



WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

TESTIMONY ON SENATE BILL 1: SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY

Presented to the Senate Committee on Education Reform and Government Operations
By Kim Wadas, Associate Director
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On behalf of the Wisconsin Catholic Conference (WCC), I thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony for information on Senate Bill 1 and the effect of its implementation on our Catholic schools and systems participating in parental choice programs.

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 certain provisions of Senate Bill 1, especially when compared to bills forwarded in this and past legislative sessions. Requirements, such as limiting the application of Senate Bill 1's provisions to private schools serving at least 20 parental choice program students, helps to ensure that the system is truly about accountability and not penalty.

However, there are other concerns regarding current assessment requirements that this bill fails to address. For example, within the Wisconsin Parental Choice Program, a school may select how it is recognized under the program. For example, a system of schools, such as Assumption Catholic Schools or St. Francis Xavier Catholic School System, Inc., may apply to participate in the program as one entity. This means that even though the St. Francis Xavier system serves almost 1600 students, its school accountability report will be based on its 94 voucher students, 89 of which are full-time. The result is a published accountability rating based on less than 6 percent of the "school's" population.

Many counter that one way to alter this result would be to allow a private system to voluntarily submit data for all its students to the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) for accountability analysis. The DPI could then produce an accountability rating for the entire school, if it so chooses. However, many Catholic schools currently do not utilize the approved state assessments used in this accountability determination and instead use the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS), a nationally normed assessment that has been used for decades to accurately assess the proficiency of students across numerous subject areas.

According to our records, this year's administration of the ITBS costs on average less than \$12 per student for all materials, including extensive ITBS scoring and the provision and scoring of the CogAT (Cognitive Abilities Test) for grades four, six, and eight. The only deviation from this cost occurs in second grade where the ITBS and CogAT combined is a little under \$15. Assessments can be administered electronically or via traditional pen and paper and schools receive test results within 10 days.

As you know, beginning in the spring of 2014-15, Wisconsin requires the administration of the Badger Exam in public schools for English language arts and mathematics through grade eight. Public high schools are required to administer the ACT Suite of assessments, with two examinations for grade nine, one for grade ten, and two for grade eleven. Additionally, students continue to take the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examination (WKCE) for science and social studies in grades four, eight, and ten. These requirements apply to choice students in grades three through twelve as well.

Private schools participating in the parental choice programs recently learned that they may purchase the Badger Exam at a rate of \$46.44 per student. If a school opts to test all their students and not just choice students, in grades four, eight, and ten, they may purchase the WKCE for non-choice students for \$42.48. Therefore, testing a fourth grade non-choice student would cost the private school a combined \$88.92 per student. This is a significant increase from the cost of administering the ITBS, but costs schools will have to consider if they want to avoid the identification of their choice students by classmates and staff, or consider voluntary full school participation in the school accountability system, if available.

For choice schools that have a limited number of non-choice students, the purchase of the more expensive tests in order to have comprehensive, across-the-board results would be a hardship, and in doing so, schools would lose the easy ability to compare multiple years of prior student data obtained through ITBS assessments. However, for schools that have a significant number of non-choice students, the option of testing all students with the state approved assessment is cost prohibitive. Nor would this be wise given that these schools have never used the Badger Exam before, nor know in what form or fashion data will be shared with private schools, or in how timely a fashion that information will be provided.

Assembly Bill 1, a bill with a similar objective, provides a means through which the DPI, working in concert with the Value-Added Research Center (VARC) at University of Wisconsin-Madison, can statistically equate the scores of a nationally recognized, norm-referenced test to measure achievement and the growth of pupils attending a private school with those collected for other populations, including public schools. To avoid identifying choice students, we request that the Committee consider amending SB 1 and permit choice schools to use this same process in lieu of the requirement that choice students utilize the Badger Exam and WKCE assessments.

Again, Catholic educators are not opposed to accountability. That is why the WCC does not oppose this legislation as currently drafted. However, data collection in choice schools should be limited to that which is necessary and permits a private school to follow its mission. By recognizing the distinctive ways in which private schools operate, we can ensure student privacy protection, obtain significant measures of performance, and produce useful results. This will ensure a consistent and transparent system that maintains accountability without altering the unique character and climate of our Catholic schools.