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A Question of Accountability

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Alan J. Borsuk and Sarah Carr

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It's tougher to assess the quality of a voucher school than an open one

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Sa'Rai Nance was working as a teacher's aide a couple of years ago at Louis Tucker Academy, a voucher school. One day, she says, "I was praying and God told me to open a business with Cliff."

She asked, " 'A shelter?' He said, 'No, a school.' "

A school it was.

Cliff is Clifford Zigler. He worked as a teacher at Louis Tucker. He agreed to open a school with Nance.

And so Sa'Rai and Zigler Upper Excelerated Academy opened last fall in rented space at St. Patrick's Congregation, 1115 S. 7th St., a worn school building well over a century old, partly modernized but still subpar by today's standards.

The rules of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program make it easy to open a school. Regulators have limited influence over how a school operates. Supporters say the freedom to open a school is a key to improving education in Milwaukee for the better; critics say it leads to bad education and wasted public money.

Key voucher supporters admit there are a small number of schools operating in Milwaukee that ought not to exist. Four voucher schools have closed in the last 18 months, each under pressure from regulators or legal authorities, each beset by questions about quality. One was Louis Tucker.

Journal Sentinel reporters visited 106 of the remaining 115 schools this spring to see what kind of education programs they were operating. The remaining nine did not allow reporters

to observe. The large majority of those visited were either conventional parochial schools, with professional staff and clear, well-executed academic programs, or newer schools, both religious and non-religious, some of them very good, some of them mediocre.

But it was also clear that there were about 10 to 15 schools where professionalism appeared lacking, facilities were not good, and the overall operation appeared alarming when it came to the basic matter of educating children. And the quality of several of the nine schools that did not allow visits has been questioned by voucher school experts who are familiar with their operations.

Limited teaching tools

The Sa'Rai and Zigler school is not run by people grounded in school operations. Zigler is administrator of the school. Nance is principal. According to the state Department of Public Instruction, Zigler has an expired license as a substitute teacher. He said he has taught and worked as a security guard in schools in Chicago and Milwaukee. Nance said she has worked as a teacher's aide in Chicago and Milwaukee and is a certified reading tutor.

Is it a problem that she doesn't have a teaching license and is principal? "It's not a problem at all. . . . It's not necessary," she said.

Zigler said, "All you need to do is to have common sense, good communication skills and work with people."

Nance said: "It's all about heart anyway. . . . You have to love children and make sure they have what they need."

As for the school's name, "Upper" refers to "the upper room where Jesus prayed," Nance said. She said "Excellerated" is "short for anything that starts with excel." Zigler said it's a fusion word combining accelerated and excellent. Nance added, "It's spelled wrong on purpose."

Eighty students attended the school as of the official attendance day in January. They were in kindergarten through eighth grade and all were supported by vouchers. The school received \$414,524 in voucher payments this year, according to the Department of Public Instruction.

On an afternoon in March, fewer than 50 students appeared to be present. There were almost no signs of student work in any classroom or in the hallways. Most rooms had few textbooks or other reading material. "We have what they need," Nance said, but she added they could use more.

In a combined third- and fourth-grade class, 11 students were present. The teacher was drilling students on multiplication facts. Four times six, four times eight - they were supposed to master facts up to 13 times 13. He called on them individually. An hour later, the math drills were still under way. On a wall was a poster set up to mark progress by students as they completed assignments. There were 21 names on the chart. No entries had been made in three months.

In a combined first- and second-grade classroom, the teacher was drawing animals such as a kangaroo and an alligator on a marker board, using letters as parts of the animals. The students copied what she did.

In a seventh- and eighth-grade classroom, Nance talked to eight students about who should win upcoming student awards. The kids laughed as she suggested some students who might win. A student showed Nance a paper he put together on the beating of Frank Jude Jr., allegedly by off-duty Milwaukee police officers. It consisted of newspaper photos and what appeared to be a hand-copied, word-for-word repetition of what a newspaper story said.

On a doorway, a sign said, "Please keep gym door closed at all times. No exceptions. Thank you. Administrations (sic)." The door was open throughout the afternoon.

