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## Delavan-Darien schools battle to improve despite diminishing resources

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XAVIER WARD  
Monday, June 26, 2017

DELAVAN—Dione Brown for years had considered pulling her children from the Delavan-Darien School District before deciding this year to move her kids to Whitewater.

Brown has a daughter who just finished her sophomore year at Delavan-Darien High School and a son who will be a freshman.

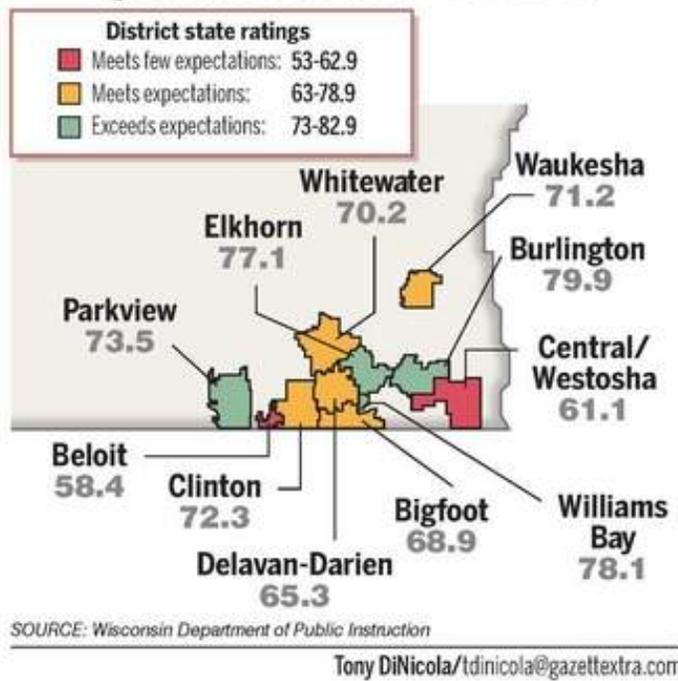
Her daughter wanted to take advanced placement courses, but the

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school wasn't able to fill a class, so students had to take the courses online, Brown said.

"I've been considering for three years, but I couldn't quite get my children on board," she said.

She and her husband are district alumni, so it was tough to leave, but she felt the Delavan-Darien district wasn't offering classes advanced enough and was catering to lower-

achievement students, she said.

Families such as the Browns pulling their children out of the Delavan-Darien School District through open enrollment are costing the district millions of dollars in state aid.

The problem is made worse by revenue caps that limit how much the district can raise property taxes.

The result is a school district battling to make itself more attractive despite diminishing resources, school board President Jeff Scherer said.

"I've been on the board now for eight years, and it's been a long battle to try to improve things," Scherer said.

### 'Perpetual hole'

District officials said the district is improving and the rate of increase in students leaving the district is slowing.

Since 2000, the number of students open enrolling out of the district has increased.

For the 2000-01 school year, \$195,776 in state aid followed students out of the district, according to state Department of Public Instruction data. By the 2015-16 school year, \$2.86 million

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in state aid left the district with students who open enrolled elsewhere. Although students open enrolling into the district brought with them \$276,739 in state aid, the district had a net loss of \$2.6 million, according to state data.

The problem is made worse by state-imposed revenue caps, Scherer said.

In September, the district faced a \$1.7 million budget deficit for the 2016-17 school year, and Scherer said the district faced a “perpetual financial hole” under revenue caps.

Before the revenue caps took effect in 1993, the district had been spending conservatively. The caps for all school districts are based on how much they spent the year before. Because Delavan-Darien’s spending was low, its cap is low, Delavan-Darien Superintendent Robert Crist said.

While open enrollment out of the district steadily increased in the last 17 years, the trend seems to be slowing, Crist said.

However, the numbers show an uptick in students enrolling out of the district in the 2016-17 school year.

Between the 2012-13 and 2013-14 school years, open enrollment out of the district increased from 382 students leaving to 450 students—a 15 percent increase, according to the department’s numbers.

The next year, the number of students leaving through open enrollment grew to 499—a 9 percent increase, according to department’s numbers.

In the 2015-16 school year the district saw 533 students open enroll out of the district, an increase of 6 percent, according to state numbers.

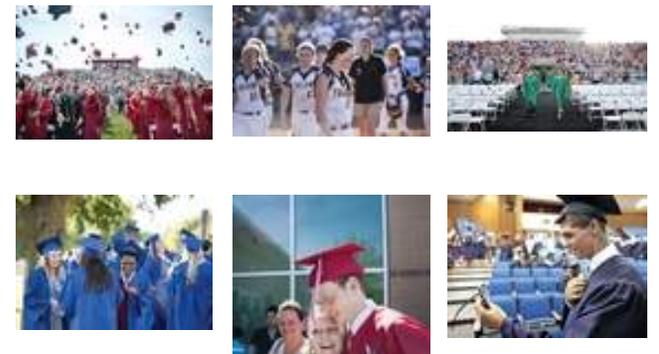
The numbers went back up in the 2016-17 school year, when 604 students, a 13 percent increase, left Delavan-Darien through open enrollment, according to numbers provided by Delavan-Darien School District.

