

IMPACT OF VOUCHERS ON WELS SCHOOLS

**The Impact of School Vouchers on WELS Lutheran Schools**

by

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### **Abstract**

School vouchers and other types of state funding for student tuition are becoming a key component in the operation of many Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) elementary schools and high schools. Such programs have created controversy and concern both in WELS circles and across the national political and social spectrum. This study looks at the impact of government sanctioned funding programs on our WELS schools and congregations, and details some of the positive and negative ramifications of participating in them. A survey was sent to over 180 WELS principals to gather information on state funded tuition programs with over half of the principals responding to the poll. The large majority of principals who serve in schools that participate in funding programs see significant blessings through the participation of such programs. But these funding programs may not work in every school because of a variety of prohibiting factors. WELS schools that have access to these programs are encouraged to continue using these sources as long as the programs fulfill the mission of the schools. Schools that don't currently participate in funding programs are encouraged to explore the use of such programs. All schools that use government funded sources are encouraged to have a well-thought-out exit plan in the event the program is no longer plausible or available.

### **Acknowledgments**

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## Chapter I: Introduction

### The Problem

The opportunity to obtain significant government funding for individual students in WELS schools is a relatively new one. For many years numerous WELS schools have used government funding to minimally support professional development with federal Title II funds and subsidize milk programs through state funding. Now many private schools can receive program-changing state funding through vouchers or state tax credits. Participation in these programs can significantly alter a school's enrollment, staffing needs, facility needs, income streams, and budgeting, among other issues.

Our country and private school systems have a long history of separation of church and state. Some WELS constituents question accepting government funding. "Individual members may view such a situation with great alarm and even be conscience-bound to refuse the offered voucher. But in its official documents and reports, the Synod has never categorically rejected the concept of government aid" (Isch, 1994, p. 79). Lutheran schools should be prepared if the current government rules change. WELS schools that are deeply imbedded in voucher programs would have a difficult time dealing with new mandates that conflict with Christian principles. School leaders would be wise to know what is on the horizon as voucher programs grow and evolve across the nation.

Voucher programs create great opportunities to enroll a significant number of non-member children in some of our WELS schools. In a number of WELS schools where member families and children were once the majority of the school enrollment, they are now the minority group. Research does not show what the impact these growing



numbers of non-member children have on WELS schools. Research does not tell us what blessings and opportunities might be arising out of the growing number of new students by way of vouchers.

These voucher programs are not just a big issue to limited number of private schools. School choice has emerged onto the national scene and is becoming a political and social “hot button.” Proponents claim voucher programs improve student achievement. Opponents argue public funds should not support religious programs. “Opponents frequently claim school choice does not benefit participants, hurts public schools, costs taxpayers, facilitates segregation, and even undermines democracy” (Forster, 2016, p. 21). WELS church and school leaders will want to consider the key issues, philosophical concerns, and possible doctrinal issues surrounding the acceptance of school vouchers in our WELS schools. School leaders will benefit from understanding how voucher systems fit within the framework of traditional WELS ministry.

### **Significance of the Study**

Today there are 26 voucher programs in 14 states and the District of Columbia. There are also 14 states that have related programs called scholarship tax credit programs. There is discussion across our country for expanding these programs in more states. In addition, there is new momentum for federal government participation. Currently, there is a significant number of WELS schools that use state education vouchers. That number is likely to grow in the immediate future. More WELS school and congregation leaders will have to decide where they stand philosophically and strategically on the use of government vouchers or tax credits for their local school ministries. As more schools

participate in these funding programs, there will be ramifications, for better or worse, for our WELS schools.

Continued growth of school vouchers could have a huge impact on the entire WELS school system. These programs could cause major changes that could be a boon to WELS school enrollment. They could change the fabric of some schools with a significant increase in enrollment of non-traditional WELS kids. They could dramatically affect school and congregation funding and budgeting. These programs have the potential to considerably impact the entire scope, mission and vision of Christian schools. WELS leaders will benefit by being informed about the impact of these programs on their schools and congregational ministries.

#### **Specific Research Questions**

1. How do voucher and tax credit programs impact WELS schools and congregations?
2. What impact do voucher and tax credit programs have on students?
3. Why do some WELS schools accept vouchers?
4. Why do other WELS schools not accept vouchers?
5. What are some options if a school can no longer use the voucher program?

## **Chapter II: Literature Review**

The interest and growth of school vouchers and tax credits have created much debate across our nation and spurred various research on their impact on education, schools, and communities. There has been discussion and research about their worthiness, their ramifications on public schools, and their influence on student achievement.

### **Student Academic Achievement and Vouchers**

One study compiled voucher research and found that “whether or not students benefit from non-governmental organizations providing their education is a fiercely contested empirical question central to the voucher debate . . . Carefully designed experiments could provide critical knowledge” (Shakeel, 2016, p. 5).

Offering school vouchers to low income families and students has given new opportunities for students to be in a school environment that promotes and supports higher academic achievement. Research shows that students may have a higher likelihood of graduation when they attend a voucher school. Wolf, Kisida, Guttman, Puma, Eissa, and Rizzo (2013) found that students had a 21 percent higher chance of graduating in the Washington, D.C. school district when students participated in the local school voucher program. They also found student reading scores were 4.8 points higher on a standardized scale score when those students attended a voucher school.

Other research shows that improved student academic achievement and personal growth cannot be categorically achieved by any and every voucher program. A study by Miron, Evergreen and Urschel (2008) suggests that careful critique needs to be carried out on the research of school voucher programs:

Leaders should not evaluate school choice solely on the basis of outcomes from standardized tests. They should be skeptical of sweeping conclusions and of press releases with no technical report to back them up. Decision makers need to consider and reach their own conclusions about such methodological considerations as the population studied, sample size, and relevance of comparison groups. Research consumers should also consider whether the source of a study is from an advocacy group. (p. 2)

Also, Witte (2008) found that the Milwaukee voucher system showed no substantial difference in reading and math test scores between the students in Milwaukee Parent Choice Program (MPCP) and the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS).

Previous to this, Rouse (1998), a Milwaukee voucher system researcher, summarized,

The results implemented from one program in one city cannot, and should not, be the only evidence on which important policy regarding the structure of American education should be based. It is only by piecing together evidence from many places that we will ever really learn whether private school vouchers could increase student achievement. (p. 594)

### **Voucher Programs and Communities**

Other research shows that voucher programs may have a positive influence on students beyond academics. One study shows voucher students develop stronger personal values. Forster (2016) found eleven empirical studies examined school choice's effect on civic values and practices, such as respect for the rights of others and civic knowledge. Of those, eight found school choice improved civic values and practices.

The development of voucher programs in various states and communities has become a political hot button. Opposition puts private schools in those locales at risk of losing the voucher opportunities or experiencing difficulty in continued participation. Staunch public school supporters and teachers' unions have vehemently opposed voucher programs. They claim voucher programs hurt public schools and dig into public school funding. Burris (2017) wrote "the idea that 'the money should follow the child' when students leave a public school for other options is a bad financial decision." She noted that a study by MGT in Los Angeles shows the public school district lost \$591 million to charter schools. On the other hand, Forster (2016) found just the opposite when she reported twenty-eight empirical studies that examined school choice's fiscal impact on taxpayers and public schools. Of these, 25 found school choice programs save money.

Opponents claim voucher programs for private schools lead to lower achievement in public schools. Forster (2016) found thirty-three empirical studies examined school choice's effect on students' academic outcomes in public schools. Of those, 31 found choice improved public schools.

Voucher programs impact the local school community. When vouchers are viewed as good for the community, then WELS school leaders may experience elements of support for voucher implementation. When voucher programs are recognized as detrimental to the community, WELS leaders may experience more opposition and hurdles when participating in the programs. A study by Latisch (2016) aimed to determine the impact of vouchers on local communities. This research showed that school choice opportunities have benefits and possible detriments to the local community. Latisch (2016) suggested school choice opportunities break down monopolies of local

public schools and create healthy competition among competing areas schools, thus improving the quality of local schools and education. On the other hand, voucher programs can be detrimental in what Latisch (2016) described as “neighborhood effects” where, ideally, citizens have a set of shared values, a basic level of literacy and knowledge, each child benefits the broader society, and contributes to the welfare of others. His research found voucher programs tend to create segregated school communities that may not be in the best interests of its citizenry. Latisch (2016) wrote that “available research suggests that choice programs in the U.S. do generally result in greater economic and ethnic stratification” (p. 28).

There is also concern about the effects of voucher programs on the local public schools who lose students to voucher schools. Research has been done analyzing public schools in low income communities that lose students to voucher programs. Carlson & Cowen (2015) found,

consistent evidence that neighborhoods whose students attend less effective public schools and neighborhoods with lower academic outcomes contribute disproportionately to the voucher program. This evidence is quite consistent with patterns apparent on Census-based observational measures of neighborhood socioeconomic characteristics: higher rates of voucher use are found in the least advantaged neighborhoods. We also find, however, that disadvantaged students in general are those most likely to leave the voucher program after enrolling. (p. 1)

School voucher programs are not unique to the United States. Several other countries provide choice funding programs that are regarded as successful. Those countries include Chile, India, Sweden, Denmark, and France. Shakeel (2016) found that

reading and math test score improvement in voucher systems outside the United States are generally better than in the U.S. These foreign programs demonstrate that student achievement can possibly be improved with similar programs in the U.S.

### **Funding Sources for Voucher Programs**

The funding avenues and the vehicles for dispersing voucher program tuition dollars are not all the same. There are several different models in use today where vouchers are funded by public funds, private funds, or a hybrid of both sources. Some research indicates that publicly funded programs tend to produce better academic results. “We found that publicly-funded voucher programs show larger and clearer positive effects than privately-funded programs. Public funding could be a proxy for voucher amount, as publicly-funded vouchers tend to be of significantly greater value than privately-funded ones” (Shakeel, 2016, p. 40).

Tax payers, government budget leaders, and politicians have expressed concerns about the costs of voucher programs. Shakeel (2016) wrote about research by Wolf and McShane (2013) and Muralidharan et al. (2015) that found “vouchers are cost effective, since they tend to generate achievement outcomes that are as good as or better than traditional public schools but at a fraction of the cost” (p. 41).

### **Voucher Programs and the WELS**

Some research has been done on voucher programs in WELS schools. In 2004, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary student, James Hoogervorst did a study on the local program in Milwaukee area. He found most WELS leaders determined that the choice program in Milwaukee was a benefit to WELS schools, the program was manageable to operate under state regulations, and fit within principles of Lutheran ministry.