Accountability at issue

You don't need any credentials to open a voucher school. Your teachers don't need any, either. You don't need to meet any detailed standards of educational progress or performance. You can hold school in just about any place, as long as you can get an occupancy permit from the city building inspector.

Basically, all you need to run a voucher school is a building, parents who are willing to enroll their kids and the ability to meet the administrative rules of the state Department of Public Instruction.

"I believe there are about 10 schools that ought to be closed immediately and there are about 30 schools that are consistently worthy of children's intelligence and parents' commitment and support," said Robert Pavlik, director of the School Design and Development Center at Marquette University's Institute for the Transformation of Learning. The rest, he said, are in the middle.

The institute, headed by former Milwaukee Public Schools Superintendent Howard Fuller, is a major supporter of the voucher movement. It has found itself in the unexpected position in recent years of working hard to keep many potential voucher school operators from actually opening schools, even as it works to help a couple of dozen to get better.

In the meantime, DPI regulators have been working to strengthen their hand in dealing with problem schools. Barred from taking on educational aspects of voucher schools, they have focused on administrative and financial issues.

Deputy State School Superintendent Tony Evers said that regulators assume that problems in a school's business operations are often accompanied by problems in its educational program.

Although they still have strongly divergent views on what kind of accountability systems there ought to be, DPI officials and leading advocates of voucher schools have cooperated to a greater degree in the last couple of years than in the past to give the state more tools to go after problems in voucher schools. Many voucher school leaders have been stung by the low quality of some schools in the program and want to see problems cleaned up.

Strong boards

In an interview, Fuller was asked what he knew now about opening schools that he didn't know in 1990, when the contemporary voucher movement was launched in Milwaukee.

"I don't think I understood how hard it is to create a really good school," he said. He used to think having people who are totally committed to a school and who care deeply was enough to make a difference. Now he thinks those qualities are necessary, but not sufficient.

He said much more needs to be done to develop both the academic and business operations of schools. Many schools are underfunded even for routine operations. And he suggests that things which may be necessary to succeed with low-income, central-city children - such as evening and weekend classes, and summer school - are being done only in a small number of schools in Milwaukee, public or private.

Pavlik said one of the common characteristics of weak schools is the absence of a meaningful board of directors that can support the work of the principal and provide checks against mistakes.

It also is clear that the problems in the voucher movement are not due only to well-intentioned people falling short. The use of state money by David Seppeh, founder of the Mandella School of Science and Math, to buy himself two Mercedes-Benz cars has become a lasting and embarrassing symbol of how some school operators have not put students first.

Seppeh is currently trying to withdraw his earlier guilty plea to stealing more than \$300,000 from the state.

A leading critic of the voucher schools, Stan Johnson, president of the Wisconsin Education Association Council, the state teachers union, said the lack of accountability in the school choice program and the lack of information about how individual schools are doing means that almost nothing can be concluded about what the program has accomplished after 15 years.

Johnson said: "I'm sure there are some wonderful things that go on in those schools, but how can anyone say that, except for anecdotal information, because they do not take the same tests that we take in public schools."

Check to check

What can you do with \$6,000?

The amount of money paid in the voucher program, up to \$5,943 per student this year, is enough to pay for modest to slightly better than modest school operations if it's used well, many school administrators indicated. And there appeared to be little reason, in general, to think schools were not using their money to pay for just that - schooling - especially given the state's stronger financial oversight.

Kenneth Marton, principal of 84-student Christ Memorial Lutheran School at 5719 N. Teutonia Ave., said the school has enough money to be financially stable, but only by offering "not too many bells and whistles, a very good basic, generic education." The building and classroom observations support his description.

He said even some of his colleagues who head Lutheran schools outside the city assume he is rolling in money because of school choice. "We're still struggling, choice payment to choice payment," he said.

The state voucher payments are not linked to what a school charges in tuition but are intended to reflect the actual cost of educating a child.

Some of the choice schools visited by the Journal Sentinel were clearly short on money.

At LaBrew Troopers Military University School, which was housed this year in a former Catholic high school downtown, children in one classroom were working with the lights off

when reporters visited. The daylight coming in through windows was adequate, but the principal, Shirley McCarty, said the school was so short of money that it needed to get by with the lights out to hold down utility bills.

