Wisconsin parents enrolled 63,317 children in private schools this way in September, up 2,345 children, or 3.8 percent, from the year before, and up 48,282 over the past 20 years, an increase of 345 percent.

There are four separate parental choice programs, three that divvy up Wisconsin by geography and a fourth for children requiring special education. The largest and oldest, in place since 1990, covers the city of Milwaukee. It is funding the education of 30,091 students this year, up 142 students from last year. Another covers children living in the Racine area, 4,029 of them this fall, a decrease of 142 students. The program for children with special education needs covers 3,859 students this year, 423 more than last year, a 12.3 percent increase.

Numerically, the biggest increase was in the Wisconsin Parental Choice Program, which covers all the state outside of Milwaukee and Racine. The 25,338 children using that option this year is up 1,921 from last year, an increase of 8.2 percent. The statewide program, around since 2013, has increased by an average of about 2,200 pupils a year for the last decade.

Part of the reason for the large increase across Wisconsin is that, unlike the Milwaukee and Racine programs, enrollment in the rest of Wisconsin was initially limited to a small percent of children living in each school district. The limits eased slowly and, after becoming irrelevant in most districts,[2] vanished entirely after last school year.

Publicly funded school enrollment: change since 2004



Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

The number of schools taking part also rose: The 432 private schools in parental choice programs statewide this September is up from 414 the year before and up from 212 in 2016.

The broader allure of school choice

Polling consistently shows broad support beyond parents who use private school choice or independent public charter schools.

For example, school choice drew the support of the majority of respondents to a Marquette University Law School poll in August.

Using language favored by opponents, the poll asked if respondents wanted "the elimination of the state program that

Wisconsin donors, aided by new federal tax credit, can help schoolchildren — but not in Wisconsin yet

Children in virtually all schools in Wisconsin — ranging from traditional public to charter to parental choice — could benefit immensely were a new governor to let private donors use a new federal dollar-for-dollar tax credit to shift money to scholarship granting organizations.

The Federal Scholarship Tax Credit, also branded the Education Freedom Tax Credit, lets each individual taxpayer reduce his or her federal income tax by up to $1,700 for donations to those SGOs — nonprofits designated by their states that funnel aid to schools of any kind.

The credit is expected to result in billions of dollars in new private donations for education. Wisconsin taxpayers will be eligible to donate and claim the credit — but not for donations to Wisconsin schools unless a new governor allows it. While about 30 governors have signed up their states or promised to, Wisconsin Gov. Tony Evers has pre-emptively rejected participating.

Evers told a reporter that allowing donations to help Wisconsin children would be "catastrophic" for public schools, even though donations could go to public school students for tutoring, books, band field trips, or other uses school superintendents say they're envisioning.

Evers' objection: Donors could also support children in private schools, which he branded an "expansion of a private voucher school program." Evers is a long-time opponent of school choice in Wisconsin.

Participating in the program has no fiscal or legal bearing either on Wisconsin's parental choice programs involving private schools or its independent public charter schools or traditional schools.

Proponents of the program, such as Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce head Dale Kooyenga, predict that Wisconsin eventually will opt into the program. Donors' choices will constitute the largest infusion of federal money into education ever, he said, and it will prove politically untenable to see Wisconsinites' donations going solely to other states.

Evers' decision covers only the first year of the credit, 2027. Wisconsin's next governor can opt in by designating a list of scholarship-granting organizations, or conceivably the next Legislature could require it, as has happened in at least three states.

Of the two major gubernatorial candidates, Republican Tom Tiffany said he would opt Wisconsin in, while Democrat David Crowley has declined to say what he would do.

The Badger Institute recommends that Wisconsin join in the program.

—Patrick McIlheran

provides publicly funded vouchers to attend private or religious K-12 schools." School choice drew 51 percent support.[3]

Previous Marquette polls showed greater support for choice: Using essentially the same language, the poll five times from 2022 to 2025 found majorities in favor of "vouchers," by margins ranging from 52-47 to 58-37.[4] The poll in May 2023 broke down results by whether respondents had children at home; those who did have kids favored choice by a 65-35 margin. Since most children in Wisconsin attend traditional public schools, that result indicates that choice is supported even by families not using it.[5]

In 2024, asked whether "school choice," which was defined only as "including charter schools and vouchers to attend private schools," was a success, Marquette's respondents agreed by a 2-to-1 ratio.[6]

Other polls find similar results.