Hoogervorst did find most WELS leaders, after careful study, believe the program does not cross the line of church and state separation. He did find some philosophical opposition to the program as one pastor viewed WELS schools' involvement in the MPCP as participating in a discriminatory welfare program and causing harm on area public schools. Hoogervorst quoted another pastor's concern, "I believe that by participating in the Choice program we will start down the slippery slope of reliance on government funding for our ministry." Hoogervorst concluded his study with this question and conclusion, "Is school choice the right choice for WELS schools? Certainly this question has challenged leaders of WELS schools in Milwaukee. It is a question that will likely challenge these leaders as long as the program continues" (p. 22).

As the voucher program came into play for Milwaukee WELS schools in the early 90's educator John Isch (1994) noted an earlier study on the WELS Biblical and philosophical view on government funding. He wrote:

the Synod has never categorically rejected the concept of government aid. The most extensive statement was made by the Advisory Committee on Education and the Supplemental Statement of the Board of Education (Advisory Committee 1967) nearly 30 years ago. This committee's report and cautionary statements were endorsed by the Synod Convention as 'based on Scripture.' The Committee . . . issued a strong warning that individuals and congregations should judge the impact any government aid would make and base their decision to accept or reject on that exercise of Christian judgment. (p. 79)

A WELS educator and essayist for *The Lutheran Educator* shared these concerns as WELS schools in Milwaukee delved into the MPCP. "I am convinced the easiest way



to destroy our K-12 educational system would be to accept too many government subsidies . . . if such subsidies were to be taken away, even after just one or two years, it may be extraordinarily difficult to develop again the understanding and practice of Christian stewardship and parental and congregational support for Bible-based education” (Freese, 1997, p. 10).

A number of our WELS schools are heavily invested in a voucher program. The principal of one WELS school participating in the Choice program did an enrollment analysis of his Lutheran school. One of his statistics showed that 124 out of 202 total students (61% of student body) in his school enrolled through the use of vouchers (Koestler, 2014). There are other WELS schools in the Milwaukee area that have similar statistics. These high numbers of voucher students impact the financial, educational, and cultural elements of the school. These issues raise concerns about what will happen if the government parameters of this program are changed. As Freese (1997) cautioned, “No one can predict what new regulations will result, but it is certain that there will be more. The question then needs to be answered regarding the extent to which these regulations restrict our mission” (p.11).

### **Summary**

Study and evaluation of school voucher programs like the program in Milwaukee (MPCP) have gone on for almost 20 years. Researchers, educational leaders, and politicians are still debating the benefits and the validity of voucher programs. WELS school leaders also continue to examine the issues to understand how these programs align with school ministry. For some WELS schools, voucher programs have given them

new life while some other WELS schools are shrinking. Hoogervost (2004) summarized it well,

As some of these WELS schools are declining, they too will have to struggle to determine if school choice is a good solution to the problem, or a temptation to get involved in a program that could compromise their mission. WELS schools will do good to proceed with their decisions concerning school choice with wisdom, vigilance, caution, and prayer. (p. 22)

### **Chapter III: Methodology**

#### **Subjects**

Surveys were sent to WELS schools principals in most states where funding programs are available and where multiple WELS schools operate. The surveys were sent via email to the principals of all the WELS schools in multiple states. Those states included Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Nebraska, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin. The survey was sent to over 180 WELS high school and elementary principals. Responses to the survey were anonymous.

#### **Measures**

The study was conducted using a Google Forms survey. The survey requested both quantitative and qualitative data for analysis. The 28 question survey asked for program information, numerical data, opinions, and responses to a scaled questionnaire. Seven of the questions asked for demographic information such as school location, enrollment figures, and number of baptisms and confirmations. Twelve questions pertaining to the impact of voucher programs requested responses using a Likert scale of 1-5 with the choices of “strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), neutral (3), agree (4), or strongly agree (5).” Six questions asked for specific results of voucher programs with multiple choice responses including the choice of “other” for which participants can submit additional answers. The survey concluded with the invitation to participants to give additional comments. The survey questions and a link to the survey are included in the appendix.

**Procedures**

Principals received an email describing the purpose and nature of the study. The email included a link to a Google Forms survey that the principal could complete in about 10 minutes after collecting a minimum amount of school data. The principals were strongly encouraged to participate and were informed they could receive study results. By completing the survey, respondents were informed they were giving consent to include their responses in the data analysis. A follow up email was sent to encourage participation.

**Data Analysis**

The quantitative data is organized using basic statistical and descriptive methods. The qualitative data was sorted and summarized by common themes. Responses were collected from schools that use and do not use voucher or tax credit programs.

**Limitations of the Design**

This study was dependent on the number of respondents to the survey as well as the extent of the information provided such as the amount of hard data and the number of narrative responses. Some of the data collected are opinions of the school principals and not determined by empirical evidence. Because funding programs vary in nature from state to state, different program variables may have influenced the survey responses. Also, variables in the student and community populations of respondents' schools may have influenced survey answers. This study looked for common trends, themes, and results of state funding programs in WELS schools.

## Chapter IV: The Results

### Introduction

The operations of our WELS Lutheran schools have many common threads in practice and certainly in Scriptural foundations. Almost every school and congregation operates as its own entity and can be vastly different from other Lutheran schools in its setting, culture, socio-economic environment, financial resources and other dynamic factors. Factual data on the impact of a school choice program in one particular WELS school may be very different from another WELS school in a different environment. Also, the impact of a particular choice program may be influenced by many different factors in different schools. The data gathered and results determined in this study have been compiled to find common trends. Those trends attempt to answer the following questions:

1. How do voucher and tax credit programs impact WELS schools and congregations?
2. What impact do voucher and tax credit programs have on students?
3. Why do some WELS schools accept vouchers?
4. Why do other WELS schools not accept vouchers?
5. What are some options if a school can no longer use the voucher program?

Over 50% (99 respondents) of the principals who were sent surveys for the research participated in this study. Just over 50% of those respondents served in schools where vouchers or other state funding programs are used in their schools. The ratio of participating principals and their states where their schools reside was reflective of the number of WELS schools in each state with 71% of the participating principals serving in

Wisconsin, and the remaining schools in outer lying districts of the synod. Of the principals who responded and indicated their school does not participate in a government funding program, about 25% of those schools do not have access to a program. The other 75% do not participate in an available program for various reasons which will be described later.

## **Data Analysis**

### **1. How do voucher and tax credit programs impact WELS schools and congregations?**

In an era in our WELS schools' history where enrollment is often a concern, these programs certainly increase the enrollment of our schools with anywhere from a handful of students to over 200 children enrolled in a WELS school through a choice program. Among the 51 choice schools represented in this survey, over 3000 children are enrolled through a choice program. A significant number of the children who come to our WELS schools through a choice program are non-members. In these 51 schools, well over half of the students enrolling by a choice program are not members of the local WELS congregation.

Because the primary purpose of WELS church and school ministry is preaching the Gospel and bringing souls to Christ, it is essential to examine what impact choice programs are having in fulfilling this purpose. This study found in over 70% of the choice schools at least one child was brought into church membership in the last four years. In 25% of the schools, 6-25 voucher students came into membership in recent years. Many principals reported that some students who came to the school through the choice program were eventually baptized into the family of believers. Figure 1 shows the

percentage of non-member children baptized in recent years ranging from one child to more than 25 in a given school. But it is not clear if some of these children were baptized before enrolling in the school.

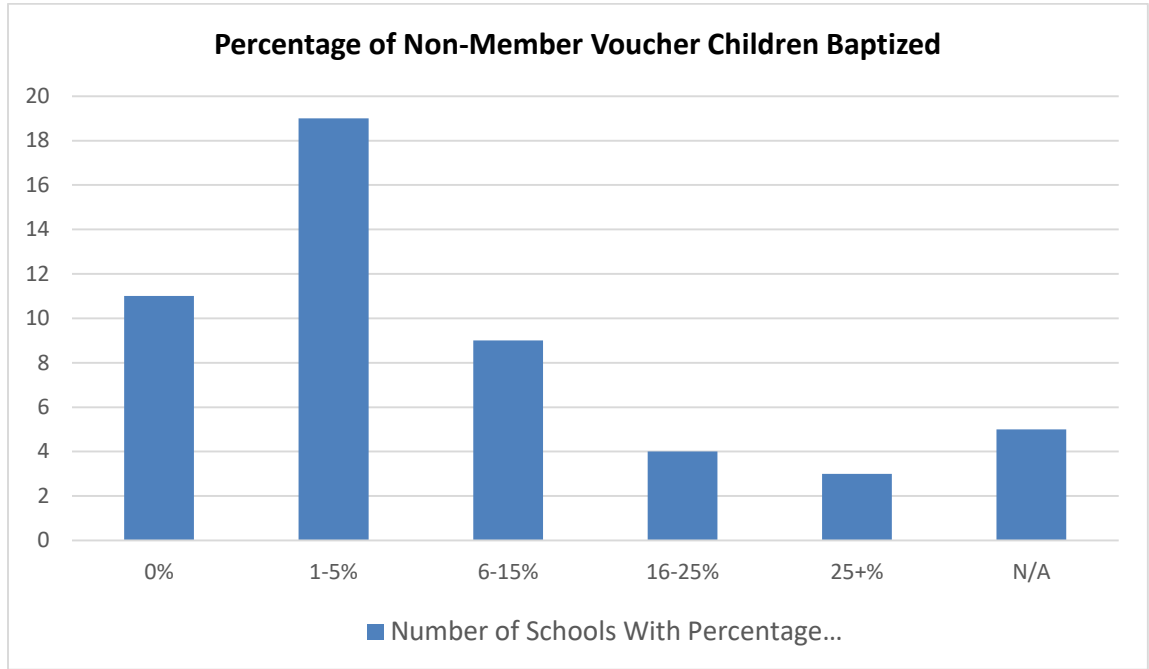


Figure 1. The percentage of non-member voucher children baptized. Principals reported the approximate percentage of non-member voucher children baptized in the last four years. 51 total responses

A general question is often asked concerning the use of a choice program: “Is it good or bad for the school ministry?” The research shows in a majority of our schools the choice programs bring blessings to the schools. Nearly 85% (42 of 50) of principals agree or strongly agree many blessings have come to the school through the voucher program. In a few schools, just 10% (5 of 50), principals disagree or strongly disagree and do not believe many blessings come to the school through such programs as shown in Figure 2.

