



WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

May 18, 2007

MOTION TO LIMIT SCHOOL BUSSING FAILS BUDGET COMMITTEE

On Tuesday, May 15, 2007, the Joint Committee on Finance defeated a motion limiting transportation funds for nonpublic school students.

Motion #257, proposed by Sen. Lena Taylor (D-Milwaukee), would require school districts to provide transportation payments to families with several children attending an independent or religious school as if the family had only one child attending the school – a significant change from current practice. With an 8-8 vote along party lines, the motion failed to garner the votes necessary to amend the state's proposed budget for 2007-09.

"The Wisconsin Catholic Conference is opposed to this measure," said John Huebscher, Executive Director. "It fails to ensure safe transportation for all our students and fosters an attitude of competition among our schools rather than a commitment to cooperation."

Although the measure did not pass as a budget item, it may still emerge as an issue this legislative session. Rep. Sheldon Wasserman (D-Milwaukee) has stated that he is considering introducing the measure as an Assembly bill.

Supporters of the bill argue school districts shouldn't have to fund transportation for each student when a group of them travel to the same place in the same vehicle. However, school districts also have groups of students traveling to the same place in the same vehicle, but receive their transportation aid from the state on a per pupil basis.

Critics worry about this legislation's affect on families who can't afford their own vehicle and use other means of transportation, like the city bus, to get their kids to school. "It doesn't matter if there are two or four people in the family car. The cost is relatively the same," admits Huebscher. "But when a family rides the same city bus to school, each person incurs a cost. If this family only gets funds for one student, they are stuck trying to pay multiple fares with fewer dollars."

Other Cuts in the Works

Several efforts have recently been made to limit the ability of independent and religious students to attend school safely. Assembly Bill 165, introduced by Rep. Donald Friske (R-Merrill), would eliminate transportation for nonpublic four-year-old kindergarten

pupils if a district's public schools fail to offer four-year-old kindergarten as well. The bill is currently under review in the Assembly Committee on Education Reform.

The Madison Metropolitan School District also recently announced, as part of its annual budget proposal, that it would no longer provide bussing for Madison Catholic school students in the coming school year. Catholic school families who currently utilize bussing in Madison will instead be provided with a transportation allotment, contracts that the Wasserman proposal would limit.

The Wisconsin Commitment to Safe School Transportation

"Many people don't realize that transportation for nonpublic students has been a decided issue in Wisconsin for over forty years," said Huebscher. "It's a legal right."

Huebscher points to Article I, Section 23 of Wisconsin's Constitution, which states that nonpublic school students are entitled to school transportation as a matter of safety and welfare. Wisconsin law also mandates that school districts provide transportation for any pupil in the district, including those who attend nonpublic school.

For parents and communities, the safety of students traveling to and from school is a priority for good reason. According to a 2002 National Highway Traffic Safety Administration report, students nationwide are nearly eight times safer riding in a school bus than with their own parents and guardians in cars.

Huebscher stated, "We're concerned these measures give school districts incentive to replace safe bussing with cheaper, more dangerous alternatives." He added, "These measures also fail to recognize the contributions that nonpublic schools and their students, staff, and parents make to the local education system. It leaves parents with fewer options and far fewer dollars to pay for those options."

Huebscher concluded, "Parents should choose a school because it meets their needs. They should not be forced to choose a school because they think it is the only one their children can safely attend."

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