Some schools that are dependent on vouchers have cash-flow problems because the state pays them only four times a year. In some cases, staff paychecks have been held up until the voucher checks arrive.

Lower pay, benefits

Few, if any, choice schools offer their staffs pay and benefits on par with MPS.

In many schools visited by the Journal Sentinel, it was clear that if finances are limited, the way to work it out has not been to pay a small number of teachers well, but to pay a larger number of teachers lower wages, sometimes below \$10 an hour, to keep class sizes down.

Many parents sending their children to voucher schools are making a choice - perhaps knowingly - to put their children in smaller, more personalized classes in exchange for teachers who do not have much background in education.

In the more established schools, the ability of teachers is less in question. The Catholic schools generally insist on teachers who are licensed by the state. Lutheran schools also generally use teachers who are licensed.

Five voucher schools, including Hickman Academy Preparatory School and Noah's Ark Preparatory, are working to obtain Wisconsin Religious and Independent Schools Accreditation (WRISA), which includes setting standards for teaching credentials. More than 30 schools, most of them Catholic, have that accreditation.

Seven parochial high schools that have voucher students and two kindergarten through eighth grade schools in the program have accreditation from the North Central Association Commission on Accreditation, the most widely recognized accrediting body.

Some Lutheran schools in the voucher program are accredited through organizations within the church's synod.

Many schools - about half of those in the program - do not have accreditation from an outside body.

Catholic schools typically aim to pay 80% of what public school salaries are, but the gap widens as teachers become more experienced. Fringe benefits, especially health insurance, fall far short of the packages most public school teachers have.

In schools that depend entirely on choice money, the gaps in pay, benefits and teacher quality appear to only grow.

'Just baby-sitting'

There are schools where even brief observations of classrooms left strong and troubling impressions about the quality of the teaching.

In some cases, voucher schools are really only a step up from day care centers, serving only very young children.

For example, reporters tried to visit the Academy of Excellence Preparatory School twice, each time finding a large, empty classroom in the back of the Parklawn YMCA on the north side. The classroom appeared unused, with few books or toys in sight.

On a third visit, the school's principal, Joe Nixon, said she kept the supplies in a back room. On that day, she had only two students. The school said it had seven choice students on the January student count date. The two students, a 4-year-old and a 5-year-old, were drawing. Nixon said she was getting ready to take them on a field trip to McDonald's.

At Milwaukee School of Choice, the teachers and principal, Michael Hutchinson, did not appear to have a well-developed curriculum. The school, at 5211 W. Hampton Ave., has only 4- and 5-year-old kindergarten students, and works in collaboration with Milwaukee Multicultural Academy. Hutchinson, in his first year as principal, was vague on the goals and teaching approach.

"It's a lot of just baby-sitting," he said. "We try to teach them the fundamentals of pretty much every subject."

At Carter's Christian Academy, 3936 W. Fond du Lac Ave., which is new to the choice program this year, James Carter, who runs the tiny school with his wife, said in February that the highest-paid teacher at the school makes \$8 an hour.

"The amount we get from the DPI is not enough to pay staff, utilities and for a building," Carter said. Since the enrollment at the school is so small - 14 kids in 4- and 5-year-old kindergarten - the school works with a small amount of revenue.

The two tiny classrooms have only bare-bones furniture. There are no toys in sight, and few books or other educational materials.

"The curriculum that we have is so basic that someone with just a high school diploma is able to teach it," Carter said.

Shoestring buildings

Schools operating on shoestrings are often operating in shoestring buildings.

Churches generally provide a school they are connected to with a facility, whether it is an older, unfancy building such as the one used by St. Philip's Lutheran School at 3012 N. Holton St., or a first-rate new building, such as the one King's Academy Christian School connected to Christ the King Baptist Church, 7798 N. 60th St., will move into this fall.

And some schools have succeeded in attracting the support of major philanthropists.

Without such support, schools become much rockier financially, and particularly appear to lack resources to pay for decent buildings - a situation made worse if they choose to use their limited funds to pay for such things as busing to school, which many choice schools offer. As a result, many schools bend the traditional notion of what a school looks like - at least from the outside.