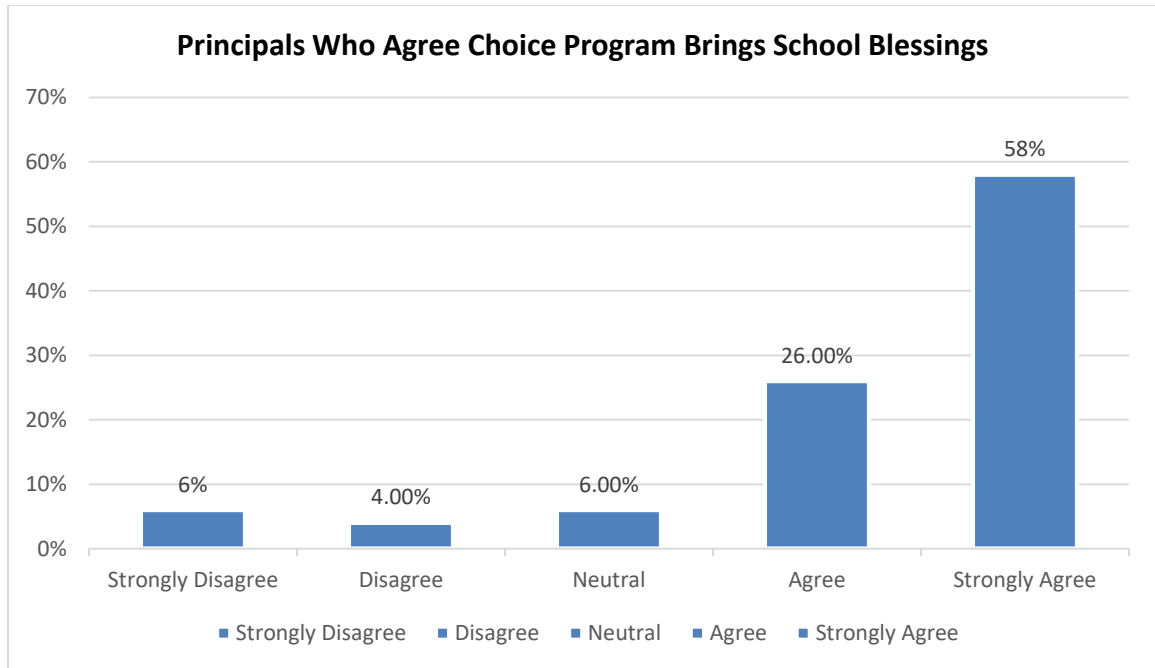


Figure 2. The percentage of principals who agree or disagree with the survey item: *The choice program has brought many blessings to my school.* 50 total responses

Not only do the majority of principals see blessings for their school through school choice, they also see added blessings to their congregation. Of the choice program principals surveyed, 87% believe the choice program has brought blessings to the congregation. Nineteen of 49 principals strongly agree blessings have come to the congregation and another nineteen agree with this. Only 4% (2 of 49) do not believe the program has brought blessings to the congregation as shown in Figure 3. Nine of 49 principals were neutral on this issue.



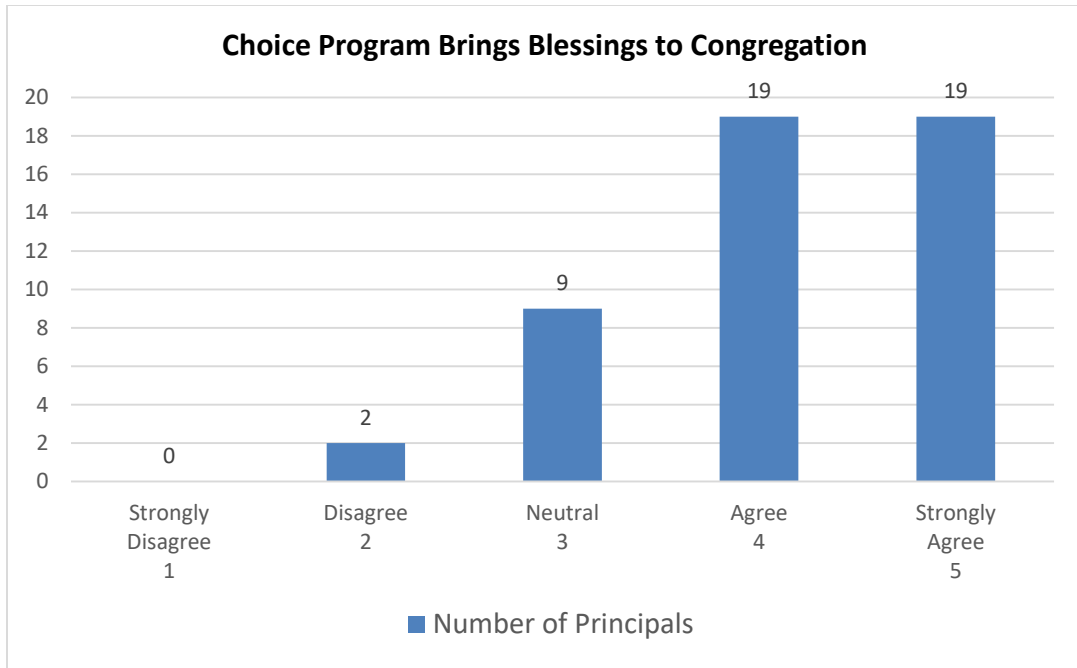


Figure 3. The number of principals who agree or disagree with the survey item: *The school choice program has brought many blessings to my congregation.* 49 total responses

Principals identified several significant specific blessings that come to the school and congregation through their local choice program as shown in Figure 4. Most significantly, 94% indicated more Gospel ministry opportunities arise out of these funding programs. Fulfilling the main purpose of our WELS schools is enhanced through such programs. Financial gains and stronger school enrollments are also important benefits of these programs. Other noted blessings are more parent involvement, minorities are entering ministry, and financial support for low income families. Figure 4 shows the percentage of principals who identified the specific blessings to participating schools and congregations.

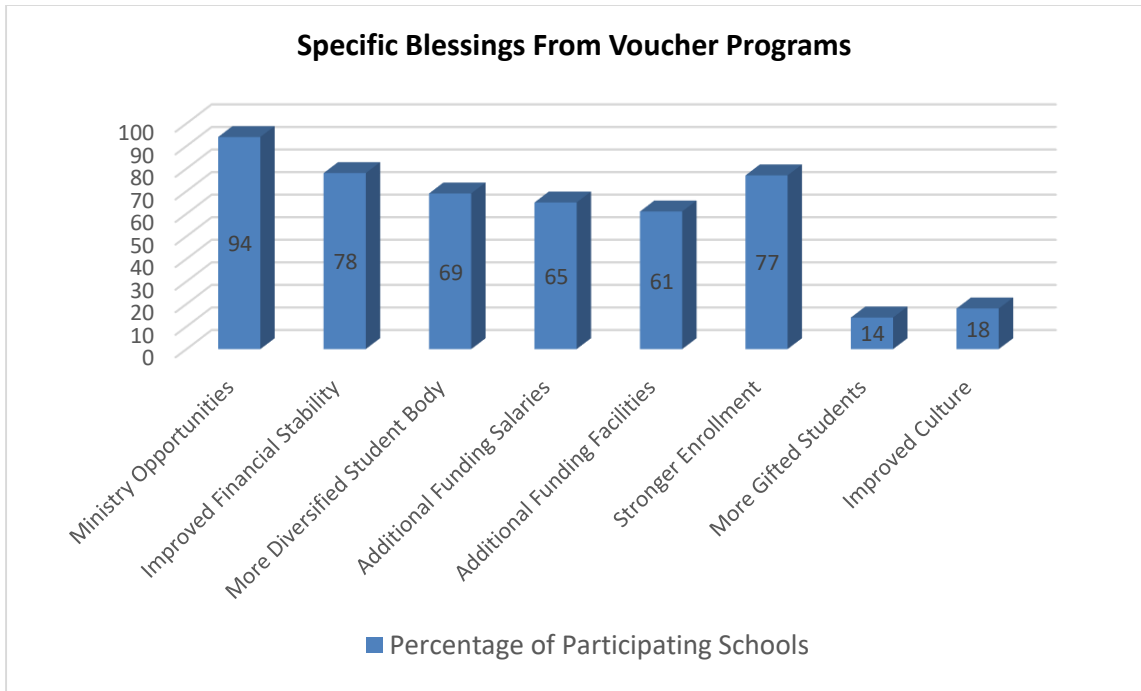


Figure 4. The percentage of principals who identified specific blessings from the voucher program with the survey item: *Identify specific blessings to your school or congregation enhanced by the choice program. (Mark all that apply.)* 51 total responses

The voucher programs have enabled schools to enroll more non-member children from the community who are not clearly connected to another church. Through enrollment in the WELS school, principals indicate that numerous children are brought into the Lutheran faith and become members of a local WELS congregation. In 70% of participating choice schools, at least one child has become a member in recent years as shown in Figure 5. Cumulatively, dozens of students in our WELS schools have joined a WELS congregations to be one in faith.

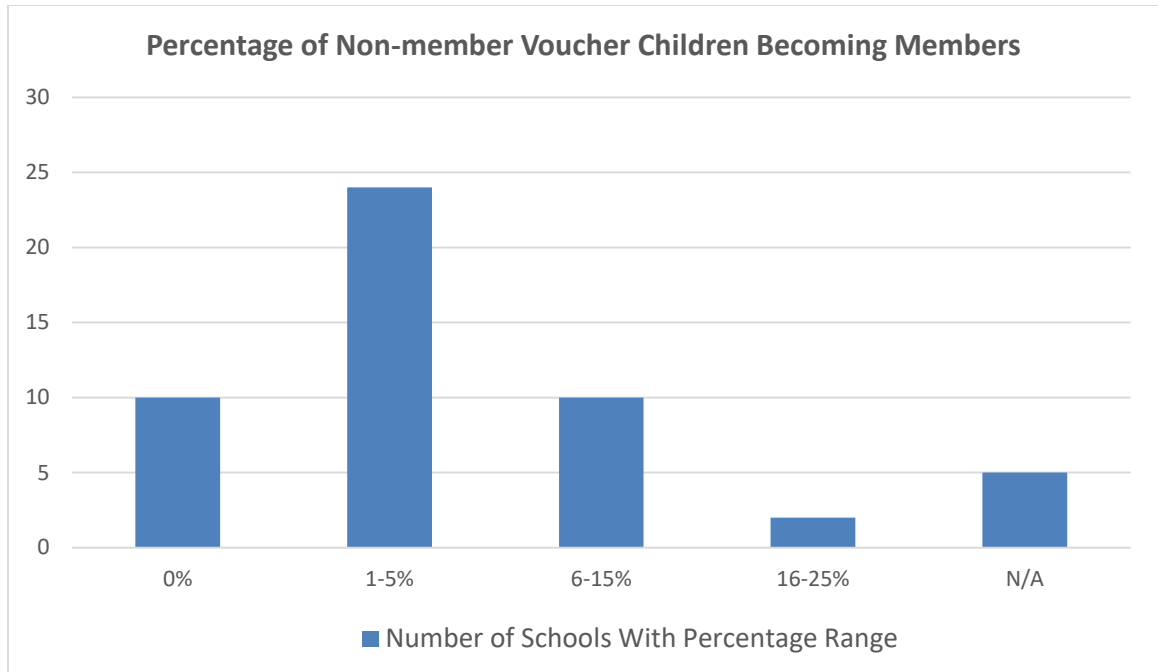


Figure 5. The percentage of non-member voucher students who became members. The principals identified the approximate percentage of non-member voucher students who became members of a WELS congregation in the last four years. Each column shows the number of schools for a percentage range. 51 total responses

In contrast to blessings experienced, 12% of principals agree that the choice program has brought problems to their schools. But 66% of the principals surveyed disagree and do not believe that the choice program has brought problems as shown in Figure 6. While we have some indication of what those problems are, it is important to note that school leaders might not necessarily see these issues as problems, but new challenges. As is commonly understood, school ministries are full of challenges that are not necessarily bad, but just part of demanding and complex ministry. It should also be noted that, practically speaking, the more students there are in a school, the more problems or challenges will arise. We can expect a school of 200 students to have numerically more discipline problems than a school of 40 children. So as a school may have grown through the use of a choice program, the growing number of problems or challenges may be mostly due to the growing student body, not the choice program itself.

