



WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

TO: Senator Luther Olsen, Chair
Members, Senate Committee on Education

FROM: Kim Wadas, Associate Director

DATE: October 19, 2011

RE: Senate Bill 234, Changes to the Parental Choice Programs

The Wisconsin Catholic Conference urges your support for Senate Bill 234, which clarifies and improves upon several policies regarding the parental choice programs in Milwaukee and Racine.

Currently, over 30 Catholic schools within the Archdiocese of Milwaukee are responsible for educating over 10,000 Choice program students. After the implementation of recent program reforms, questions have been raised by Catholic school administrators and other Choice advocates as to the proper interpretation of revised statutes. Many have also voiced concern regarding policies surrounding program eligibility and ongoing accountability for disqualified Choice school staff and administrators. SB 234 responds to these concerns by establishing clear and consistent policies that ensure quality programming within Choice participating schools and the continued participation of eligible students and their families.

Recent statutory revisions regarding what a Choice school may receive as payment beyond the voucher amount has dramatically altered how schools operate. Prior to the recent changes, Choice schools were permitted to charge certain fees to Choice students in a manner similar to that permitted for public schools when serving low-income students. However, under the newly revised Choice provisions, the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) announced that a Choice school serving Choice pupils in kindergarten through eighth grade, or Choice high school-aged students whose family incomes were below 220 percent of the federal poverty level, could not charge those students any optional fee or amount, including payments by a parent or guardian to a vendor or other third party. As a result, schools could not charge for items such as school or gym uniforms, extracurricular activities, transportation (including that for extracurricular activities), yearbook pictures, graduation caps or gowns, or any remaining amount on a reduced-price lunch or snack.

This policy change, published in a DPI bulletin dated August 2011, blindsided schools that had already completed their academic year budgets, had solicited fees from families for school-related services and items, and most important, had committed to contracts with vendors and third parties serving students within their schools. It resulted in greater restrictions being placed on the collection of fees in Choice schools than those currently placed upon public schools.

Administrators and staff of our Catholic Choice schools immediately alerted Archdiocesan administration to the host of problems and uncertainty this policy shift created. School administrators were at a loss as to how to fulfill contracts for items such as school and gym

uniforms. Some had questions as to whether you could charge a Choice student for replacing an item, or if you had to provide Choice students with multiples of items worn daily.

High schools had questions regarding the provision of lunch for low-income students when served “a la carte.” What amount of food was considered sufficient? Did schools have to pay for a student’s entire lunch, no matter how big? Several considered eliminating their school lunch programs rather than incur the unforeseen added expense of subsidizing all Choice student lunches, including those not eligible for free or reduced lunch.

Schools that traditionally aided families that could not afford fees for extracurricular activities, instead opted not to provide the activities, such as violin lessons or band. They could not afford the costs of the programs when required to pay them for all Choice students.

Often, the voucher payment amount does not cover the costs of the educational needs of Choice students, let alone any ancillary expenses. Yet Catholic and other Choice schools absorb these costs above the voucher amount because of their commitment to serving those who are of limited means. However, when these costs are compounded by fees traditionally charged to families school-wide, they become challenges that many schools find difficult, if not impossible, to manage.

Senate Bill 234 corrects the current interpretation by restoring much of the former Choice student fees policy. By once again permitting schools to charge reasonable fees for non-educational related activities, SB 234 empowers schools to continue to offer a range of services to their families, both Choice and traditional.

Beyond revising the current fees policy, SB 234 also increases program accountability. It is important that actors within the Choice program who fail to meet basic accountability standards are not allowed to remain in the program, harming students and the good reputation of their fellow Choice participating schools. SB 234 codifies that “bad actors” within the Choice program cannot continue to participate by simply transferring to another school or by establishing a new one.

Senate Bill 234 also clarifies the role of the Department of Revenue (DOR) in determining income eligibility for Choice program applicants; recognizes the different units of government that may provide a certificate of occupancy for Choice schools; and further defines who and what income is to be included as “family income.” It also clarifies that once a student is found eligible to participate in the Choice program, even if a seat for that student is not available at a Choice school, that student does not have to go through the onerous process of again verifying their family income in succeeding years.

Finally, the WCC appreciates that SB 234 includes a provision that anticipates changes in the Choice program, including changes that may occur to the entities that evaluate Choice schools, by permitting both a diocese and an archdiocese to act as a pre-accrediting and accrediting authority for Choice participating schools.

Senate Bill 234 recognizes some of the unforeseen and unnecessary administrative burdens that Choice families and schools bear and alleviates them without diminishing accountability. It provides clarity and certainty for Choice families and schools.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony. The WCC urges your support for SB 234.