



## PARENTAL CHOICE IN EDUCATION

### INTRODUCTION

Governor Walker's state budget includes two proposals designed to provide families with greater choice in education. The Wisconsin Catholic Conference (WCC) supports the expansion of parental choice programs and the creation of the Special Needs Scholarship Program, as well as other programs supporting choice in education.

### DISCUSSION

***Parental Choice Programs.*** First started in 1990, the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP) allows the parents or guardians of students who earn up to 300 percent of federal poverty level (FPL) annually (\$34,380 for an individual, \$70,947 for a family of four) and reside in the City of Milwaukee to receive a voucher to attend a private elementary school at no charge, or a high school for either no charge or limited tuition. A program nearly identical to the MPCP benefitting students in the Racine Unified School District was started in 2011.

The proposed state budget would expand parental choice programs, allowing such programs in school districts with at least two underperforming schools and at least 4,000 students. There are nine school districts that currently meet these two criteria: Green Bay, Sheboygan, Fond du Lac, Waukesha, Beloit, Kenosha, Madison, Superior, and West Allis-West Milwaukee. At least 20 students in the district must have indicated that they intend to participate in the parental choice 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 budget also includes certain reforms to the existing parental choice programs, including certain regulatory and accountability changes. Under the budget, the per student voucher payment amount would remain at \$6,442 in 2013-14, but in 2014-15, increase to \$7,050 for those in kindergarten through eighth grades and to \$7,856 for those in high school.

***Special Needs Scholarship Program.*** Under the proposed budget, a child with special needs may receive a state-funded scholarship to attend a school of his or her family's choosing, including a public school located outside the district of residence, a charter school, or a private school. The resident school district is permitted to count the pupil for purposes of equalization aid. Any participating school would be subject to certain accountability requirements.

***Other Choice Proposals.*** In addition to the budget bill, legislators have introduced several additional proposals supporting parental choice in education, including a non-refundable state tax credit for families who send their children to private schools and an individual income tax deduction for those who contribute to a Coverdell Education Savings Account (CESA). The WCC supports these measures. These tax proposals are helpful means to the desirable goal of supporting the educational choices of all families.

## CATHOLIC TEACHING

Catholic teaching has long recognized the essential role of parents as the primary educators of their children. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* expressly states:

“As those first responsible for the education of their children, parents have the right to *choose a school for them* which corresponds to their own convictions. This right is fundamental. As far as possible parents have the duty of choosing schools that will best help them in their task as Christian educators. Public authorities have the duty of guaranteeing this parental right and of ensuring the concrete conditions for its exercise.”  
(#2229, italics in original)

Parents must have the community’s support in selecting a form of education that best meets their child’s needs – academic, psychological, emotional, spiritual, and physical.

Catholic social teaching on the preferential option for the poor requires that families of modest means be supported, not limited, due to their economic status. Educational opportunities should be a reality for all children, not just for those whose families can afford to pay for them.

In a pluralistic society, the state recognizes the work of both public and private actors. In the same way that Catholic hospitals, charitable agencies, and universities, along with their public counterparts, receive public funds to assist the poor and vulnerable, so too do these choice in education initiatives recognize the vital service Catholic schools provide in our communities.

## WCC POSITION

Choice in education is a tool through which parents may ensure the proper formation of their children. Though this right extends to all families, the WCC supports these expansions of choice as a much needed step in the right direction, especially for families hindered by limited means and limited options.

## ACTION REQUESTED

**Please urge legislators to approve provisions fostering greater parental choice in education.**

- Public policies should affirm the vital role parents play in their children’s education by giving them the ability to choose where and how their children are educated.
- The proposed budget initiatives are a step towards putting all families, and the educational institutions that serve them, on an equal footing.
- Wisconsin’s choice in education proposals foster schools that are accredited, accountable, and supplied with the resources necessary to meet the needs of all students.

*For more information, please contact Kim Wadas at 608-257-0004.*

To find contact information for your State Representative or Senator, visit the Wisconsin State Legislature website at <http://legis.wisconsin.gov> and click on “Who Represents Me,” or call the State Legislative Hotline, 1-800-362-9472.