



WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

TESTIMONY ON ASSEMBLY BILL 84: SCHOOL LUNCH AND BREAKFAST PROGRAMS

Presented to the Committee on Education

By Larry Haas, Associate Director, Wisconsin Catholic Conference

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On behalf of the Wisconsin Catholic Conference (WCC), thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony for information only on Assembly Bill 84, which would impose new requirements on schools participating in the school breakfast and lunch programs. As the public policy voice for the bishops of Wisconsin, I speak on behalf of Wisconsin's Catholic schools.

The WCC, along with many of our private school partners, has consistently supported the school breakfast and lunch programs and supports the laudable goal of AB 84, which is to make certain that students, especially students of limited means, do not experience shame or discomfort simply because they may not have the means to access a daily necessity, adequate nutrition. One of the Catholic Church's primary principles focuses on providing support to the poor and vulnerable and facilitating the elimination of hunger. In that respect, AB 84 establishes a worthy requirement that schools participating in the free and reduced meal programs provide a quality lunch to a student who requests a meal, regardless of the student's ability to pay. It also prohibits school staff from publicly identifying or stigmatizing a pupil who is unable to pay for a quality meal or who has outstanding debt related to a quality meal. Finally, AB 84 also requires schools to help families access free or reduced meal program if it appears the family may be eligible.

These provisions are very admirable. However, we are concerned about the possible interpretation of the bill's language designed to avoid student discomfort due to collection practices for an outstanding debt and the bill's direction on how to collect a past-due account. We ask you to reconsider this language on funds collection.

Many of our private and Catholic schools who participate in the breakfast and lunch programs understand the need for flexibility when dealing with individual family circumstances. We are not advocating to refrain from serving any student breakfast or lunch in relation to the free or reduced-price meal programs. However, families who have the means available to pay for these meals are asked to do so, even if that is after the meal is provided. If these families fall behind for various reasons, many schools have reminder systems in place to ask for payment in a manner that respects the family and the student without incident. Sometimes schools utilize third-party vendors to manage these tasks. However, it is unclear from the bill's language as to whether these vendors may impose, on behalf of a school, a service or late fee on families who are not eligible for these meal programs and have a significantly past-due amounts. We request that this language be altered to allow schools to continue utilizing these third-party vendor systems, especially for families of means who are not eligible for the program.

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AB 84 also requires that when five or more quality meals have been provided to a student as required by its provisions, the school principal, assistant principal, or guidance counselor make at least 2 attempts to communicate with the pupil's parent or guardian regarding the debt to discuss payment options and to offer assistance to the family. However, five meals can be just a few days' worth of breakfast and lunches and there may be a very benign reason for the lack of payment that does not require two contacts from school leadership or the guidance counselor. This provision seems unnecessarily rigid. Oftentimes, resolution of this issue can occur with a simple email from the school secretary, especially with families of means or for a student whose parent or guardian might simply be out of town. The adult supervising the child in the interim may not be aware, for example, of the need to replenish meal funds. If the goal is to avoid embarrassment for the families, it would be wise to provide more deference to the schools in this regard, as they are the ones most capable to know and understand each family and student situation.

Private and Catholic school educators are not opposed to accountability. That is why the WCC does not oppose the majority of this legislation as currently drafted. However, fee collection prohibition should be limited to what is necessary to protect the student and their family. By recognizing the ways in which schools operate, we can respect student and family privacy protection, while at the same time allowing schools to use the tools and technology that allow for efficient administration. This will ensure a consistent and transparent system that maintains accountability without altering the unique character and climate of our private and Catholic schools.

We respectfully request your consideration to change AB 84's meal fee collection requirements to allow private and Catholic schools to retain the flexibility and user-friendliness of their current processes.

Thank you for your consideration.