Losing nearly \$3 million annually to open enrollment is a big financial hit for a district unable to raise property taxes because of

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revenue caps, Crist said.

“That’s a lot of money,” Crist said. “The legislators know what the issue is; it’s a matter of appropriating funds for districts like us to be treated fairly and catch up.”

## Elkhorn's gain

The majority of the students open enrolling out of the district are going to the Elkhorn Area School District, according to numbers provided by the Delavan-Darien School District.

For the 2016-17 school year, 225 students enrolled from Delavan-Darien into Elkhorn. Meanwhile, 129 students open enrolled into Williams Bay schools, according to district numbers.

Numbers provided by Elkhorn school officials show more than half of the students open enrolling into Elkhorn came from the Delavan-Darien School District. In the 2015-16 school year, Elkhorn saw 353 students open enroll into the district. For the 2016-17 school year, Elkhorn’s numbers increased to 405 students enrolling into the district from outside districts, and Delavan-Darien residents were making up more than half of that.

Sarah Meersman, Darien, moved her kids from Delavan-Darien to Elkhorn schools nine years ago.

“When our oldest son was in third grade at Darien Elementary, the biggest turning point was when he came home and said the teacher wouldn’t let him participate in a group activity because he already knew all the answers,” Meersman said.

“When I was looking at districts, I didn’t know I wanted to go to Elkhorn, I just knew the Delavan district was not going to serve my kid,” Meersman said.

She made the switch, and her eldest son just graduated as salutatorian from Elkhorn High School. They’ve been happy with the switch, she said.

Elkhorn District Administrator Jason Tadlock said he’s not sure what brings so many people from Delavan-Darien to Elkhorn but said Elkhorn provides rigorous academic programs and has a great staff.

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“It’s a very personal decision for every family, and there are different reasons as to why they open enroll,” Tadlock said.

According to calculations based on state aid numbers, Elkhorn received \$1.21 million in state aid money from Delavan-Darien students enrolling into Elkhorn schools.

### **'A long battle'**

Delavan-Darien officials hope the district’s dual language immersion program and a new technical education program will lure students from other districts, Crist said.

“We keep trying to improve everything we do, hoping that we attract people not only to stay here but people from other school districts that are not happy with their district to come here, too,” he said.

Earl Humphrey, Delavan, is the legal guardian of his grandson, a third-grader in the dual language program. Humphrey said the district is offering kids a chance he wishes he’d had.

“One of the things I wish I had done was learn a second language,” Humphrey said.

He said he remembers being at dinners with businessmen from South America or Europe and being intimidated by their ability to speak more than one language.

He said his grandson had a birthday party recently and was speaking Spanish with many of his friends.

Humphrey also likes the district’s change to the center school model, with Wileman Elementary housing preschool and kindergarten, Turtle Creek Elementary housing first through third grades, and Darien Elementary with fourth and fifth grades.

It allows the students to enter middle school on the same page instead of coming from three different schools, Humphrey said.

Humphrey helped research the center schools model, attended many of the school board meetings on the topic and spoke in favor of it.

Humphrey said he’s never had any issues with the district but

recognizes the district's financial difficulties.

"They're doing a great job with the resources and what they have to work with," Humphrey said.

Scherer, Delavan-Darien School Board president, sees other influences at work.

Scherer said that while some families are lured away by programs offered in other districts, some families leave for another reason: racism.

"That's the elephant in the room that nobody ever talks about," he said.

"Our district is 50 percent Hispanic. There's just some people that are racist—they don't want to send their kids to school that's half Hispanic. It's that simple," Scherer said.

Hispanics have been living in the Delavan area since after World War II, Scherer said.

The 2017 valedictorian is Hispanic and so are half of the scholarship recipients, he said.

"They're part of our town, and it makes us a better town, I think," Scherer said. "They're just like everybody else."

Scherer said he thinks the town is turning the corner and becoming more accepting of Hispanic immigrants.

"There's going to be some divide, no question, but I think we've made some progress," Scherer said.

Brown and Meersman said the Delavan-Darien district's Hispanic population didn't have anything to do with their decisions to leave.

"We moved from Milwaukee, and, quite honestly, there's not enough diversity in this area for me," Meersman said.

Brown said she thinks the Delavan-Darien district is too far gone to recover. With all of the kids who have left, she said, the district has started to cater to low-achieving students, and she believes reversing the trend may be difficult.

Fewer students leaving through open enrollment would not

necessarily fix Delavan-Darien's financial difficulties, Scherer said.

"If we had all of those kids immediately come back to our district, we might have to add more teachers because we don't want our class size to be too high. So it's not really a net gain, but it would help a lot," Scherer said.

Scherer said he's hopeful the new state budget will include more state aid per student, and he wants to see Delavan-Darien offer courses others don't. He'd like to see the district start a Mandarin Chinese dual language program before his term on the board ends, he said.

"It doesn't happen quickly," he said. "You have to have a long-term vision and be patient."

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