In 2023, Wisconsin Manufacturers & Commerce commissioned a poll that asked, "Do you generally support or oppose school choice?" Supporters outnumbered opponents by 70 to 24 percent. Self-identified Democrats favored it 53-39. A question that more fully explained that the program let parents use "tax dollars" at a "private school" still saw supporters outnumber opponents by 69-29.[7] The survey also asked whether taxpayer funding for "the school choice voucher" and, separately, for "students who attend independent charter schools" should be made equal to per-pupil "public schools" funding. On both, equalized funding prevailed, 56-40.

The Marquette and WMC figures are similar to results in polling on behalf of School Choice Wisconsin, an advocacy group. A 2024 poll of 600 likely voters found 70 percent support to 20 percent opposition for "school choice," without further definition. A question that defined choice as parents' "right to use the tax dollars" at a "private school" changed that only slightly, to 69-27. The split was 72-26 in favor of choice in households with school-age children.[8] Support had grown and opposition diminished over the course of five similar surveys dating back to 2020. Support thumped opposition in every one of five parts of the state, with support beating opposition by a 2-to-1 ratio in its weakest media market, metro Madison. Choice's support crossed party lines, ahead 89-6 among Republicans, but essentially a draw — 49-47 — among Democrats, and ahead about 3-to-1 among independents.

Parents who apply for the choice program or for an independent charter school cite varying reasons for doing so.[9] Some seek a less conflict-ridden environment. Some want higher academic standards, career-focused programs or alignment with their moral vision.

The results most readily measured and most often mentioned in policy debates are academic ones. On this, Wisconsin's parental choice schools, though they vary individually, have performed well as a group in study after study.

As early as 2010, a large state-commissioned study that tracked individual children in Milwaukee found that choice schools performed at least as well as public ones,[10] and by two

years later, their students were found to be significantly more likely to graduate than matched Milwaukee Public Schools students.[11] Further follow-up found that students who spent significant time in choice school were less likely years later to end up in legal trouble[12] — 79 percent less likely to have a felony conviction, for instance — or in paternity suits.[13]

Later studies showed similar results. A running series of analyses of state test results by the Wisconsin Institute of Law & Liberty, matching students demographically, finds that children in choice and charter schools persistently outperform similar children in district schools. A 2026 study by WILL's Will Flanders and economist Scott Niederjohn of Concordia University of Wisconsin found that children in private schools via the choice program advanced by about an additional year compared to demographically matched children in Wisconsin district schools over the course of four years.[14]

These consistently better results are evidence that academic performance isn't a tradeoff against parental liberty but consistent with it.

Independent public charter schools, as well, show good results, with students showing faster growth in both language and math scores on state-mandated tests than in district-run schools. The performance is notable in that, were independent charter schools regarded as their own school district, they would rank sixth among state districts in the proportion of students from poor families, and sixth as well in the proportion of students belonging to racial or ethnic minorities regarded by the state as disadvantaged. Taken as a whole, independent charter schools' score on the state "report card" is higher than any of the 12 poorest districts.

Such schools' independence manifests in the variety of options they offer families. Among them: A school that follows the Montessori method through 8th grade, a college-focused school based on Hispanic culture, and an environmentalism project-based school that takes in a high share of students who have struggled in Milwaukee Public Schools. Three independent charters — KTEC Schools of Innovation in Kenosha, The Lincoln Academy in Beloit and the newly independent WSTEM in Wauwatosa — partner with technical colleges to advance students' connections with potential careers.

Policy recommendations for parental choice schools

The property tax issue: When children living in any school district outside Milwaukee take their state aid to a private school through the parental choice program, the state's choice grant first flows through the books of the school district where the student lives before going to the private school she actually attends. Local districts then have the option of requiring property taxpayers to make up for the district's "loss" of revenue on behalf of a child the district no longer teaches.

