**Brenda\_White\_Interview\_20250310.mp3**

[00:00:00] **Speaker 1** How do you respond to concerns that taxpayers have that they are being asked to, you know, raise property taxes because of the the public school funding? But everything else is honestly very, you know, like, tell me about parental choice and what value that brings to receiving. Yeah. And that's also why I had asked to speak with you, because you have that Racine experience.

[00:00:26] **Speaker 2** Yeah. Thank you.

[00:00:29] **Speaker 1** Okay, John, are we ready to get started?

[00:00:33] **Speaker 3** Just another 10s or so.

[00:00:36] **Speaker 1** No problem.

[00:00:40] **Speaker 2** I'm just going to send you a record request. Yeah.

[00:00:50] **Speaker 1** Okay. I think you're ready. Thank you. So, Brenda, why don't you start by telling me a little about your background, your connection to the schools, and also what you do now at school choice, Wisconsin.

[00:01:03] **Speaker 2** Thank you. I'd be glad to. First of all, thank you for asking me to participate and and for giving me the chance to be on the program. My background is I'm recently retired as a career educator, and I, I spent several years in Racine as the president of Siena Catholic Schools, which is a system of K-12, seven K-12 schools. Excuse me. Let me back up. It's a system of seven schools in Racine that includes Saint Catharines High School and sixth grade schools. And so I served as president of that system for the last several years of my career. I also served as a principal in Milwaukee of a Catholic choice school, and I served as an associate superintendent for the Archdiocese of Milwaukee for ten years.

[00:01:58] **Speaker 1** Yeah, and I see that Alec has joined us here. Can you explain what the school choice movement in Wisconsin is? What does that even mean?

[00:02:08] **Speaker 2** Well, it's a wonderful opportunity for parents now across the state to have a choice in where they would like to send their child to school. So regardless of zip code, it allows parents who meet certain income criteria to be able to opt for a school that participates in the parental choice program. So for the state that includes 403 schools and over 58,000 students who now can have an option and parents can choose the school that they feel is going to be the best for their child.

[00:02:47] **Speaker 1** So if I'm a parent in Racine, what is the process of getting getting my child into a parental choice program?

[00:02:56] **Speaker 2** If you're a parent in Racine, you have the option of 36 private and religious schools that participate in the choice program that if you or your family meets certain income criteria. So, for example, our family of four, if their income is at or below $93,000, approximately that you would be eligible for a voucher so that your children could attend one of those 36 schools tuition free. So you would need to live within the unified school district and meet those income criteria. And then you would be allowed to have a choice outside of Racine Unified, where you would like to send your children.

[00:03:40] **Speaker 1** And I know that Racine and Milwaukee have these parental choice programs specific to those cities. Can you explain why that is?

[00:03:49] **Speaker 2** Well, historically, the Milwaukee it's all started in Milwaukee with the Milwaukee program well over 30 years ago. We have the oldest parental choice program in the country. And it started to give parents in Milwaukee an option outside of MPs For the same reasons we talked about. And then that program was expanded by our state legislator and the governor to include Racine. A number of years ago. And then on top of that, it's expanded now statewide. There's actually four parental choice programs, including a special needs scholarship program as well.

[00:04:28] **Speaker 1** And you touched on this earlier with the financial requirements, but what other kinds of barriers are there to people who want to get into the parental choice program?

[00:04:38] **Speaker 2** Well, really, the only criteria that a family needs to meet is income and eligibility. The schools that participate in the parental choice programs cannot exclude children based on any other reasons. So race, religion, ethnicity all of those are not barriers. The family simply has to meet the criteria set by the state for income and where where their children reside in terms of residency in the school district.

[00:05:12] **Speaker 1** Yeah. And as our state legislature gets into budget season here, what are your and your organization's priorities?

[00:05:22] **Speaker 2** School choice. Wisconsin. In fact, I should back up and and say that currently I serve the board for School Choice Wisconsin. And three of our priorities for the next legislative session are really centered around number one, making sure that we can advocate to maintain the 2023 funding compromise that was reached by Speaker Vos, Senator Lamar Hill and Governor Evers. Secondly, we are seeking to decouple the way parental choice is funded from property tax. And thirdly, priority is to advocate for the continued educational autonomy that private schools have had and is very critical to our mission, so that we can have the educational independence to choose our own curriculum and instructional programs. Very key to why parents choose a private school is because we can determine what that curriculum instruction is going to look like.

