



SUPPORTING THE MILWAUKEE PARENTAL CHOICE PROGRAM

INTRODUCTION

The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP) has been in place for over ten years. Currently, it enrolls almost 14,000 students from Milwaukee families whose income is at or below 175% of the federal poverty level (approximately \$30,000 for a family of four). Thirty-two Catholic elementary and middle schools and five Catholic high schools of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee are responsible for educating approximately 4,600 MPCP students. Choice students account for 50% of the total Catholic student population in the City of Milwaukee and the majority of these are children of color. Their participation has done much to diversify the student population within Milwaukee's Catholic educational system.

EDUCATION FROM A CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE

Catholic tradition has long recognized the important role of parents as the primary educators of their children. In their 2003 statement, *Faithful Citizenship: A Catholic Call to Political Responsibility*, the US Catholic Bishops explain that "parents—the first and most important educators—have a fundamental right to choose the education best suited to the needs of their children, including private and religious schools." The Bishops maintain that public policies should affirm the vital role parents play in their children's education by giving them meaningful choices in where and how their children are educated: "Government should help provide the resources required for parents to exercise this basic right without discrimination."

Catholic social teaching on the preferential option for the poor leads the Bishops to argue that "families of modest means especially should not be denied this choice because of their economic status." Educational opportunities should be a reality for all children, not just for those whose families can afford to pay for them.

SPECIFIC ISSUES

As the Governor and Legislature consider the future of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, several specific revisions are under discussion:

Enrollment Cap. The first is an increase in the "cap" on the overall limit on enrollment in the program. Current law caps enrollment in MPCP at no more than 15% of MPS enrollment, or just under 15,000 students. Based on enrollment trends, the 15% cap will likely be reached in 2005-06. An increase in the cap is needed to spare students, parents, and schools the complications involved in the rationing of seats that will otherwise ensue in the coming year and in future years, as enrollment continues to grow.

Income Eligibility. Under current law, a student is eligible to participate in the MPCP if his/her family has a total family income that does not exceed 175% of the federal poverty level (FPL). When that income rises to 176% or more, the student is forced to leave the MPCP. In this way, low-income families are faced either with a disincentive when trying to increase their income or with the obligation to move their children back to a public school that had previously not served them well. The WCC supports a proposal that would permit a family's income level once in the program to rise up to 225% of the FPL. Such a change would mean that families would not have to sacrifice pay raises in order to keep their children in the voucher program and that "once you're in, you're in."

Prior-Year Enrollment. The existing law provides that a student may participate in the MPCP only if, in the previous school year, s/he attended either a Milwaukee Public School, a MPCP private school, a non-MPCP Milwaukee private school for grades kindergarten to three, or was not enrolled in school. In effect, students wishing to attend a MPCP school must wait at least a year—a waste of precious time during which they may fall even further behind. The WCC supports eliminating the prior-year enrollment requirement so that all eligible students can participate immediately in the program.

Accountability Requirements. Among the many program changes under discussion, several would impose greater accountability measures on the Choice schools. Choice schools are already held accountable for fiscal matters and Catholic schools willingly test students to ensure that they are advancing. Additional reasonable accountability measures could also be considered. However, the WCC remains opposed to a proposal that would require Choice schools to be governed by Wisconsin’s “open meetings” law, since this requirement would raise serious questions of entanglement between church and state.

Milwaukee County. Currently, the MPCP does not allow students from low-income families in the City of Milwaukee to attend private schools outside the city. This is especially a problem for high school students because there are only 11 MPCP schools that serve this population—not enough to meet demand.

In particular, hundreds of low-income high school students living on the city’s south side remain outside the MPCP because a portion of the campus of the only religious or independent school that could realistically serve the logistical needs of these students lies a few feet outside the City of Milwaukee—Thomas More High School. Thomas More wants to participate in the program, and students from its six feeder schools (both Catholic and public) are interested in attending. Other private schools in the county have expressed an interest in enrolling MPCP students in grades 9-12, including Dominican High School in Whitefish Bay and Heritage Christian School in West Allis.

ACTION REQUESTED

Urge legislators to:

- raise or eliminate the 15% enrollment cap;
- raise the “staying in” income level to 225% FPL or higher;
- eliminate the prior-year enrollment requirement;
- prohibit the imposition of the “open meetings” law on Choice schools;
- permit eligible City of Milwaukee students to attend private schools in Milwaukee County.

For more information, please contact Barbara Sella at 608-257-0004.