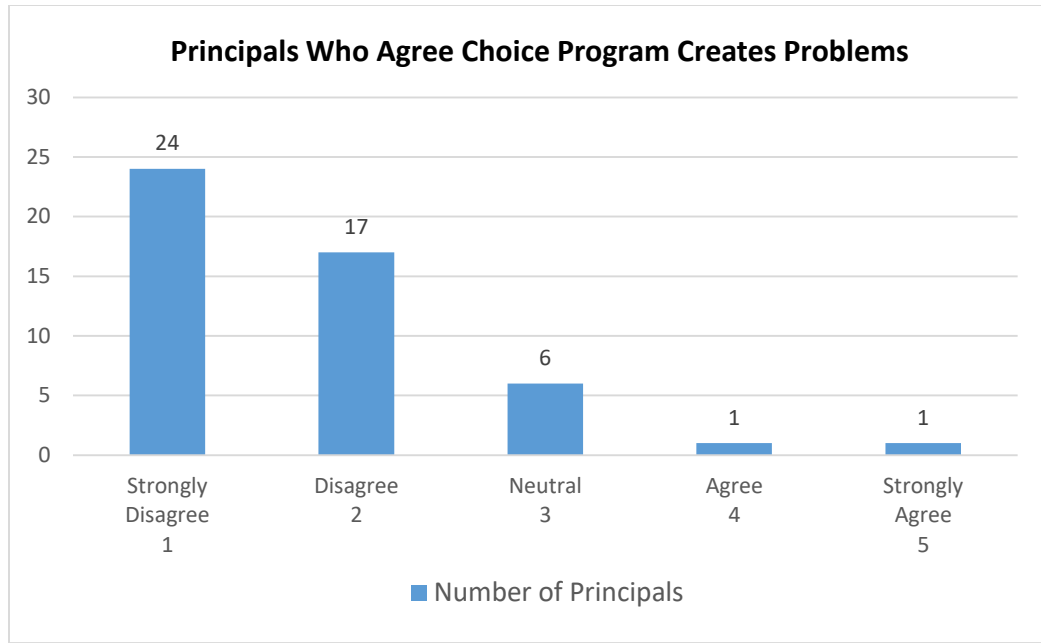


Figure 6. The number of principals who agree or disagree with the survey item: *The school choice program has created many problems for my school.* 51 total responses

The principals were asked if the choice program might in some way improved the overall quality of the student body. Just 38% of choice school principals think the program has a positive impact on the overall quality of the student body. Ten percent of the principals do not think the program makes a positive impact on the student body. Determining what exactly stipulates an improved student body is subjective and would require more data to draw factual conclusions.

Because of various economic and societal factors, the future of many WELS schools is of concern. Knowing the impact of school choice programs on the stability of Lutheran schools could be helpful. In the survey principals were asked if their school’s future would be in jeopardy without the choice program. Nearly 50% of choice school principals agreed their school’s future would be on shaky ground without the program. They believe the school choice program is critical to their school’s sustainability. In addition, 65% of the school leaders surveyed agreed the government funding program has created financial stability in their school. In this group, 29% strongly agree and 35%

agree the program has created financial stability. Just 10% disagreed the program has had a strong, positive financial impact as shown in Figure 7.

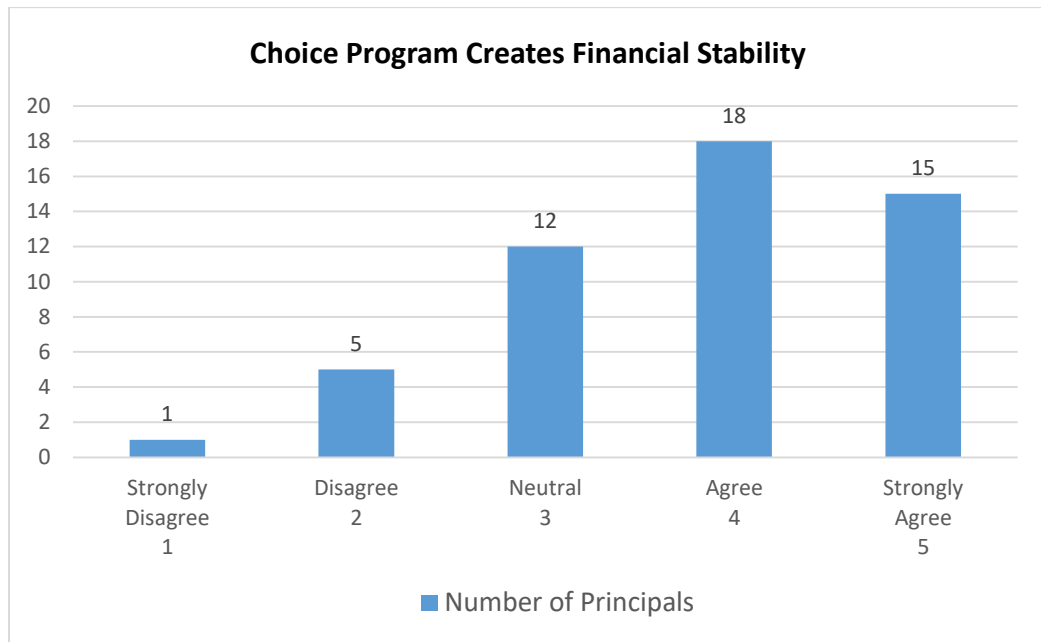


Figure 7. The number of principals who agree or disagree with the survey item: *The choice program has created financial stability in my school.* 51 total responses.

The survey also looked for negative impacts of choice programs on our WELS schools. Principals were asked to identify specific challenges or problems that result from the voucher programs. The most common problem is additional administrative requirements. Several other common school problems were identified by less than half of the choice school leaders. Such problems were the following: more students with special needs, more behavioral problems, more counseling issues, and more parent problems. Figure 8 shows the percentage of school principals who recognized specific challenges or problems in voucher programs.

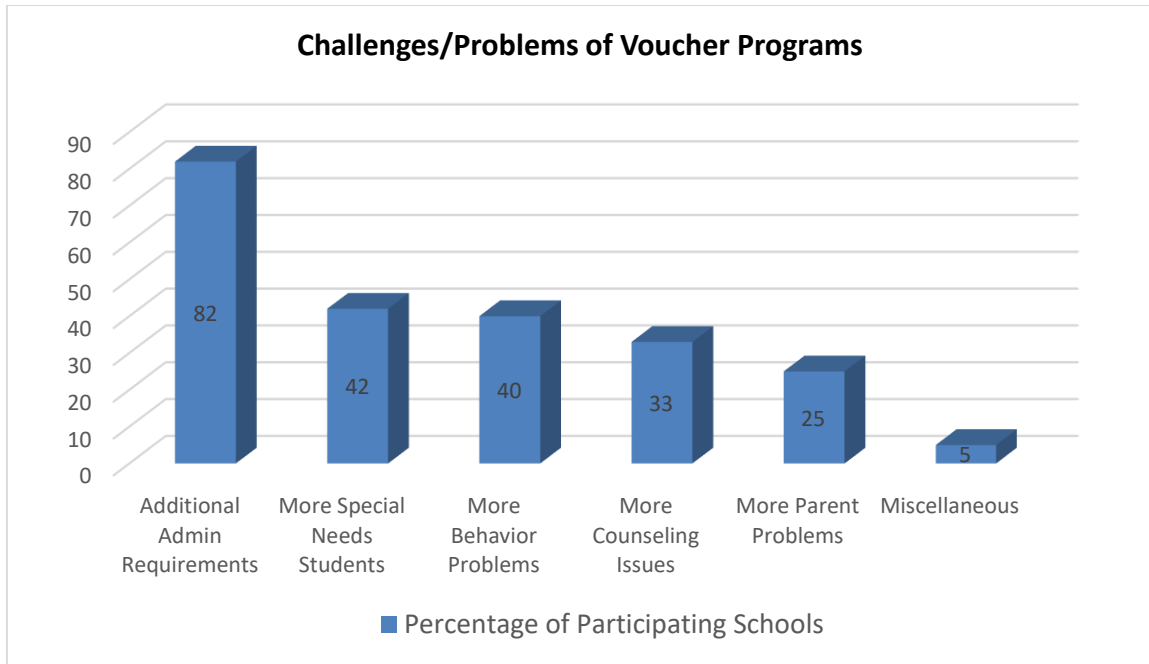


Figure 8. The percentage of principals who identified specific challenges or problems of the voucher program with the survey item: *Identify specific challenges or problems as a result of the choice program in your school. (Mark all that apply.)* 51 total responses

It should be noted that many of these problems occur in schools that do not participate in choice programs as well. As was stated earlier, some problems naturally increase with rising enrollment. One principal mentioned the choice program has created a facility shortage on their campus. That is not necessarily a negative issue. Another principal expressed, “It’s hard to say whether or not the problem is caused by the program.”

**2. What impact do voucher and tax credit programs have on students?**

Not only do choice programs have a meaningful impact on the overall school ministry, these systems also appear to have an impact on the students as well. The majority of principals (75%) agreed the choice program gives students opportunities in their school that the students would not normally get in a non-voucher school with over 50% strongly agreeing with this aspect. Just 4% did not believe this to be the case as shown in Figure 9.

