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Editorials

Spinning school vouchers

School Choice Indiana sent a news release this week boasting of \$4.1 million in "redistributed savings" from the school voucher program.

For Fort Wayne Community Schools, it means \$129,331.93 is coming back from the state. But how much did the voucher program cost the district in tuition support this year? The exact number isn't known (see related editorial), but it's more like \$2.3 million.

Voucher *savings*? Only in the view of those determined to benefit private and parochial schools at the expense of public education in Indiana. As lawmakers prepare to examine the school-choice record and the push continues to eliminate all limits on vouchers, public school supporters must speak up about the real cost of this new entitlement.

Under the voucher law, the Indiana Department of Education must make a special distribution to public schools in an amount determined by



Brown



Enlow



File
 At a ceremony last May, Gov. Mitch Daniels greets children attending a bill-signing for the school voucher legislation. A school choice group is

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■ **Disclose the details**
 As Indiana closes out its academic year, the gaps in information about the nation's most expensive voucher program are becoming clear. Today 3:00 am

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the total cost of vouchers and the difference in the amount that would have gone to public schools for each student's tuition support. The figure is \$4,180,383, distributed among all public school districts and charter schools.

touting savings from the first year of the voucher program but neglects to acknowledge the millions drained from public schools.

"It's exciting to be able to provide quality opportunities for kids, while saving the state millions of dollars that are now being distributed to Indiana schools," Lindsey Brown, executive director of School Choice Indiana, said in the news release.

While boasting of "nearly 4,000 low- and middle-income Hoosier students benefiting from vouchers," Brown doesn't acknowledge the more than \$15 million that flowed from public schools to private and parochial schools.

And a statement from Robert Enlow, president and CEO of the pro-voucher Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, is clearly misleading: "This is good news because the redistributed savings recognized through this program will raise per-pupil allocations for the schools and allow them to have greater financial resources for educating students."

Only in Enlow's math workbook is \$4 million in distributions greater than \$15 million in losses.

Vic Smith, a retired Indiana administrator and one of the founders of the Indiana Coalition for Public Education, said he wasn't surprised by the school choice group's spin.

"This was the way the program was sold to legislators. They sold it as a savings," Smith said. "It had some attraction to some legislators in the House, because it rolled out the savings to all public schools. Our objection was that it was going to be redistributed all across the state and not just the places where the students came from. Places like Indianapolis and Fort Wayne were going to lose more because there are more private-school choices there."

Smith said some legislators in districts without school choice options liked the idea that their public schools would reap the savings while urban districts like Indianapolis and Fort Wayne lost money.

The Indiana Supreme Court is set to review the constitutional challenge to Indiana's voucher program. In the meantime, legislators should be reviewing the new entitlement in clear terms. Painting it as a "savings" to taxpayers is disingenuous at best.

The cost to public education is tremendous, not just in terms of lost tuition support, but in the loss of middle-class support for a civic institution with a long and proud history.

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