

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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June 16, 2015

The Honorable Luther Olsen
Wisconsin State Senate
313 South, State Capitol
Madison, WI 53703

Re: Urgent: Please act now to stop harmful voucher expansion

Dear Senator Olsen:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding the Joint Finance Committee's alarming education budget. FFRF is a Wisconsin-based national association of 23,000 members including 1,300 state members. We write to draw your attention to the irreparable harm that the expansion of statewide vouchers would cause your district and the state.

We understand that you voted on May 20 to approve the Joint Finance Committee education budget that would remove the current 1,000 student cap on statewide vouchers in the Wisconsin Parental Choice program. If passed by the Legislature, vouchers would incrementally expand at a rate of 1% of a district's enrolled students each year until after 10 years when there would be no limit to the number of students attending private religious schools at public expense.

If enacted, voucher expansion would dramatically harm Wisconsin's public education system. The financial damage would increase each year as any funding for voucher students would come directly from state aid given to the school district of residence of the students. **The Legislative Fiscal Bureau estimates a loss of state aid to public schools, and corresponding payments to private schools, will amount to between \$600 million to \$800 million in the first ten years.**¹ The overwhelming beneficiaries will be sectarian religious schools.

If you go along with this publicly-funded parochial education system, we would like to point out what you can expect to happen.

You should expect your senate district's public schools to lose critical funding. For example, **more than 1,000 students in the Waupaca School District qualify for free or reduced price lunch², which means they would be eligible to attend voucher schools.** That number is staggering considering that it is 46% of the students attending district schools. **In the Adams-Friendship Area School District, more than 1,200 students would be eligible for vouchers,** which is 75% of enrollment. How can our public school system continue to operate if untold

¹ Source: May 26, 2015 Legislative Fiscal Bureau memo to Rep. Peter Barca

² Department of Public Instruction 2013 Report:

http://fns.dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/fns/xls/enrollpartoct2013_public.xls

numbers of students could leave for religious education, taking corresponding state funding with them? Wisconsin's treasured public school system would be destroyed.

School districts across the state may start to look like Milwaukee. After incrementally increasing enrollment caps and income limits, the Milwaukee voucher program went from a mere 300 students in 1990 to more than 26,000 full time students today.

You should expect millions of dollars to go to unaccountable schools that will close up shop abruptly when the state comes asking questions. The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, which is the longest running voucher experiment in the country, serves as a warning as to what happens when taxpayer money is given to private groups that are not answerable to taxpayers. In the last ten years, taxpayers have given \$139 million to voucher schools that were subsequently barred from the program for failing to meet requirements related to finances, accreditation, student safety and auditing, according to a Wisconsin State Journal analysis published last year.

You should expect your constituents to be cut out of school decision-making. There are no assurances that voucher educators are answerable to the citizens who ultimately write the checks. They are not governed by publicly elected school boards that answer to constituents. There is also no means for the public to review records, attend meetings, or otherwise gather information about school operations. Where public funds go, public accountability must follow.

If this budget bill is passed the way it is currently written, it is apparent that public school districts will lose already diminished resources and the quality of education will suffer. The loss of a student to a voucher school does not mean that school districts will see an equal reduction in costs. Public schools must retain essential staff, provide transportation service, maintain building facilities, and provide an education to students with disabilities. You can expect private unaccountable schools to reap millions while public schools face a crisis.

Please support Wisconsin's constitutionally created public education system, which has a 150-year history of educating Wisconsin citizens.

Sincerely,



Patrick C. Elliott
Staff Attorney