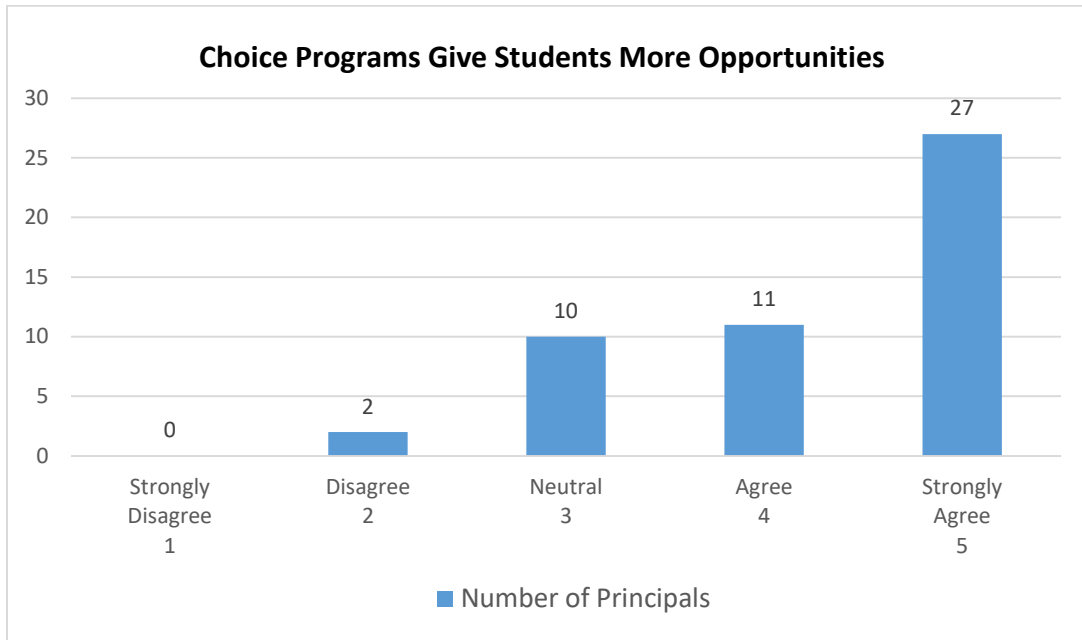


Figure 9. The number of principals who agree or disagree with the survey item: *The school choice program gives students in my school opportunities they would not normally get in a non-voucher school.* 50 total responses

The impact of school choice programs on student academic achievement is a hotly debated and extensively researched national issue with varying results. Knowing if these funding programs have any impact on student achievement in our WELS schools can be useful. As shown in Figure 10, over half (58%) of responding choice school principals say voucher students in their school have improved in their standardized test scores. About 4% said the voucher students have not improved in their test scores. Over one-third of the principals did not know or were neutral. But it is apparent a number of students have done better academically when they are enrolled in a WELS school.

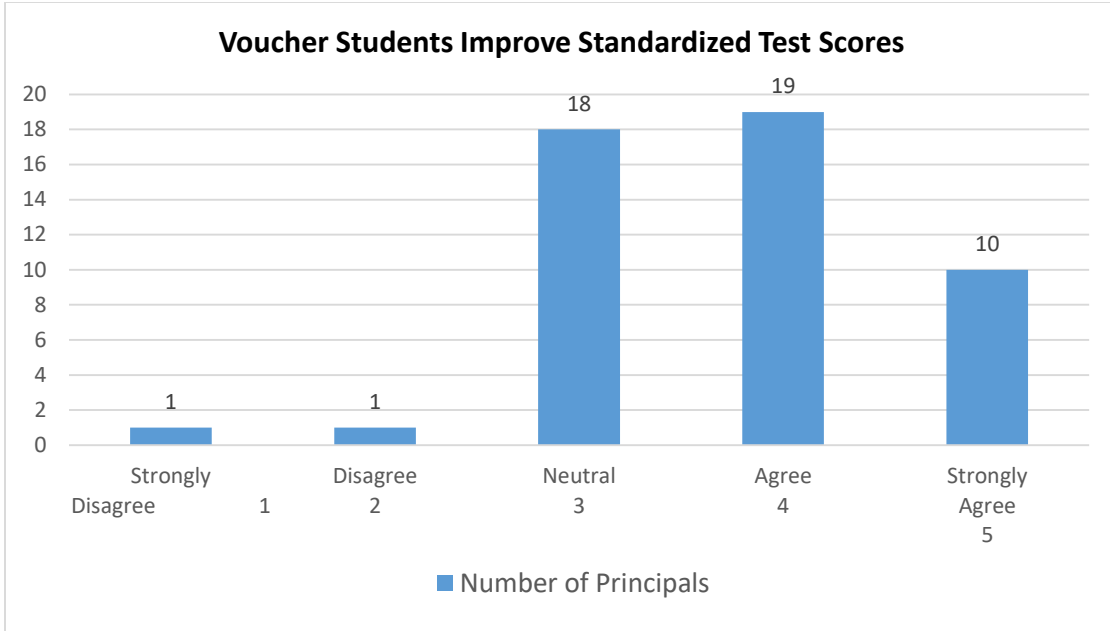


Figure 10. The number of principals who agree or disagree with the survey item: *Voucher students in my school have improved in their standardized test scores.* 49 total responses

Principals were also surveyed about the impact of the choice program on the overall student academic achievement in the school. Over one-third (39%) of the principals believe the program has a positive impact on the overall student academic achievement of the school as shown in Figure 11. And 10% disagreed it has a positive impact on the overall student body achievement. Most of the principals, 26 of 51, responding to this survey item remained neutral on this issue. The likely do not have the tools or the data to make a connection between a portion of the student body enrolled through the voucher program and resulting changes to the entire student body academic achievement.



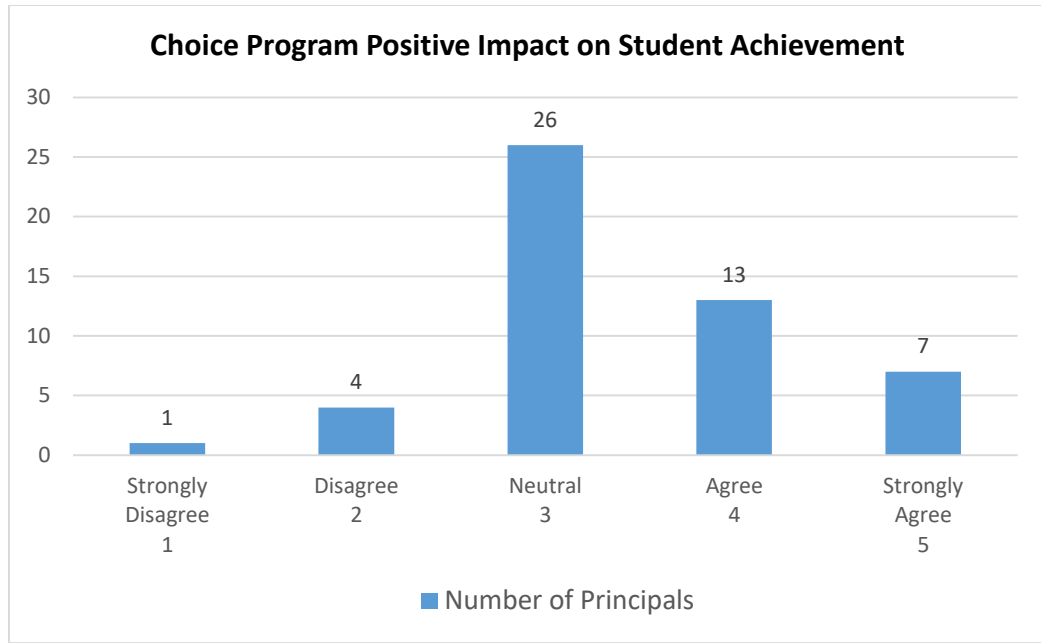


Figure 11. The number of principals who agree or disagree with the survey item: *The choice program has a positive impact on the overall student academic achievement.* 51 total responses

Another impact WELS principals considered was the connection between funding programs and quality of instruction. The survey showed 43% of principals believe the program has a positive impact on quality of instruction and 6% disagreed there was such a positive impact as shown in Figure 12.

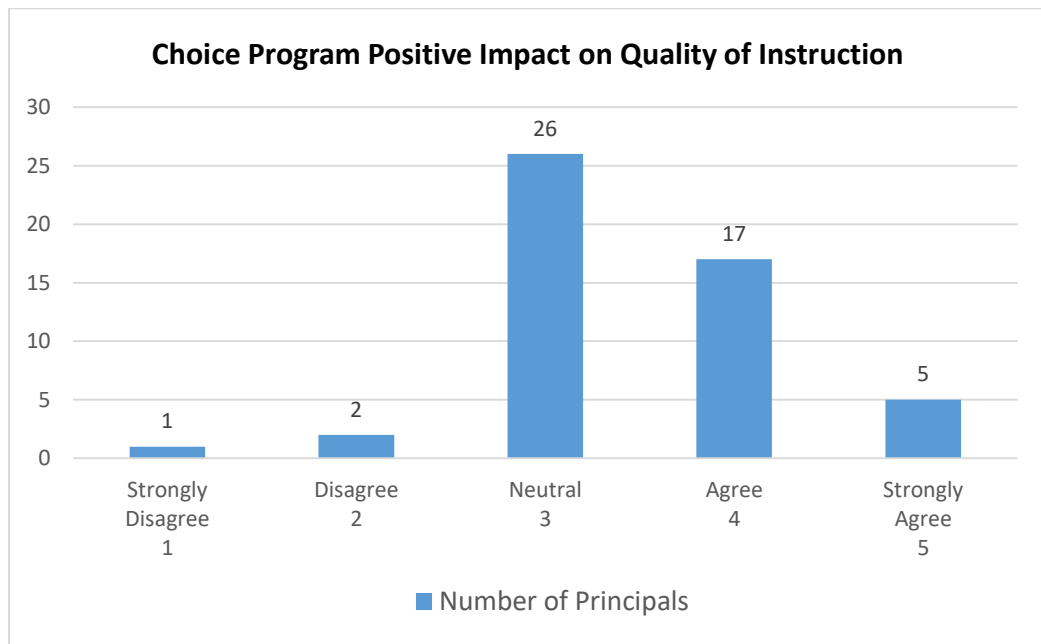


Figure 12. The number of principals who agree or disagree with the survey item: *The choice program has a positive impact on the quality of instruction in my school.* 51 total responses.

The school leaders were also asked what significant benefits voucher students receive in their school that they would unlikely receive in a non-voucher school. Funding programs in WELS schools clearly have a significant impact on students. Most importantly, the opportunity for a Christ-centered education was identified as a blessing to voucher students in 100% of the funded schools. Nearly as many (92%) recognize participating students are nurtured in their Christian faith and are blessed with Christian role models. Other significant benefits are better academic success, development of student gifts and talents, and opportunities to participate in programs that normally might not be accessible to them.

