



WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

TO: Members of the Joint Committee on Finance
FROM: Jolita Huebscher
DATE: May 15, 2007
RE: Transportation for Independent and Religious School Students.

Several proposals have been recently circulated in the Legislature that would severely limit the ability of independent and religious students to be transported to and from school safely. The Wisconsin Catholic Conference opposes these measures and urges you to do the same.

ALL STUDENTS HAVE A RIGHT TO GET TO SCHOOL SAFELY

- Religious and independent school students are entitled to school transportation as a matter of safety and welfare under the Wisconsin Constitution. Wis. Const., Article I, § 23.
- Wisconsin law mandates that school districts provide transportation to and from school for any pupil in the district who attends a private school. Wis. Stat. s.121.54(2)(b)1 (2005-06).
- No evidence has been presented that demonstrates the costs of transporting independent and religious school students are persistently and significantly greater than the costs of transporting other students in a district.
- If a school district cannot demonstrate it suffers a financial hardship under the terms of Wis. Stat. s.121.55(3), it must continue to provide transportation for students.

WISCONSIN SHOULD MAINTAIN ITS COMMITMENT TO SAFE SCHOOL TRANSPORTATION

Oppose measures that reduce school district transportation requirements for all students.

- These proposals alter an established area of policy concern and should be introduced as independent legislation, separate from the budget process.
- Students nationwide are nearly eight times safer riding in a school bus than with their own parents and guardians in cars. Report to Congress on *School Bus Safety: Crashworthiness Research*, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, (April 2002).
- Student safety is endangered when the State offers incentives to school districts to replace safe transportation with other alternatives.
- Reducing the school transportation allotments affects families who use mass transit services to transport their children to a religious or independent school. When students ride the same city bus to school, they incur individual costs. Changing the reimbursement policy would directly affect a family's ability to meet the costs associated with this type of transportation.

- Families who send their children to religious and independent schools support their communities in a variety of ways and should not be limited in their choice of school due to concerns over safe transportation.
- The entire community benefits from the safe transport of all students. Less congestion, productive workers who do not have to leave their place of employment to pick children up from school, greater safety for students, and greater diversity of education are all excellent reasons to continue to require adequate school transportation for all students.

Last year, when he urged you to support the proposal raising the cap on the Milwaukee choice program and increasing funding for the SAGE program, Archbishop Dolan affirmed that support for parental choice and support for public education are not mutually exclusive positions. He stated also that the bishops' support for the voucher program is matched by a desire to affirm and improve public schools.

This attitude of partnership serves all children better than proposals that retreat from our state's commitment to safe transportation for all schoolchildren.

Thank you for considering these views.

Please contact John Huebscher, Executive Director, or Kim Wadas, Associate Director for Education, at 608-257-0004 for more information.