



## PARENTAL CHOICE IN EDUCATION

### INTRODUCTION

Governor Walker's state budget includes a proposal designed to provide more families greater choice in education. The Wisconsin Catholic Conference (WCC) supports the expansion of the statewide parental choice program.

### CHURCH TEACHING

Catholic teaching has long recognized the essential 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)

Parents must have the community's support in selecting a form of education that best meets their child's needs – academic, psychological, emotional, spiritual, and physical.

Catholic social teaching on the preferential option for the poor requires that educational choices by families of modest means be supported, not limited, due to their economic status. Educational opportunities should be a reality for all children, not just for those whose families can afford them.

In a pluralistic society, the state recognizes the work of both public and private actors. In the same way that Catholic hospitals, charitable agencies, and universities, along with their public counterparts, receive public funds to assist the poor and vulnerable, so too do these choice in education initiatives recognize the vital service Catholic schools provide in our communities.

### PARENTAL CHOICE EXPANSION AND REFORMS

In 2013, the Wisconsin Parental Choice Program (WPCP) was created to allow the parents or guardians of students who earn up to 185% of federal poverty level (FPL) annually (\$21,935 for an individual, \$44,828 for a family of four) to receive a voucher to attend a private school at no charge. The program was limited to 500 students in the 2013-14 academic year and 1,000 students in 2014-15. The number of students receiving voucher payments could not exceed more than one percent of the total student population for the public school district in which a student resides. Currently, the per pupil voucher payment amount is \$7,210 for a student in kindergarten through eighth grade and \$7,856 for a high school student.

The WPCP is similar to the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP), which was started in 1990 and allows the parents or guardians of students who earn up to 300% of the FPL annually (\$35,571 for an individual, \$72,696 for a family of four) within the City of Milwaukee to receive a voucher to attend a private elementary school at no charge, or a high school for either no charge or limited tuition. A program nearly identical to the MPCP benefitting students in the Racine Unified School District was started in 2011.

**Funding and Program Eligibility.** The Governor's budget would remove the cap on the number of students who could participate in the WPCP, but also alter the funding mechanism for any student new to the statewide or Racine programs. The new funding mechanism would likely result in a several thousand dollar reduction in the per student voucher payment for those new to the program in the 2015-16 academic year.

Under the new mechanism, the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) would withhold from the public school district's aid payment the amount that would be attributable to the choice student had he or she attended public school. The DPI would then pool the state aid withheld and equally distribute it back to families as a voucher for the family's use at a participating private school. The exact amount of the voucher payment would not be known until information could be collected on each new statewide choice participant and the aid amount attributable to that student within his or her public school district of residence. This aid amount varies greatly from district to district.

Furthermore, the budget would institute new rules for WPCP initial eligibility, limiting entry into the program to those who were either enrolled in public school in the prior year; not enrolled in school the prior year; attended a private school through the WPCP or RPCP in the prior year; or are entering kindergarten, first grade, or ninth grade. These restrictions already apply to the RPCP.

**School Accountability.** The budget would also change the state's school accountability report card by requiring the use of letter grades to rate schools, as well as weighting school performance to account for student poverty rates, disabilities, and the length of time a school has had to influence a student's academic progress. Under current law, choice schools are required to be assessed under the accountability system starting in the 2016-17 academic year. Under the budget, accountability reports would be published for choice schools beginning in the 2015-16 school year.

Choice pupils are also required to take the state-approved assessment. However, the budget would allow choice schools to select an alternative to state-approved student assessments if the alternate assessment has been certified by the Value-Added Research Center at the University of Wisconsin.

## **WCC POSITION**

Choice in education is a tool through which parents may ensure the proper formation of their children. The WCC supports the expansion of educational choice as a much needed step in the right direction, especially for families hindered by limited means and limited options.

## **ACTION REQUESTED**

Please contact your legislators and urge them to:

1. Support the expansion of the statewide parental choice program.
2. Provide funding in such a manner that the per student voucher payment amount is known before families and schools must commit to program participation.
3. Support accountability measures that account for the unique character of Catholic schools.

*For more information, please contact Kim Wadas at 608/257-0004.*

To contact your State Senator or Representative, visit the Wisconsin State Legislature website at <http://legis.wisconsin.gov> and click on "Find My Legislators," or call the State Legislative Hotline, 1-800-362-9472.