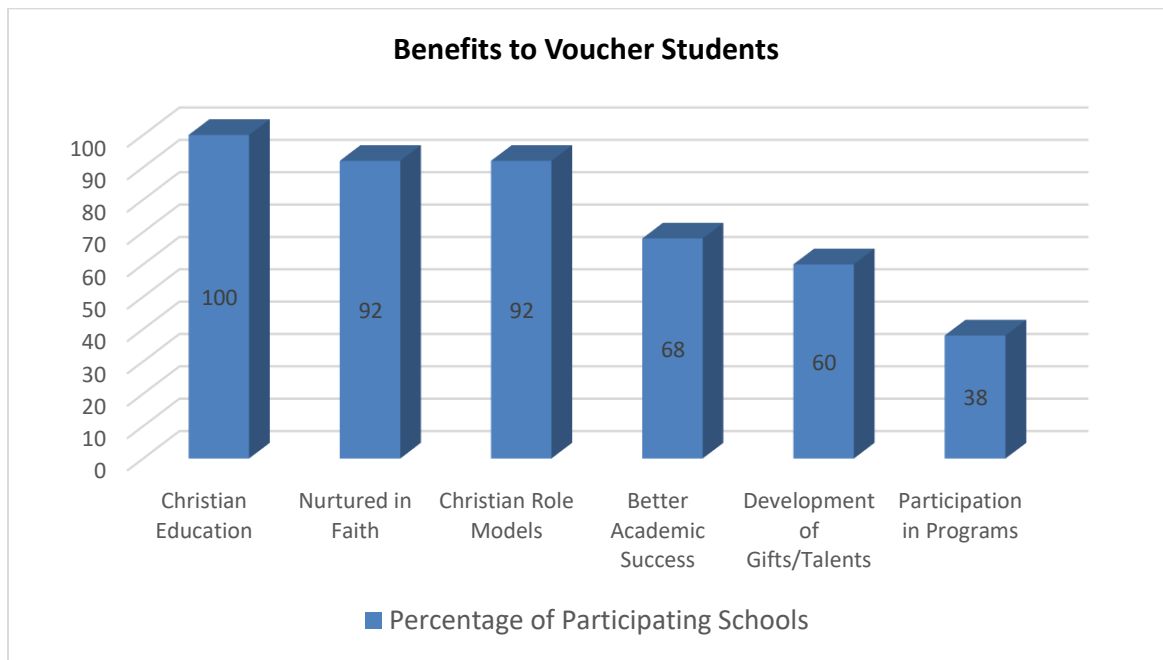


Figure 13. The percentage of principals who identified specific benefits voucher students receive in the school with the survey item: *What significant benefits do voucher students receive in your school that they would unlikely receive in a non-voucher school?* (Mark all that apply) 50 total responses

As was noted in the results to the previous question, a significant number of children who came into our WELS schools through the funding program were eventually baptized. This certainly is a tremendously positive impact on these students which bestows both temporal and eternal blessings in the lives of these children (See Figure 1).

The survey results also show that dozens of non-member choice students were blessed by coming into membership after their enrollment in a WELS school (See Figure 5). Again, significant spiritual blessings through the voucher programs to students.

**3. Why do some WELS schools accept vouchers?**

There are several principle reasons why WELS schools participate in voucher or state credit programs. Most notably, WELS school leaders whose schools participate in these programs believe this practice fits with the purpose of their schools. Nearly all principals (96%) agree accepting voucher students fit well into the mission of their school. Of these, 65% strongly agree it fits with their mission as shown in Figure 14.

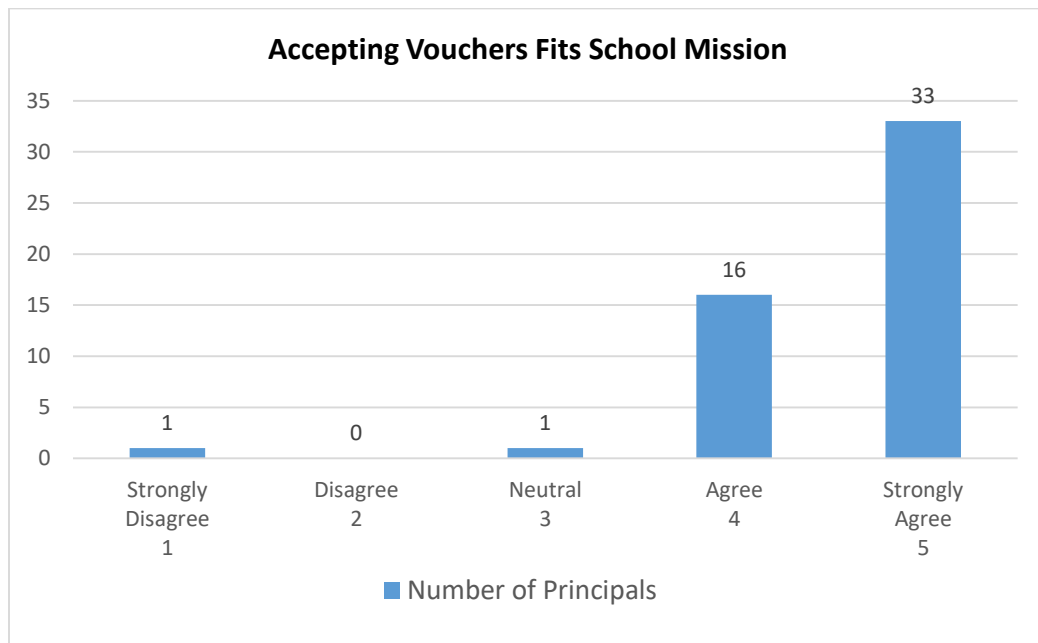


Figure 14. The number of principals who agree or disagree with the survey item: *Accepting voucher students fits well into the mission of my school.* 51 total responses

The principals of funded schools were asked the direct question, “Why does your school accept vouchers?” The prevailing response (90%) was that the programs fulfill the school mission as shown in Figure 15. Three-fourths of the principals say the programs create more opportunities for the church. Over half of the schools see more opportunities to expand ministry and fulfill needs for funding. Nearly half say the

programs improve the school stability. A very valuable reason indicated by a few principals (5%) is the voucher programs allows low income member families to receive Christian education as well as reduces financial pressure on member families. One principal noted, “We have more money in our assistance funds for other families who do not qualify for the WPCP yet still struggle to pay tuition.”

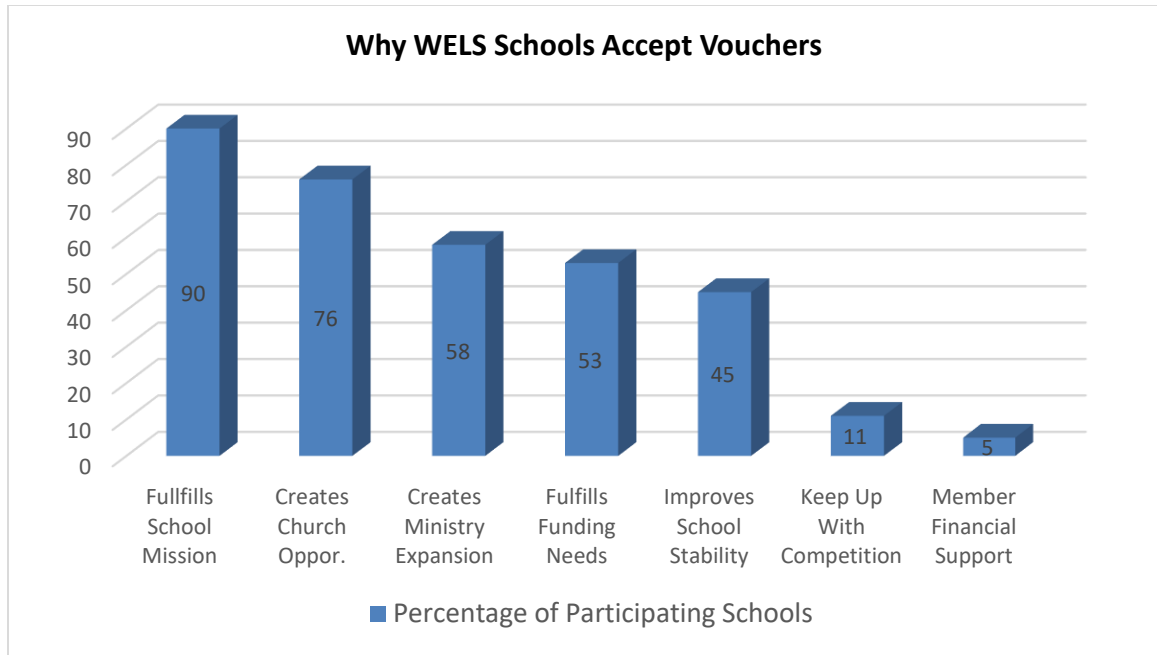


Figure 15. The percentage of principals who identified specific reasons why the school accepts vouchers with the survey item: *Why does your school accept vouchers?* (Mark all that apply) 51 total responses

Another reason WELS schools may be using vouchers is to support their sustainability. Nearly 50% of the principals agree their school would be in jeopardy if it no longer participated in the funding program as shown in Figure 16. The large majority (43%) of these principals strongly agree with this reasoning. It is clear a number of our WELS would no longer be in operation without state funding.