This means a school district's total per-pupil funding is unaffected by a child leaving for a choice school. All that changes is the source of the funds and the

number of children in the district.

Milwaukee school choice funding used to operate in similar fashion, but Milwaukee children using the parental choice program are now funded directly by the state with no effect on Milwaukee property taxes. A bill to bring all school choice funding into alignment with the Milwaukee method, "decoupling" school choice from property taxes,[15] was opposed by critics of school choice for overtly political reasons. As one such opponent, the Wisconsin Association of School Business Officials, put it, fixing the system to address districts' complaints "would mask the cost of vouchers at the local level and the negative attention it has come to generate."[16]

The similar ornate shuffle afflicts the independent charter school sector, too, tying charter funding to a district's state aid formula in a way that affects property taxes.

Recommendation 1: Decouple property taxes and give the rest of Wisconsin the same funding mechanism already applying to the school choice program in Milwaukee. Such a "decoupling" would end the complicated way a child's choice grant passes first through a school district's books, is "taken away," and the school district is permitted to make itself whole via property taxes. In Milwaukee, choice funding simply follows a child straight from the state to the school her parents choose.

The same decoupling should take place in the independent charter sector, too, with charter funding flowing directly from the state to the school.

The funding gap: Funding for both parental choice and charter schools increased in the state's last biennial budget.[17] In exchange for more than a $1 billion increase in state aid to school districts, Gov. Tony Evers agreed to increase the per-pupil state aid that follows children to choice and charter schools, moving them closer to the bottom end of the range of what traditional district schools will spend.[18]

The increase in per-pupil funding, especially at the costlier high-school level, was for some private schools in the choice program "the difference between keeping their doors open or having to end operations entirely," as one Milwaukee educator told a newspaper.[19] Since the actual cost of educating a child can and often does exceed the value of the choice grant, schools — by law, all are nonprofit — usually turn to donors, if they can. State law prohibits schools from picking and choosing among choice-using applicants, but they can decide how many slots to make available to students using choice vouchers, and a school's ability to fundraise is a determining factor in how many children they can accept.

Two months after the aid-boosting deal, the philanthropic family behind one of the most rapidly growing schools in Milwaukee announced that it would open a second campus to serve another part of the city — and said that the increased funding made it possible.[20]

"We would not have gone forward had we not had the new funding by the state," Gus Ramirez, whose family foundation started and built St. Augustine Preparatory School, told a newspaper.[21]

The new campus opened with 330 students in August.

This year, the sum of taxpayer money following a child in a parental choice program is $11,305 if she is kindergarten through 8th grade, $13,799 if she is in high school.[22] The statewide average, by DPI figures, is $11,929. In independent charter schools, it's $12,369 per pupil.[23]

School districts statewide averaged $18,746 in per-pupil funding in the 2024-25 year, the latest figures — a record high even after adjusting for inflation. Individual districts varied widely, but only one, Merton, was under $14,000.[24] The state's biggest district, Milwaukee, had $22,390. Ten districts operate only a high school; they averaged $22,279.

This means taxpayers are funding students in choice and charter schools at about 65 percent of the per-pupil funding in district public schools. Districts' incremental per-pupil cost of adding a child would vary depending on circumstances, but it is clear that if school choice options were closed, Wisconsin taxpayers would have to fund the shift of many students from lower-cost to much higher-cost schools.

Unequal choice: Even as 18 other states have adopted universal school choice programs,[25] Wisconsin's private school choice programs remain income-capped, available only to low- and moderate-income families.

Families living in the city of Milwaukee or in eastern Racine County can use choice if their household income is under 300 percent of the federal poverty line — this year, $79,950 for two parents and a child, for example. For families living anywhere else in Wisconsin, their income must be no higher than 220 percent of poverty — $58,630 for the same three-member household.

Recommendation 2: Achieve real funding parity for all types of schools. Ideally, the Legislature should eliminate the income caps entirely.

