



Parental Choice Programs in Private Schools

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Parental choice programs allow eligible students to attend private schools using state-funded tuition vouchers. Wisconsin has four choice programs, commonly referred to as: (1) the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program; (2) the Racine Parental Choice Program; (3) the Statewide Parental Choice Program; and (4) the Special Needs Scholarship Program.

CHOICE PROGRAMS FOR LOW-INCOME STUDENTS

The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, the Racine Parental Choice Program, and the Statewide Parental Choice Program are available only to low-income students. The eligibility criteria students must meet to participate in each program varies slightly.

Milwaukee Parental Choice

The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program was the first choice program in Wisconsin and began accepting low-income students in the City of Milwaukee in 1990. Only nonsectarian (nonreligious) schools were originally eligible to participate, but the program was expanded to include sectarian schools in 1995.

The Milwaukee Program is the largest choice program, enrolling 28,958 students in 129 private schools for the 2022-23 school year.¹ The Milwaukee Program is open to students who live in the City of Milwaukee and have a family income of 300 percent or less of the federal poverty level.²

Racine Parental Choice

The Racine Parental Choice Program became the second choice program in the state when it began accepting students in the 2011-12 school year. The Racine Program is the smallest choice program for low-income students, enrolling 3,935 students in 31 private schools in the 2022-23 school year.³

The Racine Program is open to students who reside within the Racine Unified School District and have a family income of 300 percent or less of the federal poverty level.⁴ However, a student already attending private school but not yet participating in a choice program generally may only enter at certain grade levels. A student must be entering 4K, 5K, 1st grade, or 9th grade or must meet one of the following to apply: (1) was enrolled in public school the prior year; (2) was not enrolled in any school the prior year; (3) participated in the Milwaukee, Racine, or Statewide Program the prior year; (4) attended school out-of-state the prior year; (5) was on a choice school waiting list the prior school year; or (6) was on a Statewide Program waiting list due to the statutory cap.⁵

Statewide Parental Choice

The Statewide Program is the newest choice program for low-income students and began accepting students in the 2013-14 school year. The Statewide Program enrolled 17,079 students in 314 private schools in the 2022-23 school year.⁶

The program is open to students who live anywhere in the state – other than within the City of Milwaukee or within the Racine Unified School District – who have a family income of 220 percent or less of the federal poverty level.⁷ However, there are two limitations on a student's ability to participate in the Statewide Program. First, there is a statutory cap on the percentage of students from a particular school district that may participate in the Statewide Program each year. For the 2022-23 school year, no more than seven percent of a school district's student membership may participate in the program.⁸ Second, as with the Racine Program, a student already attending private school but not yet participating

in a choice program must be entering 4K, 5K, 1st grade, or 9th grade, or must meet one of the other listed criteria.

SPECIAL NEEDS SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM

The Special Needs Scholarship Program is available to children with disabilities who have an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or services plan, without regard to family income. The program began accepting students in the 2016-17 school year.⁹ The Special Needs Scholarship Program is the smallest choice program and enrolled 2,217 students in 162 private schools in the 2022-23 school year.¹⁰

For purposes of the program, a “child with a disability” is a child who needs special education and related services because of particular impairments.¹¹ Children with disabilities are evaluated for and may receive an IEP, which is a written statement of instruction and supports for a particular child developed according to specified statutory procedures.

STATE FUNDING FOR CHOICE SCHOOLS

Private schools receive a payment from the state for each eligible student attending the school under a choice program. For the 2022-23 school year, the state will pay private schools participating in the Milwaukee, Racine, or Statewide Program \$8,399 for each eligible K-8 student and \$9,045 for each 9th to 12th grade student.¹²

The state pays private schools participating in the Special Needs Scholarship Program either a set amount per student or the amount reflected in a Statement of Actual Cost for a particular student. For the 2022-23 school year, the state will pay private schools \$13,076 for each eligible student, unless a school submitted a statement of actual cost for that student.¹³

REQUIREMENTS FOR CHOICE SCHOOLS

A private school must comply with statutory requirements to participate in a choice program. Among other requirements, a school must generally: (1) administer statewide assessments to choice students; (2) adopt academic standards; (3) require teachers and administrators to possess certain credentials, such as a bachelor’s degree or a Department of Public Instruction (DPI) license; (4) provide at least 1,050 hours of direct instruction in 1st to 6th grades and at least 1,137 hours in 7th to 12th grades; (5) comply with health, safety, and nondiscrimination laws; (6) have accreditation; and (7) submit an annual financial audit to DPI.¹⁴

¹ The figures are unaudited enrollment numbers as of October 2022 from DPI, as are those for the other choice programs. See, [MILWAUKEE PARENTAL CHOICE PROGRAM \(MPCP\): MPCP Facts and Figures for 2022-23](#).

² s. 119.23 (2) (a) (intro) and 1., Stats.

³ [RACINE PARENTAL CHOICE PROGRAM \(RPCP\): RPCP Facts and Figures for 2022-23](#).

⁴ s. 118.60 (2) (a) (intro) and 1.a., Stats. The statute makes students who reside within an “eligible school district” eligible for the program and does not specifically refer to the Racine Unified School District. However, “eligible school district” is defined narrowly so that the only school district that qualifies is Racine Unified. [s. 118.60 (1) (am), Stats.]

⁵ s. 118.60 (2) (a) 2., Stats.

⁶ [WISCONSIN PARENTAL CHOICE PROGRAM \(WPCP/Statewide\): WPCP Facts and Figures for 2022-23](#).

⁷ s. 118.60 (2) (a) (intro.) and (bm), Stats.

⁸ s. 118.60 (2) (be) 1. and 2., Stats. The statutory cap began at 1 percent and increases by one percentage point each year until it reaches 10 percent in the 2025-26 school year. There is no longer a statutory cap beginning in the 2026-27 school year.

⁹ s. 115.7915 (2) (d), Stats.

¹⁰ [SPECIAL NEEDS SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM \(SNSP\) FACTS AND FIGURES 2022-23](#).

¹¹ s. 115.76 (5), Stats.

¹² The per pupil payment amount is determined according to a statutory formula that includes the prior year per pupil amount, plus any positive increase in the revenue limit per pupil adjustment, plus any positive increase in total categorical aid funding per pupil. [ss. 118.60 (4) (bg) 3. and 119.23 (4) (bg), Stats.]

¹³ The per pupil payment amount is determined according to a statutory formula. [s. 115.7915 (4m) (a) 2.b. and 3., Stats.]

¹⁴ Requirements for schools in the Special Needs Scholarship Program differ from those applicable to the other choice programs. For instance, a school must implement a student’s IEP or services plan, as modified by a agreement with the student’s parents, but is not required to administer statewide assessments to a student unless requested. Also, its teachers are not required to hold bachelor’s degrees or DPI licenses, it is not required to meet the same instructional hour minimum, and it is not required to adopt academic standards. [ss. 115.7915 (6), 118.30 (1s) to (2), 118.33 (1m), 118.60 (2) and (7), and 119.23 (2) and (7), Stats.]