D.J. Perkins Academy of Excellence, a first-year school with 25 students in kindergarten through third grade, is on the second floor of a small building at 3622 W. Silver Spring Drive, with a vacuum cleaner shop and hair salon on the first floor. The classrooms were formerly used as offices for a doctor, a dentist and a lawn service. Some are cramped.

Getting to the principal's office requires going through the combined second- and third-grade class; only a partial wall separates the lunchroom and the first-grade classroom.

Dr. Brenda Noach Choice School has perhaps the most unlikely location of any school in Milwaukee - it's in the Milwaukee County War Memorial Center, connected to the Milwaukee Art Museum. The school rents several classrooms on the ground level of the north side of the building - space that is windowless, cramped and unattractive - plus two upper-floor classrooms that are spacious, well-lighted and offer gorgeous views of Lake Michigan.

Does bad space make for a bad school? Not necessarily. Community Vision Academy, a school connected to Community Baptist Church, has classes in buildings on all four corners of W. North Ave. and N. Sherman Blvd., including some in the basement of the church itself. It also has kindergarten operations on both floors of a duplex across the street, which means 4- and 5-year-olds are often led across North Ave. to get lunch.

But the staff members are mostly retired MPS teachers who appear to be providing a strong, religious-oriented program in a capable manner. The school is working to get everyone under one roof by September.

Different testing

Critics of the voucher program point frequently to the fact that the voucher schools do not need to follow the state's educational goals and do not need to take the state's standardized tests each year. Public schools are required not only to administer tests but to release detailed reports on results.

Almost every school that reporters visited reported that students take standardized tests each year. In many cases, school officials provided reporters with summaries of student performance, sometimes in detail.

"We believe in testing, totally, absolutely," said Julie Loomis, principal of Eastbrook Academy, 5375 N. Green Bay Ave. She said students at the school tested overall at the 91st percentile on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills.

But given that different tests are used - many private schools use the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills, not the tests used by public schools - no meaningful comparison of test scores was feasible even when data was presented.

Catholic schools, in particular, appear to be headed toward more participation in the state testing system and more openness with test results. The Milwaukee Archdiocese has asked all schools with eighth-grade students to take the same tests that public school eighth-graders take, and that may expand to include fourth-graders. Most Catholic schools were willing to share some or all of their schoolwide test scores with reporters.

In broad terms, most of the scores provided by Catholic and Lutheran schools appeared to be in the ballpark of scores in Milwaukee Public Schools, especially when the socioeconomics of the schools' student bodies were comparable.

No research has been done using data on student performance in voucher schools since 1995, when a state requirement for an annual research report ended. There have been efforts in the state Legislature to launch new research, but they have faltered amid highly partisan politics. Voucher program backers are close to agreement with researchers from Georgetown University to undertake a privately funded, long-term study of the voucher program.

Weeding out applicants

Pavlik, of the pro-voucher institute at Marquette, said he has worked in recent years with 184 people who were planning to open schools. Only 41 schools have actually opened, he said, which he took as a good thing.

More than 50 new schools or potential schools have applied to join the voucher program for next year, which could swell the number of schools to more than 170. But that won't happen. The DPI's Evers expects that come fall, fewer than 20 new schools will be in operation.

Susan Mitchell, a leading advocate of the voucher program, said she hopes many of the applicants don't succeed in opening schools because of their lack of qualifications.

Partners Advancing Values in Education, a private, non-profit organization that has provided scholarships, grants and other services involving voucher schools for more than a decade, declines to give money to some schools because of similar concerns. Executive Director Dan McKinley recently told the group's board that he believes about 10% of choice schools have serious quality issues. Whatever happens in the state Legislature in regard to the size, regulation and funding of the voucher program, it is clear that it will not be as easy in the future to open a school as it has been or to keep a weak school going.

As for Sa'Rai and Zigler Upper Excellerated Academy, more than a half-dozen calls to the school on different days since June 1 have been answered by a recording that urges applicants to file enrollment applications for this fall by Feb. 20. No one has responded to messages left on the answering machine. A secretary at St. Patrick's, the school's landlord, says the church is trying to get in touch with the school's owners to find out the status of the school.

In March, Sa'Rai Nance said her goal was to expand the school eventually to include a high school. But first, it must make it to September.

Leonard Sykes Jr. of the Journal Sentinel staff contributed to this report.