After all, there is no principle stating that taxpayers should fund education only for children from low- or modest-income families: They provide tuition-free education for children from all families, even in the top tier of earnings, in district-run schools. If there's no income cap on using schools in Middleton or Milwaukee's North Shore, middle-income parents shouldn't face an income cap in opting for an independent school.

Recommendation 3: Absent universal choice, make caps equal. If it proves impossible to generate sufficient legislative support for universalization in the short term, ending the discrepancy in income caps based on whether a child lives in Milwaukee or Manitowoc is a simple matter of fairness that should be implemented immediately. That much lower income caps apply in most of Wisconsin outside of Milwaukee and Racine is an accident of earlier legislative logrolling. A simple and just step would be to bring all of Wisconsin up to the income cap that prevails in Milwaukee and Racine.

Policy recommendations for independent charter schools

How they are chartered: Independent charter schools require a charterer, an organization agreeing to oversee the school. By law, several government bodies, every University of Wisconsin campus, two tribal colleges and every technical college can do this. In practice, only two UW schools, Milwaukee and Parkside, do so, along with the City of Milwaukee, Waukesha County (and then only one school), and a statewide agency, the Office of Educational Opportunity, that's part of UW-Madison and is viewed by charter school advocates as vulnerable to anti-charter sentiment in its parent organization.

Recommendation 1: Replace the Office of Educational Opportunity with a truly independent statewide charterer — one not housed at UW-Madison, where the College of Education is seen as hostile by charter school advocates, one not subject to the UW system's board of regents and its politics.

Administrative disadvantages: Charter schools are subject to administrative disadvantages. For example, some charter school leaders have pointed out that the state's narrow teacher licensure path restricts their ability to find faculty with backgrounds differing from the traditional public school teacher. Even the state's five-year charter license restricts teachers' careers.[26]

Recommendation 2: Develop more flexible teacher licensure — a reform that not only will accommodate charter school innovations in tapping the expertise of accomplished people with careers outside classrooms but will also help district schools relieve their staffing issues via second-career would-be educators.

Other types of funding inequities: In career and technical education, for example, independent charter schools are at a disadvantage, as are parental choice schools.

Wisconsin offers two separate grants worth millions to school districts and students involved in vocational and technical education. Career and Technical Education Incentive Grants offer high-schoolers a chance to earn industry-recognized certifications before graduation, and they directly aid students completing certifications in emergency services. Technical Education Equipment Grants reimburse school districts for facilities used in construction or manufacturing fields.

None of the funding for either grant is available to independent charter or parental choice schools, cutting out many students whose interest in technical careers could bolster Wisconsin's workforce. The same ineligibilities affect a number of other state grants.

Recommendation 3: Give students in parental choice and independent charter schools the same general eligibility for grants. There is no reason to deny such kids opportunities for a job in trades that their peers have. Charter schools and private schools in the choice program should have access to Career and Technical Education Incentive Grants and Technical Education Equipment Grants, as well as other similar grants.

Recommendation 4: Also develop a means for independent charter schools to gain funding for facilities — something other public schools, via districts, have. Most other states with charter schools have some form of dedicated funding and borrowing opportunities for independent charter schools. Wisconsin does not, meaning nonprofits operating charter schools must fundraise from donors for the roof over their classrooms. Relatedly, while Wisconsin law already requires that vacant, unneeded district school buildings in the City of Milwaukee be offered for sale to independent schools in need of space, the law has not worked well, and no such law applies in the rest of the state. The law needs to be broadened and reformed to prevent gaming by districts that see choice and charter schools as competitors.

Conclusion

Wisconsin families are choosing independent schools in growing numbers even as overall student enrollment declines. The reforms outlined here would remove unnecessary barriers, address inequities in the existing system, and make it easier for schools to respond to growing demand. The next Legislature and governor should recognize the value parents place on these options and work to ensure that more Wisconsin families, including those without the means to pay private school tuition on their own, can access the education they believe best serves their children.



About the author



Patrick McIlheran is the executive editor at the Badger Institute.

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