

Senate Committee on Education
February 13, 2014

Department of Public Instruction
Testimony on 2013 Senate Bill 584

I want to thank Chairman Olsen and members of the committee for the opportunity to testify before you today in support of Senate Bill 584 (SB 584). My name is Tricia Collins and I am Director of the School Management Services Team, which oversees the Milwaukee, Racine, and Wisconsin parental choice programs.

SB 584 makes changes to the accreditation and new private school requirements under the private school choice programs.

Accreditation and Preaccreditation Requirements:

First, the bill clarifies the preaccreditation and accreditation requirements under the programs and specifies the requirements related to maintaining accreditation as first required under Act 20.

The bill adds a new preaccrediting organization – the Wisconsin Association of Christian Schools. Currently, this organization is only authorized to fully accredit private schools participating in the choice program.

SB 584 also allows private schools up to three years to be fully accredited by another accrediting organization if the organization that accredited the school no longer is an accrediting entity under statute.

Requirements for New Private Schools:

Second, SB 584 creates a new timeline for private schools that apply to participate in the private school choice programs. These new dates will require those working to establish a new school to do the requisite additional planning that is needed.

Under the bill, a new private school is defined as a private school in operation in Wisconsin for less than 12 consecutive months or a private school that provides education to fewer than 40 students in 2 or fewer grades. It does not include a private school that will be operated or managed by a governing body of a private school already in the voucher program as long as the current school has not had its state voucher payments withheld or had an order issued barring the school in the prior 3 years.

The bill will require new private schools to complete a number of current law requirements earlier than schools continuing in the program and require the department to annually administer two separate timelines for schools registering to participate in the program.

Under the timeline proposed in this bill, a new private school that intends to participate in a private school choice program in the 2015-16 school year would be required to register by August 1st of this year instead of February 1, 2015. The new school would also be required to submit a budget and information about the governing body and certain school policies when it registers in August. In addition, the school must be preaccredited by December 15, 2014, rather than August 1, 2015.

The bill requires the department to notify all new schools by December 31 whether the schools have met these requirements. If a new school fails to meet the requirements, it may not participate in the choice program in that school year. The bill also creates a new requirement that new schools contract with a third-party payroll service by August 1 of the first year of participation.

Implementing and administering two separate timelines for schools will require a significant amount of work. Since the Milwaukee choice program's inception in 1990 and subsequent expansion to become a \$190 million program alone next year that will include over 27,000 students in over 100 private schools, the department has been given two state-funded positions and one program-revenue funded position to administer it.

As you know, we also administer the Racine parental choice program, where 2,000 students are expected to enroll in participating schools next year, and the recently added Wisconsin program, which will likely enroll 1,000 students. Each of these three choice programs have different statutory provisions that must be followed and continue to grow in terms of the number of schools, students, and their complexity every year.

Our department has received no additional positions to administer these two choice programs. We are supportive of this bill, but if we are expected to administer these new responsibilities this summer while continuing to administer all current law program requirements, we respectfully request that we be provided with two additional staff positions.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. At this time I would be happy to answer any questions you have.