Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

Given the Same Choices, Results Can Vary Widely

June 18, 2005

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The voucher program's ups and downs can be seen through 3 pioneering schools

Seventh of 7 parts

Bruce Guadalupe, Harambee Community and Urban Day were once considered the cream of Milwaukee's private schools.

Each rose from the remains of financially strapped Catholic schools. Each became a respected, non-sectarian, community-controlled institution. Each earned a reputation for learning steeped in ethnic culture.

When lawmakers made the case for creating the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, they pointed to schools like Bruce Guadalupe, Harambee and Urban Day.

But over the years, the paths of the three schools have diverged dramatically. Now, these schools are symbols both of some of the most serious challenges facing the program as well as its biggest successes:

• Harambee has severe financial and management problems that some believe have affected the quality of education. The school has lost something it held dear: community control. Visits to 106 voucher schools by Journal Sentinel reporters, as well as other reporting, showed that many schools have financial worries but few have fallen as far or as hard as Harambee.

• Urban Day remains well-regarded for academics and puts a premium on parental involvement. But it is quartered in a cramped facility and sometimes struggles to make ends meet.

• Bruce Guadalupe has left the voucher program. Now a charter school, Bruce Guadalupe receives more money per pupil than it did as part of the parental choice program. It enjoys a solid reputation for academics.

To get a feel for the current state of the voucher program - and its immediate future - you need look no further than Harambee, Urban Day and Bruce Guadalupe.

Harambee Community School
Harambee is a Swahili term that means "pulling together." It was the community's way of saying it would pull together all resources to educate its children.

For many years, before the voucher program existed, the private school's record at doing that was strong. Milwaukee County Circuit Judge Joe Donald, a graduate of Harambee, can tick off a list of classmates from 1973 who are successful today.

There is Jesse Wray, who became a Milwaukee businessman, and there is his brother, Noble, the chief of police in Madison.

On April 27, 1990, former Gov. Tommy G. Thompson used Harambee as the backdrop when he signed legislation creating the voucher system.

But in recent years, Harambee's detractors charge that the school has pulled back from its mission.

Mikel Holt, who served on the Harambee School Board for close to 20 years and whose three sons attended Harambee, questions whether academics at the school remain solid amid turmoil. Holt was concerned enough that he pulled his youngest son from Harambee two years ago, he said. He has continued to stay in touch with school families.

In January, Cleveland Lee Sr., a former financial officer at Harambee, was criminally charged with systematically embezzling up to $750,000 from the school.

In April, a small group of teachers walked out in protest of a delay in their paychecks and other disputes over personnel issues. They eventually were paid. Harambee officials said no classroom was left unattended. But teachers at the school have complained that sometimes their paychecks bounced, and one former board member said the school could be as much as $500,000 in debt.

In five years, in quick succession, the school has had five principals and lost experienced staff members. Just last week, some of its teaching staff was laid off.

Sister Callista Robinson, a longtime leader and vice president of the school board, said the teachers were let go because enrollment has dropped and administrators won't know until the fall how many children they will have. She declined to say how many teachers were laid off in recent days.

Aside from money problems, both Holt and former principal Russell Stamper, a reserve Milwaukee County circuit judge, believe Harambee lost parent control. Some critics, including Holt, claim parents no longer have a voice on the school board.

Both Holt and Donald, who formerly served on Harambee's development board, believe Harambee will overcome its internal problems. But Holt is skeptical that the present board will be able to deal with the school's finances.

"We all were on this quest to create future black leaders in Milwaukee," Holt said. "And that meant if we had to sacrifice, if we couldn't have the latest computers so that we could bring in the best teachers possible, then that's what we did."

Robinson contends that Harambee remains on solid ground despite its troubles.

"I think what we're doing now is rebuilding," she said. "We had our past problems. We've corrected them, and teachers have not missed a paycheck."

The voucher program is a case study for what can happen in the absence of public scrutiny, Holt said. Voucher schools, like Harambee, are not required to let state officials - or anyone else - see their books.

"We wanted to prove that we could educate our own through this vehicle called Harambee Community School," he said. "We'd go above and beyond to make sure our kids got a quality education.

"But there's some distance between that mission today - between that and what the mission or direction of the board is today."

Urban Day School
The primary campus of Urban Day School on 24th St. is hemmed in by a parking lot on one side and St. Michael's Catholic Church on the other. It's cramped, no doubt. But the faculty and students there have a broad sense of what makes school choice valuable: parental involvement and an emphasis on achievement.

The Urban Day 4-year-old kindergarten program is accredited by the North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and School Improvements, one of the few K-4 programs in the state with that distinction.

At its annual science fair in May, students in grades one through eight competed for the top prize: a $50 savings bond. The fair drew more than two dozen parents and volunteers to judge the 86 science projects.

Glen Diamante, 12, a seventh-grader, grew patches of grass in plastic containers. His hypothesis: Using a name-brand or generic fertilizer would produce the same results. He concluded there was no difference. Roberta Boose, a sixth-grader, also 12, wanted to know what makes volcanoes erupt. Her red, green and yellow clay model of a volcano surrounded by valleys was bolstered by one tablespoon of baking soda, a dash of dishwashing liquid and a quarter cup of water.

The science fair, with its parent and community volunteers, is what parents have come to expect at Urban Day.

State Rep. Annette Polly Williams, the Democratic legislator who crossed party lines in 1989 to sponsor the initial bill for voucher schools, sent all four of her children to the school.

