



WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

TESTIMONY IN OPPOSITION TO SENATE BILL 595: TRANSPORTATION SERVICES FOR PRIVATE SCHOOL PUPILS

Presented by Kim Wadas, Associate Director

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My name is Kim Wadas and I am the Associate Director for Education and Health Care at the Wisconsin Catholic Conference. On behalf of Wisconsin's Catholic bishops, I strongly urge you to oppose Senate Bill 595.

This proposal would jeopardize safe transportation for school children across the state and unduly target Catholic school families and others who attend religious and independent schools.

Under Senate Bill 595, school districts are only required to provide transportation services to nonpublic school pupils during the public school district's term. The bill also allows school districts to fund transportation contracts for families with several children attending a religious or independent school as if the family had only one child attending. Finally, SB 595 extends the deadline by which nonpublic school authorities must provide information regarding pupils in need of transportation services from May 15 to July 15.

School districts in Wisconsin are required to provide transportation services to all students, both public and nonpublic. However, the attendance area for private schools does not always mirror that of public school districts. Many Catholic schools work with multiple school districts to arrange transportation services for their pupils. Limiting transportation services to a public school district's term would compel these private schools to meet the start and end dates of several different district terms at once, severely limiting the ability of a private school to determine its own calendar. In addition to logistical concerns, Wisconsin courts have recognized that as a matter of equal protection school districts cannot force private schools to comply with a district's calendar as a condition for receiving transportation services.

Current law also permits a school district to offer a parent transportation contract in lieu of busing services if the cost of busing a nonpublic student is 1.5 times the district's average cost per pupil. Under SB 595, school districts would be allowed to withdraw busing services for families who have two or more children attending the same nonpublic school building and offer them a single transportation contract in its place. The family would receive a contract amount equal to the average cost of busing one child in the district, or \$5 a mile, whichever is greater.

Larger families with less flexible work schedules, those who live in small towns and rural areas far from school, low-income families that do not own a vehicle, or families that pay per child for transit services would face a special burden. Without transportation services provided by the district, such families must look for alternative transportation options, such as paying for mass transit services from third party providers. Bus passes and other transit services are often sold

based on a per person rate. A family stipend would not meet the cost of these per student charges. Families would have to find transportation for four children on a budget for one.

These families, who may have already lost transportation services in lieu of parent contract payments, would suffer the additional hardship of seeing that contact amount diminish per child simply because they have a large family. The increased transportation costs could force these families to remove their children from private schools.

School districts receive state aid for transportation costs based on the number of pupils within the district. By allowing them to offer contracts on a per family basis, the provision fosters the unequal treatment of individual students and provides an incentive to districts to deny families traditional transportation services. This raises not only issues of safety and fairness, but is also unsound on environmental grounds.

Most children who attend Catholic schools and other nonpublic schools live on the same bus routes as public school children. Using buses on these routes reduces fuel consumption. Consider the case of one school bus transporting the children of five Catholic school families on the same bus route as used for public school students. Under the contract approach, five separate cars will have to make two round trips a day to transport the same 10 children. With fuel prices heading back to \$3 a gallon and government leaders urging us to find ways to reduce the use of gasoline, this idea is as bad for the environment as it is for families.

Families who send their children to religious and independent schools support their communities in a variety of ways and should not be limited in their choice of schools due to concerns over safe transportation. Rather than retreat from our state's commitment to safe transportation for all schoolchildren, we should elevate the importance of safe transportation by providing schools with the resources necessary to ensure that all kids have access to a safe learning environment.

For all these reasons, I urge you not to advance Senate Bill 595.

Thank you.