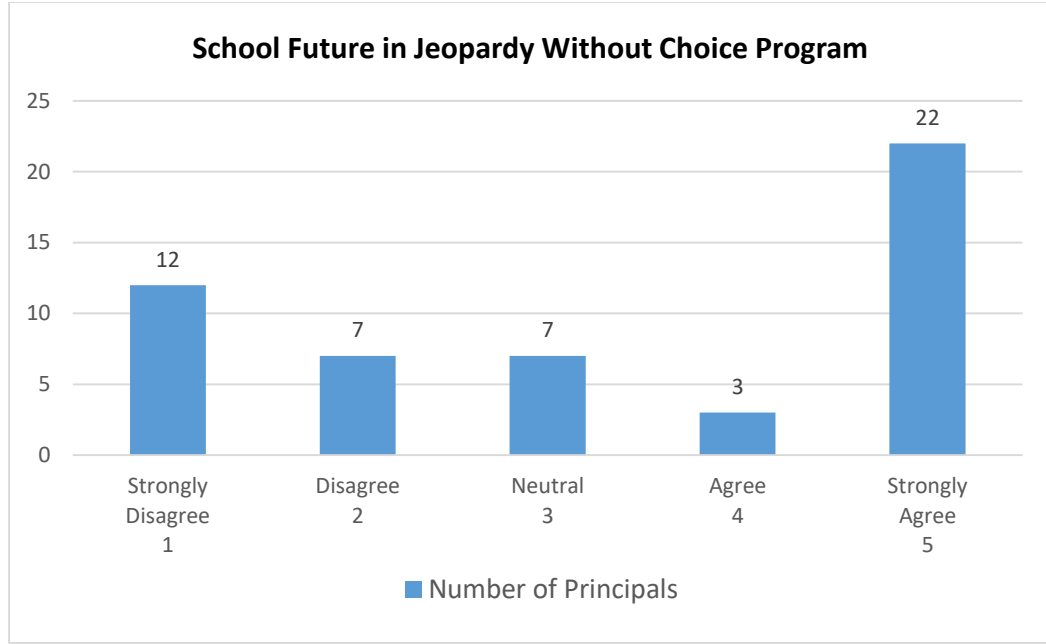


Figure 16. The number of principals who agree or disagree with the survey item: *The future of my school would be in jeopardy if it no longer participated in the choice program.* 51 total responses

**4. Why do other WELS schools not accept vouchers?**

A substantial number of principals indicated that their school does not participate in a school funding program in a state or district where they do have the opportunity to do so. Of these 40 schools, 74% choose not to participate or are not qualified to participate in a supplemental funding/enrollment system. Some schools find that government funding program does not fit with their mission. Some congregations and schools find that the funding programs could come in conflict with stewardship or Scriptural principles that are carefully applied to their ministries. Other schools see prohibitive administrative issues as a deterrent to participate. The most common reason is the school is not qualified to participate because it is not accredited as shown in Figure 17.

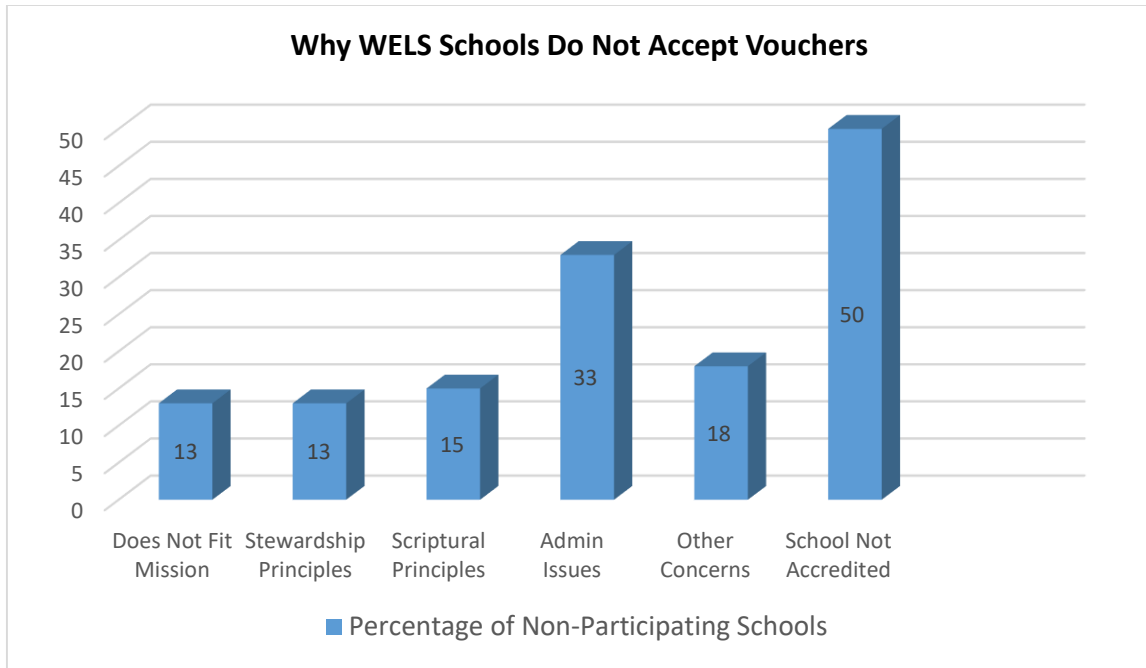


Figure 17. The percentage of principals who identified specific reasons for not accepting vouchers with the survey item: *Why does your school not participate in the voucher program?* (Mark all that apply.) 37 total responses

Several principals indicated their school is currently pursuing accreditation so they can enter a funding program or that their school or congregation is studying the funding concept for consideration in participating in a choice program.

**5. What are some options if a school can no longer use the voucher program?**

The responses from many principals indicate that school leaders are aware circumstances may change where the school no longer is able to participate or receive this special funding. Many principals indicated in the survey their school does have a plan in place in case significant changes come about. Of participating voucher schools, 51% have an exit strategy i.e. following a previously adopted staff reduction plan (19%), in some way cut staff (27%), implement a new funding model (35%). Some schools have reserve funds to transition to a new way of funding and operating the school ministry. A few schools would just close.

**Summary**

The survey results clearly show that school voucher programs and related state funding systems influence the operations and the results of church and school ministries. These programs clearly impact the enrollments, the finances, the ministry opportunities, the school stability, and other aspects of the participating school to one degree or another, depending on the specific choice school. Funding programs which give some students the means to attend a Christian school also personally impact the voucher students in their spiritual growth, academic success, and opportunities for personal growth and development. Schools that participate in funding programs have clear and meaningful reasons for using these methods of enrollment. Schools that have the opportunity to participate, but do not, most often have clear and specific reasons for not participating. Because voucher programs are not guaranteed to be available or acceptable for the distant future, many voucher schools have wisely prepared an exit strategy if the funding comes to an end.

## **Chapter V: Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations**

### **Introduction**

Dozens of WELS church and school leaders have needed to make collaborative decisions on whether or not to participate in a government funding program for school tuition. It is likely more WELS school leaders will be presented with the opportunity to make this choice as well. Being informed about the possible ramifications of participating in these programs and the impact these funding system may have on the school and congregation is valuable. For WELS leaders whose schools are currently involved in these programs, knowing the synod wide impact of choice programs can be beneficial as well. The results of this study show several common outcomes when choice funding programs are implemented to which Lutheran school educators and leaders will want to pay attention.

### **Summary**

The impact of school voucher programs on WELS schools is overall positive. Accepting voucher students fits well into the mission of the large majority of WELS Lutheran schools. Most often choice programs increase the school enrollment and give the school more opportunities to fulfill its purpose. The large majority of principals see multiple blessings come to their school and church using the voucher program. More children are baptized and confirmed in the Lutheran faith. The financial resources increase with choice programs. A number of schools have more funding for facilities and salaries. The schools have better stability and viability. Choice schools enroll more students who bring blessings of cultural diversity as well as personal gifts and talents to



the school. Various tuition funding programs bring multiple blessings to our WELS schools.

The voucher programs also positively impact the students who come to our Lutheran schools by a funding system. Principals overwhelmingly agree that these students benefit from a Christian education they may not normally receive in an alternate school. These students are also nurtured in their Christian faith, enjoy Christian role models, and experience better than average academic success which they also may not experience in another school. In many cases, voucher students see their standardized test scores go up in a WELS school. Our WELS schools are making a difference in the lives of these voucher students. Lutheran schools are making a spiritual, academic, social, and cultural impact on students through school choice programs.

The impact of funding systems on the overall student body in these WELS schools, in general, is moderate. About 40% of the choice school principals do believe the system supports improved academic achievement of the whole student body. About the same number of principals believe the funding plan has a positive impact on the quality of instruction in their school. And just under 40% of the school administrators believe a positive impact is made on the whole student body when students are enrolled through a voucher program.

The negative impact of funding programs is minimal in the majority of participating schools. The biggest issue in most schools is the additional administrative responsibilities associated with such programs. Committing sufficient time and staffing resources to participate in these systems can be very challenging for called workers and support staff who are already committed to so many other parts of the school ministry.

The large majority of principals do not see significant problems that develop in the school ministry because of the use of a voucher program. Problems or challenges may be magnified or increased only because the enrollment has gone up.

The biggest concerning issue for many WELS schools could be the dependence on the program funding for operating the school. Nearly one half of the schools participating in a funding plan would find their school's future in jeopardy if the school no longer participated in it according to the surveyed principals. Nearly two-thirds of the participating schools have achieved some degree of financial stability through the government funding. This puts a significant number of WELS schools in a precarious position moving forward for the long term future.

In contrast, one-half of the funded schools in this study do not depend on the government program for their future viability. These schools and their students and families take advantage of these programs as supplemental support for tuition-based operations thus making Christian education more affordable and feasible. Some programs in some locations are simply a means to help parents pay the tuition and lessen their financial burden. In a few schools, the program helps a small number of families foot the bill, but the program has little impact on the overall stability and makeup of the school.

The use of funding programs is relatively new in the history of our WELS school system. Most Lutheran schools are in their infancy in the use of state funding programs as shown in Figure 18. How many more years will these programs be available or viable to WELS schools and parents is uncertain. Knowing this, about half of the funded WELS schools in this study have exit plans to initiate in the event the funding goes away or restraints prevent participation. Some schools have very well thought out plans that

negate immediate damage to enrollment and budgets. Having these exit plans in place provides stability and confidence while operating in a time with an uncertain future.

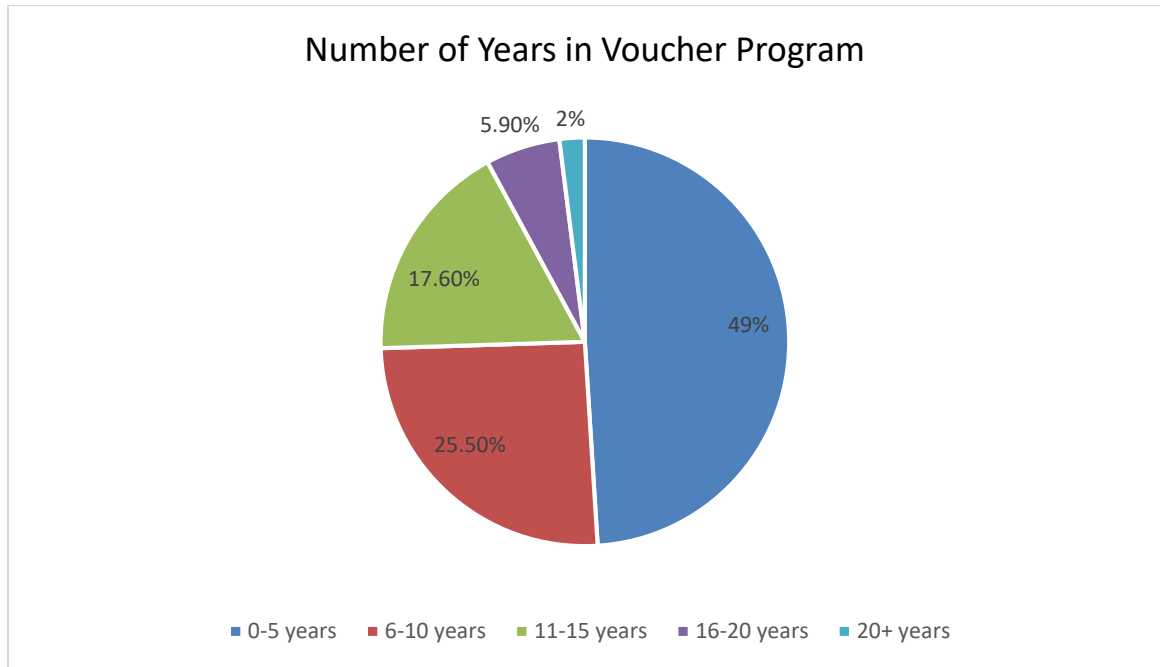


Figure 18. The number of years the principal's school has been in a voucher program. 51 total responses

A considerable number of schools that could be in a funding program have chosen not to do so or are not certified to do so at the current time. About one-half of those schools are currently not accredited so they are not eligible to participate. Several of those schools are considering participation or planning on becoming accredited and begin participation in a choice program. One-third of the schools not participating find administrative challenges to be a barrier for involvement. Approximately 15% of the schools not participating find Scriptural principles or their prevailing school mission and philosophy to not be in unison with using a government funding program (See figure 17).

