

# District explains voucher funding for taxpayers

By Susan Steele  
CORRESPONDENT

Local Elkhorn Area School District taxpayers are covering roughly \$800,000 annually to fund private school vouchers, according to discussion at the Feb. 9 Elkhorn Area School District Board of Education meeting, where board members and administrators referenced information shared during Wisconsin Association of School Boards (WASB) conference discussions.

District officials explained that under Wisconsin's current funding structure, when a resident student uses a private school voucher, the state aid that would normally follow that student to the public school district is instead deducted from the district's aid payment. The district then replaces that funding through the local property tax levy in order to maintain school operations.

A district administrator described the funding mechanism during the meeting, explaining that when students use vouchers, "the voucher is

paid for from the state aid that's assigned to that resident district... then the district levies the difference... through the local tax levy," adding that in practice, "vouchers are paid 100 percent by local levies, so technically our tax levy could go up simply because people are paying for private education."

Officials noted that the shift in funding does not automatically reduce district costs, since staffing, programming and facility expenses largely remain even when individual students leave for private schools. As a result, districts commonly increase the local levy to maintain services, meaning residents see the financial impact locally rather than through state funding adjustments.

Administrators added that while families may choose private education for a variety of reasons, the funding structure means the resident public school district and its taxpayers continue to absorb the financial adjustment, a topic that generated discussion among board members

during their report on the recent WASB conference.

## Charter school grant loss prompts restructuring plan

Board members also learned Feb. 9 that the district recently lost a state Charter School Expansion Grant tied to its Options Virtual Charter School after the program did not meet a required 20 percent enrollment growth target.

District administrators told the board the grant, which supported planning and marketing efforts for grades 6-12 programming, was unexpectedly withdrawn after enrollment growth fell just short of the state benchmark.

Officials said the district had projected future growth following its initial planning year but was informed the grant would be discontinued because enrollment numbers did not meet the state's threshold.

In response, district leaders are

**See VOUCHER FUNDING, Page 5**

## • **Voucher funding** (Continued from front page)

now pursuing a restructuring strategy similar to the Southern Lakes College Academy model, creating a new independent charter school serving grades 9-12. Administrators said doing so would allow the district to apply for a different state charter grant program that requires only a minimum of 20 enrolled students.

Under the proposed plan, grades 9-12 would operate as a separate virtual charter school, while the existing Options program would continue serving younger students. District officials said enrollment numbers already meet the minimum requirement needed to establish the new school.

Administrators told the board the district plans to seek approximately \$800,000 in grant funding over three years, slightly more than the remaining funds expected under the original expansion grant, to support programming and marketing efforts moving forward.

Officials added that Wisconsin's virtual charter environment remains competitive statewide, making recruitment and program awareness critical to future enrollment growth.

### **Enrollment trends show gradual shift in student**

#### **counts**

District officials also reviewed January enrollment figures, noting continued enrollment pressure at the elementary level while middle school enrollment remains comparatively steady.

Total district enrollment stands at 3,428 students, including 2,535 resident (R) students and 893 non-resident (NR) students enrolled across district schools and charter programs.

School-by-school figures presented to the board show:

- West Side Elementary: 271 R / 67 NR
- Tibbets Elementary: 334 R / 68 NR
- Jackson Elementary: 312 R / 78 NR
- Elkhorn Area Middle School: 538 R / 112 NR
- Elkhorn Area High School: 732 R / 165 NR

Two district programs, however, enroll more non-resident than resident students:

- Career & College Academy: 115 R / 152 NR
- Options Virtual Charter School: 130 R / 223 NR

Officials noted that virtual and charter programming often draws students from outside district boundaries, accounting for the higher non-resident en-

rollment in those programs.

Administrators told the board that enrollment declines typically spread gradually across grade levels rather than occurring in a single year, making staffing and facility adjustments challenging since district operating costs remain largely fixed even as student counts shift.

### **Student representative highlights district activities**

Student representatives provided updates on activities across district schools, highlighting academic and extra-curricular events underway.

At the high school, preparations are underway for the upcoming MakerFest, described as one of the largest student-centered maker events in Wisconsin outside Milwaukee. The event showcases student innovation and includes hands-on demonstrations and community participation, along with a planned drone light show.

Middle school students recently participated in career exploration programming, dance camp opportunities and recognition events promoting positive behavior. Elementary schools reported robot-

ics learning projects, book events and kindness-themed activities, while fundraising efforts supported area autism programming and community events.

Board members praised the variety of opportunities available to students and the strong community involvement in district programs.

### **Legislative funding concerns discussed**

Board members also shared updates from recent meetings with state legislators and participation in WASB conference discussions, focusing heavily on school funding concerns.

Officials noted that declining enrollment statewide, combined with state funding formulas that phase in reductions over multiple years, can create long-term revenue challenges for districts. Even relatively small enrollment declines can eventually translate into significant funding losses while operating costs remain largely unchanged.

Board members emphasized the importance of continued communication with state lawmakers regarding funding formulas, assessment standards and financial pressures facing public school districts.