

## WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

### EYE ON THE CAPITOL

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#### EXPANDING CHOICE PROGRAMS FOSTERS PARTNERSHIP IN EDUCATION

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As the Wisconsin Legislature's Joint Finance Committee reviews the state's budget proposal, one provision that continues to receive attention is the expansion of parental choice programs.

Wisconsin's parental choice programs allow families of limited means to receive vouchers that can be used towards the cost of education in a private school. First started in 1990, the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP) is open to parents or guardians of students earning up to 300 percent of federal poverty level (\$70,947 for a family of four annually) who reside in the City of Milwaukee. If eligible, the family receives a voucher that allows their child to attend a participating private elementary school at no charge, or a private high school for either no charge or limited tuition. A similar program for students in the Racine Unified School District was started in 2011.

The budget proposal would expand parental choice programs to school districts with at least two underperforming schools and 4,000 students. Currently nine school districts would be affected: Green Bay, Sheboygan, Fond du Lac, Waukesha, Beloit, Kenosha, Madison, Superior, and West Allis-West Milwaukee. At least 20 students in each district must indicate they want to participate in the voucher program and expansion would be capped at 500 students statewide for the 2013-14 academic year, and 1,000 students for the following year.

The bishops of Wisconsin support this expansion because Catholic teaching affirms parental choice. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* speaks to the fundamental right of parents, as the primary educators of their children, to “*choose a school for them* which corresponds to their own convictions.” (CCC #2229, italics in original) Additionally, “Public authorities have the duty of guaranteeing this parental right and of ensuring the concrete conditions for its exercise.” Wisconsin parental choice programs also promote a preferential option for the poor, another key principle of Catholic teaching.

There are other good reasons – regardless of faith perspective – to support the expansion of voucher programs. Our government should ensure that parents have access to schools whose mission, values, and culture align with that of their family. For most families, a local public school meets all these needs. However, some families find that a private school offers the best

environment for their child's development. Vouchers make this choice a reality for many low-income families.

Vouchers also foster diversity in our education system. Families whose culture and heritage observe the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe or celebrate milestones, such as a Quinceañera, may wish to send a daughter to a school where these events are a part of the school experience. Families may find value in schools that offer courses in servant leadership or philosophy. Some private schools observe religious holy days or allow parents and siblings to attend special cultural or religious celebrations with students in the school. This allows families to recognize treasured practices and customs without concern for a student missing class.

Public and private schools are community partners. Backing the choice of private school education is no different than supporting families and individuals who receive services from other private entities that help build and sustain vibrant communities. A person may choose a health care provider based on their faith, whether Jewish, secular, Catholic, or Methodist, but the state continues to provide that individual and facility access to funding through programs such as Medicaid or Medicare. Just as partnerships among secular and non-secular health systems have fostered growth, not disintegration, in the health care industry, we believe school partnerships will benefit our education system as well.

Lastly, Wisconsin's private schools often go beyond providing students with an academic experience. They regularly offer service opportunities and family programs, such as day care, counseling, and food assistance. Our Catholic schools, much like our Catholic Charities agencies, St. Vincent de Paul Society food pantries, or Catholic community health clinics, are dedicated to serving their communities, especially those most in need of aid. Private schools work to enrich families and neighborhoods, along with their students.

Expanding access to vouchers is consistent with Wisconsin's progressive heritage. Such an expansion promotes a diversity of experience for our youth that will make our communities stronger and our future brighter.