

WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

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WCC SUPPORTS IMPROVEMENTS TO PARENTAL CHOICE PROGRAM

The Wisconsin Catholic Conference (WCC) has endorsed two proposals recently brought forward before the Assembly Committee on Education. Both bills, Assembly Bills 92 and 94, would significantly improve the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP), the state's only – and the nation's oldest – school choice voucher program.

Assembly Bill 92, introduced by Representative Mark Honadel (R-South Milwaukee), would eliminate the MPCP enrollment limit and allow religious and independent schools in Milwaukee County to participate in the program.

Currently, any student who resides within the City of Milwaukee whose household income is at or below 175 percent of the federal poverty level (about \$39,000 for a family of four) is eligible to participate in the program. However, overall MPCP participation is limited to 22,500 students. With current program enrollment exceeding 20,000 students, MPCP families and schools are concerned about continued access to the program. AB 92 would ease those fears.

The bill also expands the number of schools that may participate in the program. Currently, only schools within the City of Milwaukee are eligible to participate in the MPCP. While student enrollment would still be limited to City of Milwaukee residents, AB 92 would allow private schools within Milwaukee County to accept MPCP students and receive voucher payments from those families.

In testimony provided to the committee, Kim Wadas, Associate Director of Education and Health Care at the Wisconsin Catholic Conference, reiterated how the MPCP is an important and empowering program for families.

Citing the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Wadas noted “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.” The quote continues, “Public authorities have the duty of guaranteeing this parental right and of ensuring the concrete conditions for its exercise.”

The MPCP also furthers a central principle of Catholic teaching by providing a preferential option for the poor and vulnerable. Wadas observed that this principle “is advanced when those of limited means are empowered with the ability to exercise their rights in the same manner available to other citizens who enjoy more material resources.” She asserted that the MPCP “gives parents the ability to exercise their basic rights and guide their children's education without discrimination.”

“Hundreds of students living in the City of Milwaukee remain unable to avail themselves of the opportunities the MPCP provides,” noted Wadas, continuing that this problem exists, “because either there are no open MPCP seats at the schools they would like to attend – a particular problem for

MPCP students entering secondary education – or the only non-public school that could realistically serve a student is located outside the city limits and currently barred from MPCP participation.”

The committee also received testimony on Assembly Bill 94, sponsored by committee member Representative Howard Marklein (R-Spring Green). By streamlining certain administrative processes, like allowing an MPCP eligible family to complete one application per family instead of per child, AB 94 would facilitate consistent and efficient administration within MPCP schools. The bill would institute a number of changes, including allowing schools to receive one payment for all MPCP pupils attending a school (as opposed to the current practice of issuing separate checks from the state for each participating child), to altering auditing standards to align with American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (as opposed to the current standards established by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction).

In testimony supporting the bill, again provided by Wadas, the WCC noted that AB 94 would “eliminate certain redundancies in MPCP administration, allowing schools to focus more resources on student performance and achievement.”

The next step for both bills is review by the committee in executive session. The WCC will monitor the progression of the bills and continue to urge legislators to support both measures.

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