Williams said her intent, mostly hewed from her experiences as a board member and active parent at Urban Day, was to use school choice to give parents of color an advantage.

"I liked the idea that the focus was going to be placed on the needs of the children, as opposed to the needs of the bureaucracy.

"I used to beat up on public schools, but I don't do that now. What I wanted to see was the public schools address more of the needs of the students. It wasn't doing that before choice, but I think it's beginning to do it now."

Urban Day was offering an alternative long before the voucher school program began. But the flow of public money into the school has taken some of the pressure off fund-raising and allowed the school to channel more energy into its curriculum and programs, officials say.

John Plantenberg, a Kansas City, Mo., shoe company executive who was hired in February as the school's new president, said what choice really needs to survive is accountability.

"What we'd like to see is more collaboration between elementary and secondary educational institutions and less of a competitive feeling," Plantenberg said. "This marketplace has been rife with that. It's driven politically. But I don't think our politicians serve us well when they fan the fires. The mission is education, not finances."

Nevertheless, finances are what run facilities and programs, and the approximately $6,000 per child that the state provides Urban Day for its 475 students in K-4 through eighth grade is never enough to pay all the bills. School officials say they would need about $9,000 a child to do that.

Bruce Guadalupe School
Increasing its flow of money was one of the primary reasons Bruce Guadalupe pulled away from the voucher program in 2000 and opted to become a charter school under Milwaukee Public Schools.

As the income of Hispanic families in the neighborhood improved in the 1990s, about a third of its students were no longer eligible for vouchers. The reimbursement provided to MPS charter schools was about $1,000 more per child, and every child qualifies. That spurred board members of Bruce Guadalupe to switch, said Ricardo Diaz, executive director of the United Community Center, the agency that oversees the school.

"We've got to go every single year and prove ourselves," Diaz said. "I think you stay sharper that way. We've got to respond to a number of constituencies, including parents involved in the school who may not be able to write you a check, but they vote with their feet in terms of the fact that they can go anywhere else."

About 97% of the students at Bruce Guadalupe return each year, according to Diaz. It has one of the highest rates of returning students in the state. Ninety-eight percent of parents are involved in the school in one way or another.

The school shows progress in achievement. Its reading scores on the Wisconsin Comprehensive Reading Test for third-graders rose from 67% in 2002 to 95% this year. The state's average score for third-grade reading was 87.4%. School officials credit the growth to consistency of staff, low student turnover and mandatory summer school and after-school programs. In 2006, the school is planning to add a 3-year-old kindergarten. It has both elementary and middle schools.

Bruce Guadalupe has the feel of a suburban school. Last month, its fourth-graders gathered in the school's auditorium for the annual visit from the traveling program of the Milwaukee County Zoo. Chinchillas were among animals on display.

Those kinds of exhibits are not out of the ordinary for the school, Diaz said.

Its after-school and summer school programs are mandatory and closed to children who are not enrolled in the school. Parental involvement is mandatory - part of a pledge parents agree to when they sign up.

"It's because we choose to totally focus in on education," Diaz said. "It's the only issue. If we're going to get kids to go to more challenging high schools, we need to give them an elementary base so that they can compete, because a diploma from (Rufus) King is different than one from South Division."

About 60% of the children who graduate from Bruce Guadalupe attend private high schools, including Marquette, Thomas More, Messmer, St. Joan Antida and Dominican.

Bruce Guadalupe also offers students something many choice schools cannot: Top-tier students who graduate from the school have a third of their high school tuition paid for by the school. Last year, Bruce Guadalupe spent about $24,000 on graduating eighth-graders. This year, it will spend $48,000.

"This is about the future of the city," Diaz said. "Until we get 5,000 or so college graduates every year for the next 20 years in Milwaukee, this town will not be a first-class city."

Change likely

Fifteen years after its launch, Milwaukee's pioneering private school voucher program is like Bruce Guadalupe School: It is vibrant, growing and sometimes excellent.

The program is also like Urban Day School: It is working hard but struggling to make progress in educating the city's children.

And the program is like Harambee: It has schools where even good intentions and promise have led to troubling - even alarming - results.

The voucher program plowed new ground in American education but produced little information about what is growing there.

It brought satisfaction to many parents who like the idea of having private school options, who want religious schools for their children, who want the small classes and intimacy that many of the voucher schools offer. It has shaken up the status quo for all schools in the city.

But the warts - in the form of problem schools that parents continue to select, year after year - have persisted. And given the great range in quality among the 115 schools in the voucher program and the small amount of data about student performance, no one knows whether vouchers help address the urgent need for a better educated generation of urban school children.

Like a teenager growing up, the voucher program itself now will probably change.

Even some advocates for vouchers are focused on the need to improve the quality of some schools. Other changes could come from the Legislature, regulators, or the grass roots where the schools and their students operate.

But amid the continuing controversies over the future of the program, it seems that vouchers are here to stay.

"The schools that have solid programs are going to be the ones that survive," said Sister Virgine Lawinger, the former principal of Urban Day, who is actively involved in the school and its affairs. "I sometimes wonder what the answers would be if you asked the parents what they wanted. I think they would say, 'We want to raise our children in safety and see that they get a good education.' Universally, that's what they want.

"They can be fooled for a while, but they can't be fooled for very long. They'll know if their children are learning."

Still, parents have not always known whether they've chosen schools that are faltering or rising toward excellence - and neither has the broader public.

The future of vouchers, as well as the future of urban education in the country, depends on reaching clearer and better answers.

Alan J. Borsuk of the Journal Sentinel staff contributed to this report