

# Mayor and School Board Study Milwaukee Vouchers

By ABBY GOODNOUGH

MILWAUKEE, May 14 — Eager to start a school voucher program in New York City before he leaves office, Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani flew the seven members of the Board of Education here today for an immersion course in how such a system would work.

The board members, some bitter opponents of Mr. Giuliani, traveled 700 miles to tour private and parochial schools in Milwaukee's decade-old voucher program, the nation's oldest. Through the program, public school students from poor families can use up to \$5,300 each in tax dollars to attend the private or parochial school of their choice.

Mayor John Norquist of Milwaukee, a Democrat, assembled a group of local parents and educators to praise the voucher program, which they say has improved public schools by forcing them to compete for students and public funds. Almost 10,000 of the city's 100,000 schoolchildren have withdrawn from public schools to participate in the voucher program, taking with them \$22 million of state aid to the school system's \$1 billion budget.

Mr. Giuliani has been pushing for a small-scale voucher program in New York City since 1999, but he has not managed to persuade the Board of Education to enact it.

Three board members — Irving S. Hamer Jr. of Manhattan, Greg Brooks of Brooklyn and Sandra S. Lerner of the Bronx — have said publicly that they would vote against a voucher program. A fourth, Terri Thomson of Queens, has expressed skepticism and told friends that she would almost certainly not support such a program.

Those four members voiced concerns about vouchers today. But all said they wanted to educate themselves thoroughly about the pros and cons, which is why they said they accepted Mr. Giuliani's invitation to Milwaukee. "We can't be so entrenched as to refuse to even see what others have to offer," Mr. Brooks said. "But I have certain reservations about a voucher program, mostly having to do with diverting public funds away from public schools."

Dr. Hamer, who has been the board's most vocal opponent of vouchers, said that he at first rejected Mr. Giuliani's invitation but changed his mind when he realized that all other board members were going. "I wanted to have the same basic information as them in case we have future discussions," he said. "But the whole concept of vouchers

is an embryonic little thing that is too new and unproven to bring to New York."

Seven members of the City Council also joined Mr. Giuliani for the day-long trip, and while several said it had not changed their antivoucher views, Priscilla Wooten, chairwoman of the Council's Education Committee, said she was more open to the concept after hearing the Milwaukee testimonials.

The trip was financed with funds from the \$12 million that the mayor set aside in the 2000-001 city budget for school choice programs. Mr. Giuliani's spokeswoman, Sunny Mindel, would not say how much the trip cost but added that the main expense was airfare for the two dozen city employees who came.

The trip made for interesting atmospheres. Mr. Giuliani was shuttled around the city in a red trolley, sitting side by side and making pleasant small talk with Board of Education members he has publicly attacked for being resistant to reform, and who have seethed at his attempts to control education policy.

Mr. Giuliani and his three allies on the board — Ninfa Segarra, Irene H. Impellizzeri and Jerry Cammarata — smiled during the speeches by Milwaukee voucher advocates and chortled at their jokes while the four board members who appear to oppose vouchers were poker-faced and quiet.

Schools Chancellor Harold O. Levy, who has remained mostly silent on the voucher issue, declined the mayor's invitation to come on the trip but provided the board members with an informational packet suggesting that voucher programs do not improve academic performance.

The Giuliani administration says a voucher program would not violate the separation of church and state because the tuition money would flow from the government to parents, not to private and parochial schools. Mr. Giuliani has proposed a pilot program in two city school districts, which would each receive \$6 million in discretionary education funds for participating.

Deputy Mayor Anthony P. Coles said today that students from poor families would get vouchers of up to \$9,500 — roughly the cost of educating each student — to attend private and parochial schools in the voucher program.

Mr. Coles said that most schools would be parochial and that high-end private schools like Dalton, where Mr. Levy sends his two children, would not participate because their tuition costs far surpassed what vouchers would cover.



Associated Press

Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani talked with students at Messmer Catholic High School in Milwaukee, which is part of a voucher program.

Between touring Messmer Catholic High School and the Marva Collins Preparatory Academy, the New York City delegation heard testimonials from three parents who said that vouchers had been their children's educational salvation. Spence Korté, Milwaukee's schools superintendent, also praised the program, insisting that it had improved the city's public schools by spurring competition.

And Howard Fuller, the city's former schools superintendent and an architect of its voucher program, forcefully told the New Yorkers that if wealthy parents could choose whether to send their children to

private school, poor parents should have that right, too.

"It's a very distorted, convoluted argument that says if poor families leave public schools it will destroy the system," Mr. Fuller said.

Dr. Lerner, the board member from the Bronx, said that the trip was worthwhile but too one-sided, since the only antivoucher people the New Yorkers heard from were a group of about 20 protesters who greeted them at the airport shouting, "Vouchers don't work!"

She also pointed out that private and parochial schools were not required to administer standardized tests and report scores to the state.