**Conclusions**

School voucher and state funding programs are most often beneficial to WELS school and church ministries. Choice programs do bring significant blessings to WELS congregations and schools. These systems do strengthen, and in many cases, build up the

programs of Christian education in Lutheran schools. These programs also result in significant blessings for students who enroll in WELS schools through voucher programs. The impact on these students produces benefits for their temporal and eternal life. School choice and state tax credit programs are currently a viable and successful strategy for WELS congregations and schools to carry out more Gospel ministry. Under the current government parameters schools can participate in these programs and carry out their mission without any substantial conflicts or doctrinal compromises.

More WELS schools will participate in these funding programs after they are accredited or have thoroughly studied how this strategy may fit within their ministry. The large majority of funded schools find that participation fits within the primary mission of their school.

Choice programs do not create significant problems or challenges to the congregation and school. Although, schools that do participate in state funding programs can experience administrative challenges in running the program.

Participating in state funding programs puts some WELS schools in a risky position. Should the funding stop or be compromised in principle, the future of Christian education in those locations will be severely diminished or terminated. Having an exit plan is crucial.

Finally, there are principled reasons why congregations and schools in some settings do not or should not participate in these programs. Every school and congregation has a unique set of circumstances, issues, and philosophies that may or may not be conducive to using a government subsidy system.

**Recommendations**

Will voucher programs continue to be a growing trend across the country in the years to come? Or are they temporary subsidy programs that will eventually disappear or become incompatible with ministry in WELS Christian education? If voucher programs are here to stay for the foreseeable future, WELS school leaders need to stay attuned to the opportunity. Considering that participation in state funding programs has been successfully used in some WELS schools for two decades and many more WELS schools have successfully used them in recent years, it is prudent for all WELS school constituents to examine the benefits and challenges in using these programs in Lutheran schools.

**Recommendation #1:**

Lutheran schools that are currently choice schools and experiencing the positive impacts are encouraged to stay the course and make most of the ministry and funding opportunities that are before them. As with all aspects of Christian education, school leaders should continually review and evaluate the program implementation in their respective schools. If it is working well, carefully and prayerfully build and expand the ministry program as much as possible. School leaders of choice programs should stay abreast of legislative discussions and related state budgeting plans pertaining to funding programs. Most importantly, WELS leaders will want to stay focused on their school mission and purpose as they continue to employ government funded programs.

**Recommendation #2:**

An important recommendation to schools that currently participate in a funding program that do not have an exit strategy is promptly develop and adopt an exit plan so

that the school and congregation is prepared for the ramifications of decreased funding and a likely drop in enrollment. There may be exceptions in schools where the funding is not critical to enrollment or budgets.

**Recommendation #3:**

Based on the high number of principals who indicated that administration of a choice program is challenging, problematic, or prohibitive, WELS school leaders would be wise to examine solutions or relief strategies to this issue. A less burdensome administrative load can benefit the other parts of the school ministry.

**Recommendation #4:**

For congregations and schools that are not in a funding program but have one accessible, they are encouraged to consider their local community, review their mission statement, and examine the opportunities. Then prayerfully consider how a choice program in their school might further carry out the mission of their school, bring more souls to Christ, and bring blessings to the school and congregation. While doing so, they should be prepared for additional administrative requirements and other ministry challenges that likely will develop. If schools pursue the opportunity, they are advised to create a well-planned exit strategy in the event the choice program goes away. Might that mean to downsize the school or worst case scenario, close the school? Possibly. But what will the school ministry look like in the future if the opportunity is never taken? Will it still be there?

A recommended first step for many schools is to become an accredited school. Besides becoming eligible for a choice program, accreditation brings numerous blessings and possible unknown ministry opportunities in the future.

**Concluding Recommendation: Seize the Opportunity**

This researcher recommends that WELS leaders not be fearful about participation in such programs. Following the careful and thoughtful process of many WELS schools and their leaders who have instituted these programs, educational leaders should seize the opportunity that is before them to reach out with the Gospel to more people in their community. The conditions today for this strategy may work very well for expanding ministry. Make the most of it! Those conditions may change next year or next decade, but that is no different from other challenging changes WELS churches and schools have experienced over the years. The door has opened in recent decades for early childhood ministry and many WELS churches have seized the opportunity. The door has closed for some WELS schools as the demographics have changed in the congregation and community. The door has opened for congregational ministry to immigrant groups in a number of U.S. cities. How long the door will be open for WELS schools to participate in state funding programs is unknown, so WELS school leaders should be bold and seize the opportunity while it is here.

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## Appendix

### Appendix A: Principal Survey (<https://goo.gl/forms/iP7jk9vEZO4tcaf62>)

1. In what state is your school?
2. What is your school's enrollment?
  - 0-50
  - 51-100
  - 101-150
  - 151-200
  - 200+
3. Does your school use vouchers or tax credits for tuition and fees?

If you responded "no" to question #3 go to question #27.

4. How many students are enrolled through the voucher/tax credit program?
  - 0-50
  - 51-100
  - 101-150
  - 151-200
  - 200+
5. How many of the voucher/tax credit students enrolled as non-member children?
  - 0-50
  - 51-100
  - 101-150
  - 151-200
  - 200+

6. How many years has your school been accepting vouchers?
  - 0-5 years
  - 6-10 years
  - 11-15 years
  - 16-20 years
  - 20+

7. Over the last four years, what percentage of non-member voucher children were baptized?
- 0%
  - 1-5%
  - 6-15%
  - 16-25%
  - 25+%
  - N/A
8. Over the last four years, what percentage of non-member voucher children became members of a WELS congregation?
- 0%
  - 1-5%
  - 6-15%
  - 15-25%
  - 25+%
  - N/A

Respond to the following statements #9 - #20 using the following scale:

1-strongly disagree 2-disagree 3-neutral 4-agree 5-strongly agree

9. The school choice program has brought many blessings to my school.
10. The school choice program has created many problems for my school.
11. The school choice program has brought many blessings to my congregation.
12. The school choice program has created many problems for my congregation.
13. The school choice program gives students in my school opportunities they would not normally get in a non-voucher school.
14. Voucher students in my school have improved in their standardized test scores.
15. The choice program has a positive impact on the overall student academic achievement.

- 16. The choice program has a positive impact on the quality of instruction in my school.
- 17. The choice program has a positive impact on the overall quality of the student body.
- 18. Accepting voucher students fits well into the mission of my school.
- 19. The choice program has created financial stability in my school.
- 20. The future of my school would be in jeopardy if it no longer participated in the choice program.
- 21. Identify specific blessings in your school or congregation because of the school choice program.

- Stronger school enrollment
  - More Gospel ministry opportunities
  - Improved financial stability
  - Additional funding for school facilities/equipment
  - Additional funding for teacher salaries
  - Improved school culture and climate
  - More diversified student body
  - More talented and gifted students
  - More parent involvement
  - Other:
- 

- 22. Identify specific challenges or problems as a result of the choice program in your school.

- More behavioral problems
  - More parent problems
  - More students with special needs
  - More student/family counseling issues
  - Diminished school culture and climate
  - Too diversified student body
  - Unrealistic expectations of school leadership/staff
  - Additional administrative requirements
  - Other:
-

23. What significant benefits do voucher students receive in your school that they would unlikely receive in a non-voucher school?

- Better academic success
  - Better development of their gifts and talents
  - Opportunities to participate in extra-curricular programs
  - Christian education
  - Nurtured in their Christian faith
  - Christian role models
  - Other:
- 

24. Why does your school accept vouchers?

- Fulfills the school mission
  - Improves school stability
  - Creates more outreach opportunities for the church
  - Fulfills need for additional funding
  - Keep up with the competition
  - Creates opportunities for expanding ministry
  - Other:
- 

25. Does your school have an exit strategy if the voucher program compromises your mission?

26. If your school does have an exit strategy, what is it?

- Adopted ministry reduction policy
  - Cut staff to match enrollment/funding
  - Implement a new funding model
  - Other:
- 

27. If your school does not use the voucher program, does it have access to do so?

- Yes
- No

If you answered “yes” to question # 27 please answer the next question.

28. Why does your school not participate in the voucher program?

- Does not fit the mission of our school
  - Scriptural principles concerning financial stewardship
  - Other Scriptural principles
  - Administrative challenges
  - Fear
  - Other:
-

**Appendix B: Letter of Invitation to Principals**

Dear WELS Elementary School Leader,

My name is Rendy Koepfel and I serve as principal at St. Paul's First Lutheran School in North Hollywood, California. I am completing my studies in the MLC MS Educational Administration program and in the process of completing my thesis project research. I am writing you to seek your help and knowledge for a study that could benefit our WELS schools.

I am researching the impact of school choice programs on WELS schools. Today there are over two dozen voucher programs or scholarship tax credit program in at least 17 states. Currently, there is a significant number of WELS schools that use state funding. Continued growth of voucher/tax credit programs could have a huge impact on our entire WELS school system.

I would really appreciate you taking 15-20 minutes to respond to the Google Form survey in the link shown below. **Receiving your response is crucial for collecting sufficient data on our WELS schools.** All responses are anonymous. I will be happy to offer you the results of my study when it is completed.

Thank you very much for taking a few minutes to help me and to provide important information for all of our WELS schools leaders.

Blessings in Christ,

Rendy Koepfel

<https://goo.gl/forms/iP7jk9vEZO4tcaf62>