



PARENTAL CHOICE IN EDUCATION

INTRODUCTION

Catholic tradition has long recognized the important role of parents as the primary educators of their children. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* expressly states:

“As those first responsible for the education of their children, parents have the right to *choose a school for them* which corresponds to their own convictions. This right is fundamental. As far as possible parents have the duty of choosing schools that will best help them in their task as Christian educators. Public authorities have the duty of guaranteeing this parental right and of ensuring the concrete conditions for its exercise.” (#2229, italics in original)

The bishops of Wisconsin maintain that public policies should affirm the vital role parents play in their children’s education by giving them meaningful choices in where and how their children are educated. Catholic social teaching on the preferential option for the poor also requires that families of modest means not be denied this choice because of their economic status. Educational opportunities should be a reality for all children, not just for those whose families can afford to pay for them.

MILWAUKEE PARENTAL CHOICE PROGRAM

The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP) has been in place for over twenty years. Currently, it enrolls over 20,000 students from Milwaukee families whose income is at or below 220 percent of the federal poverty level (approximately \$49,000 for a family of four). Thirty Catholic schools within the Archdiocese of Milwaukee are responsible for educating approximately 10,200 MPCP students.

The 2011-13 biennial budget bill includes several measures affecting the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP). The following outlines those measures and the WCC’s positions.

Enrollment Cap. The budget proposes elimination of the overall limit on MPCP enrollment. Current law caps enrollment in the MPCP at 22,500 pupils. The WCC supports lifting the cap to permit all eligible children to participate in the program.

Milwaukee County. Currently, the MPCP does not allow students from low-income families in the City of Milwaukee to attend private schools outside the city. This is especially problematic for high school students because there are a limited number of MPCP high schools that exist within the City of Milwaukee. The budget expands MPCP participation to schools within Milwaukee County, but MPCP students are still required to reside in the City of Milwaukee. The WCC supports this provision.

Testing Requirements. The 2009-11 biennial budget bill altered testing requirements for MPCP participating schools, requiring schools to administer the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examination (WKCE) rather than the nationally-normed standardized tests schools had been using. As the WKCEs are not tied to the school’s curriculum and do not provide prompt results for school administration, it is difficult to track and improve student performance. Also, the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) will only cover the cost of testing MPCP pupils, leaving schools with the difficult

choice of either identifying MPCP pupils by pulling them from class for WKCE testing, or testing all students and incurring the full cost of testing for the non-MPCP pupils.

The budget proposal restores the national-normed standardized testing requirement and eliminates the WKCE mandate. The WCC supports this method of tracking MPCP student progress and achievement.

Tuition Rules for Students New to the MPCP. Under current law, MPCP students receive a \$6,442 voucher paid to the MPCP school of their choice. MPCP schools are not allowed to charge MPCP pupils above the voucher amount. The budget allows MPCP schools to charge tuition above the voucher amount for MPCP eligible families that earn above 325 percent of the federal poverty level (FPL) (over \$72,000 annually for a family of four). The WCC supports measures that allow schools to offset pupil costs by charging tuition to those families who have the ability to meet additional costs.

Program Administration. The budget also includes several provisions related to the administration of the MPCP program, which affect how and when DPI notifies MPCP participating schools and families of any proposed changes to rules governing the MPCP. The WCC supports efforts to garner improved communication between DPI and the MPCP community.

Income Eligibility. Under current law, a student is eligible to participate in the MPCP if his/her family has a total family income that does not exceed 175 percent of the FPL. A student is allowed to remain in the MPCP if his/her family income does not exceed 220 percent of FPL. The budget removes the income eligibility and participation requirements for those students who did not attend a MPCP participating school in the 2010-11 school year. The WCC continues to assess this proposal, specifically the effect it may have on current MPCP families and low-income participants.

OTHER CHOICE PROPOSALS

In addition to the budget bill, there are several other proposals being discussed regarding parental choice in education, including: 1) a non-refundable state tax credit for families who send their children to non-public schools; 2) possible expansion of the MPCP to other regions in Wisconsin; and 3) a special needs scholarship program, which would provide funding to special needs families to allow students to attend the school of their choice. The WCC supports measures that remove fiscal barriers that may prevent parents from selecting the school that best meets their child's educational needs.

ACTION REQUESTED

As the Governor and Legislature consider the future of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program and parental choice generally, urge legislators to:

- Support elimination of the 22,500 pupil cap on MPCP enrollment.
- Support expansion of MPCP participation to private schools in Milwaukee County.
- Support restoration of nationally-normed testing standards.
- Support allowing schools to charge additional costs to certain families of means.
- Support proposals requiring improved communication between DPI and the MPCP community.
- Support measures that remove fiscal barriers to school choice.

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