

WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

EYE ON THE CAPITOL

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MARQUETTE POLL SUGGESTS SUPPORT FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND OPENNESS TO VOUCHERS

By John Huebscher, Executive Director

Few issues were as contentious in the recent debates over the state budget as the proposal to expand the parental choice program that provides vouchers to parents who want to send their children to a religious or independent school. Some opponents of the plan rejected the idea as an abandonment of public education in Wisconsin. Some supporters argued it was the best way to save children from failing public schools.

The bishops, writing as the Board of the Wisconsin Catholic Conference, took a different view.

In a letter to the Joint Committee on Finance, they argued that vouchers empower parents to select the schools that best meet the needs of their children. The bishops wrote that it is possible to support vouchers and still hold a positive view of public schools. “Vibrant religious and independent schools can and do coexist with quality public schools. It is possible to affirm and support both,” they wrote last March.

It turned out that the public agreed with them.

A Marquette Law School Poll, conducted in mid-March, found that Wisconsinites hold similar views. By large margins, participants affirmed the quality of public schools in Wisconsin. Fully 72 percent said they had a favorable view of public schools in Wisconsin. Seventy-six percent expressed a favorable view of public school teachers. Seventy-one percent said they were either very satisfied or satisfied with the public schools in their community.

When asked about vouchers, 37 percent favored expanding the program statewide. Another 14 percent supported the idea of expanding the program to larger school districts. Together these responses indicated 51 percent backing for expansion of the voucher program. This compared to 14 percent who said there should be no expansion of the program, and 28 percent who wanted to end the program. Thus, voucher opponents totaled 42 percent of the sample. The balance expressed no opinion.

Taken together, the responses to the poll suggest that on the issue of vouchers, the public is more nuanced in its views than the strong partisans on either side of the issue. The public seems to believe that Wisconsin has good public schools and that a voucher program is worth trying in school districts beyond Milwaukee and Racine where it currently exists. At the same time, nearly half (49 percent) of all poll respondents indicated they didn’t know enough about voucher schools to express a favorable or unfavorable opinion of them.

Public opinion polls have their limitations and do not define Catholic teaching. But they also provide useful insights into the preferences and attitudes of the public, especially when done by objective pollsters who have no particular “axe to grind” on a specific policy issue. In recent years, the Marquette Law School Poll has earned a reputation as such a poll.

What can this poll tell us? First, voters are pragmatic and open to changes in education, even when they are largely satisfied with the schools they have. Second, nearly half the public doesn’t know much about voucher schools.

The modest statewide expansion of the voucher program (500 additional students in the coming school year and another 500 in 2014) provides a prudent approach for a public willing to give such an expansion a chance. And the fact that almost half the public doesn’t know much about voucher schools tells us that Catholic schools, among others, that may take part in the expanded voucher program, have an opportunity to showcase their quality to an open-minded public.

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