



WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

TESTIMONY ON ASSEMBLY BILL 383: CHANGES TO PARENTAL CHOICE PROGRAMS

Presented to the Assembly Committee on Education

By Kim Wadas, Executive Director

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On behalf of the Wisconsin Catholic Conference (WCC), I thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of Assembly Bill 383 and to highlight one area of concern regarding its implementation.

The WCC, along with many of our private school partners, has consistently supported efforts to improve accountability and transparency within the parental choice programs. Catholic educators recognize that students, families, and communities need access to information on school and student performance. Catholic schools have willingly complied with measures to promote greater program accountability – from ensuring school fiscal viability and sound financial reporting to enhanced accreditation and educator credentialing; and from improved auditing of program compliance to heightened enforcement and penalty provisions for errant schools and officials. As Catholics, we fully support efforts to promote good stewardship of our public resources.

First, we wish to express our gratitude for many of the provisions of Assembly Bill 383. Eliminating arcane requirements, such as one of four old participation standards, and duplicate reporting standards, such as securing a satisfactory independent audit and separately demonstrating fiscal viability, allow school leaders and staff to better dedicate time and resources to serving students. Several changes, such as allowing evaluations by a nonresident school district of a special needs child who attends a private school within the district under the Special Needs Scholarship program, are common sense reforms that acknowledge the practical ways in which the needs of students and families are best met.

Under AB 383, students who have relocated and are no longer eligible to participate in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program can continue their education in a similar educational environment through enrollment in the Wisconsin Parental Choice Program. Students who were placed on a wait list to access a Choice program participating school can retain hope of entering the program the following year. The bill also ensures that schools which require real-life work experience as part of the curriculum are not precluded from participating in the program due to the instruction hour requirement.

Most importantly, AB 383 recognizes that a one-size-fits-all approach is not always wise or useful. If our goal is to allow families, especially low-income families, to have an array of quality educational opportunities, then the programs must attract quality schools, including small schools or schools that can only accommodate a limited number of Choice program students. By

altering certain assessment requirements for schools and establishing a streamlined audit process for schools accepting \$100,000 or less in state funds, AB 383 truly acknowledges the diversity of our schools, while at the same time retaining necessary accountability.

We do have one concern regarding AB 383. Beginning in the 2018-19 school year, each Choice participating school must conduct criminal background investigations of its employees and exclude from employment any person who would not be permitted to hold a teaching license as the result of a felony offense. Currently, our Catholic schools already submit all employees to a criminal background check and, therefore, we have no objection to this requirement. All of our schools also employ licensed teachers.

However, under this requirement any private school employee, regardless of part-time, full-time or seasonal status, would be barred from employment if he or she could not obtain a teacher's license. Licensure is prohibited if a person has been convicted of an offense specified in Wisconsin Statutes s. 118.19(4) within the past 6 years. This encompasses any Class A through H felony convictions, regardless of whether those crimes were related to children or violent acts. Currently, we do not hire individuals who pose a threat to the safety of students or others. However, a Class H felony can include offenses such as theft of a domestic animal or operating a vehicle without owner's consent.

From a social justice perspective, the WCC does not generally support provisions that institute a general bar against the employment of former offenders. We have provided testimony to this effect on other legislation regarding the employment of felons.

It does not appear that a similar provision in law applies to all public school employees. The felony hiring restriction only applies to teacher licensure in the public school context. We ask that in implementing this legislation there be uniformity in hiring prohibitions for both public and Choice participating schools. The WCC has already discussed this with the Department of Public Instruction and we have expressed our willingness to develop uniform standards.

Again, Catholic educators are not opposed to accountability. That is why the WCC continues to support this legislation and welcomes a consistent and transparent system that maintains accountability without altering the unique character and climate of our Catholic schools and social teaching. Thank you.