[00:06:39] **Speaker 1** Can you talk more about decoupling and how that would work?

[00:06:43] **Speaker 2** Sure. So decoupling is just. A way to separate out from the funding, the funding formula for public schools in Racine and the statewide program, a certain portion of that state aid to public school districts goes towards funding the choice program in that the state aid to those public districts is reduced up to cover the cost sewing machine. That would mean a certain portion of the state funds to Racine Unified is then goes towards funding the choice program, and then school districts like Racine often make up that gap in their funding through raising property taxes. So if we can decouple that, like Milwaukee is fully decoupled, it would save property tax payers and Racine $4.7 million. So it's a win win to both the district who would increase their state aides, and it would be a win for property taxpayers who would have that burden lessened. But I think it's important to point out that decoupling in the way the state funding is works now is a separate issue from the referenda. Public districts. Many public districts around the state choose to go to referenda, because they believe that the state spending limits that are set for public districts are too low. And so in Racine, Racine Unified, that $190 million referenda is a separate issue from the way choices funded. It's really related to that state spending limit for public districts.

[00:08:50] **Speaker 1** Yeah. And you have basically answered this question, but I want to give you the opportunity to I just want to rephrase it. How would you respond to taxpayers who have concerns that, you know, funding for these voucher programs comes from the state? And because of that, these schools have to go to referendum, which is then raising property taxes.

[00:09:18] **Speaker 2** Well, I would I would say that we have a legislative fix for solving the property tax issue when it comes to funding school choice, and that legislative fix is called decoupling. So we already have fix that problem in Milwaukee, and fixing it in Racine and other programs would make it the same standard for property taxpayers. And then secondly, I would say the referenda is a separate issue not related to school choice. It's related. For districts and districts who feel that they have to go to referenda to make up for that low, that low spending limit. And two separate things.

[00:10:10] **Speaker 1** Thank you. What is your perspective on how the expansion of voucher programs in the state? Or how about in Racine? How does that bring value to Racine in terms of building community and also the services that are offered to Racine?

[00:10:28] **Speaker 2** It's a great question. Well, first and foremost, I would say academic success is there's a lot of research that shows that our choice schools in Racine are outperforming our city students year after year in every academic area on the state test. So we we all take the same status. Schools that are participating in the choice program take the same state assessment that the public districts do. And so we can just look at those scores and see that in Racine, the 36 private schools that are participating in the choice program are significantly outperforming our USD and the state measures of academic progress. So that's first and foremost. Academic success is important to a community for its students. And secondly, the research nationally and locally, so that one of the ways choice schools really shine is in character formation. So there's a lot of research that shows choice schools make a difference in how students grow in those life skills. Like attendance rates are higher, graduation rates are higher, College enrollment rates are higher. Statistically, we can see that kids have greater self-respect, greater respect for the law, so it reduces and reduces crime. All of those things combined make communities stronger. Strong schools make strong communities. And that's a significant benefit of the program, the academic improvement for students and that character development that really lasts for a lifetime for those students.

[00:12:17] **Speaker 1** Thank you. Brenda. Is there anything else you want to add?

[00:12:21] **Speaker 2** I would add that we're very grateful to the legislature for the continuous growth of the program year after year, and allowing parents an option to choose the school that best fits their wishes and their desires for their child is very important in our state. And thank the legislator for legislators for supporting that. Thank think parents for choosing what school they believe is best for their child, and thank the viewers for their support as taxpayers for education in our state as a whole. We have wonderful options in our state for parents, and we're grateful for all the support that our schools across the state are given to educate children.

[00:13:16] **Speaker 1** Thank you so much, Brenda. John, are we good? Please. Okay, great. Thank you so much. This is I'm working this week on collecting all of the video and interviews that I intend to use in the story. I believe it's set to air three Fridays from now. I don't have the date off the top of my head, but our program airs Friday nights and it's it should be three Fridays from now. I can follow up with Alec when I know for certain that date.

[00:13:51] **Speaker 2** Great. Well, thank you for giving me the opportunity to address the questions and respond and give a perspective that I hope is helpful for everyone.

[00:14:03] **Speaker 1** Great. Thank you so much, Brenda. Thank you, Alec and John also.

[00:14:07] **Speaker 2** Thank you.

[00:14:08] **Speaker 1** Okay. Bye bye.

[00:14:09] **Speaker 2** Bye.