WISCONSIN INSTITUTE FOR LAW & LIBERTY

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U.S. Senator Tammy Baldwin
U.S. Senator Ron Johnson
Congressman Bryan Steil
Congressman Mark Pocan
Congressman Derrick Van Orden
Congresswoman Gwen Moore
Congressman Scott Fitzgerald
Congressman Glenn Grothman
Congressman Tom Tiffany

Dear Wisconsin Congressional Delegation,

As Congress considers President Biden's FY 2025 budget proposal, we write to encourage you to support federal funding for the Charter Schools Program (CSP) and reject the President's proposed funding cuts to the CSP. This is an important federal program that provides critical funding for the growth of public charter schools, including in Wisconsin.

Across the Badger State, over 49,000 students attend public charter schools. Public charter schools are public schools that contract for authorization by either the local school district or a state-approved entity. They must provide free education, be nonreligious, cannot limit or reject students and must serve students with disabilities. Public charters are often described as schools with more freedom from some state laws and regulations in exchange for greater accountability for results. This freedom allows for greater flexibility in curriculum or learning design, enabling the creation of schools tailored to the specific needs of communities or students and fostering innovation in K-12 education. If a public charter school fails to comply with the requirements of its contract with the authorizer, the school will close.

Public charter schools have provided Wisconsin families with educational options since 1993. Over the last few decades, Wisconsin public charter schools have grown as places for educational innovation and a response to community demand. This growth has been supported by the Charter Schools Program grants, which helped create and grow public charter schools.

The Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty (WILL) is a nonprofit, policy and litigation center that provides timely and comprehensive research as well as legal services and litigation support in a variety of areas, including K-12 education.

As an elected official representing Wisconsin, we urge you to support public charter schools by supporting funding for the Charter Schools Program.

The Charter Schools Program

The Charter Schools Program (CSP) is a federally funded program that supports the creation and expansion of public charter schools across the country. These funds provide state entities with competitive grants for the creation of charter schools, direct grants for replication and expansion of high-quality schools, facility financing assistance and grants to developers of charter schools.

For Fiscal Year 2023, the CSP is currently funded at $440 million, the same allocation it has received since FY 2019. Yet in the proposed budget for FY 2025, President Biden is proposing nearly a 10% funding cut to the program, putting the funding at $400 million.[1] This proposed cut would impact the program's ability to support public charter schools across the country as well as in Wisconsin. This program's current funding allocation represents just 1% of the federal spending on K-12 education.[2]

Wisconsin Public Schools

As of 2023-2024, Wisconsin had 236 public charter schools authorized to serve over 49,000 students.[3] These public charter schools are authorized by both local school districts and other governmental entities, including the Universities of Wisconsin, local Native American tribal colleges, and the City of Milwaukee.

Historically, public charter schools have been primarily located within the Milwaukee metro area. Many of these public charter schools were created in response to parental demand for high-quality educational options for their children. Today, public charter schools are authorized by 99 school districts across the state (from Eau Claire Area, to Hayward Community to Appleton Area to Janesville Community school districts). Many district-authorized public charter schools are considered part of the public-school community, with families may not even be aware that the school is different from the local district schools. These schools provide high-quality educational options for families and are recognized and celebrated by their communities.

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[1] Biden proposes 3.9% FY 2025 increase for Education Department | K-12 Dive (k12dive.com)
[2] For FY 2023, federal funding for U.S. Department of Education was $82 billion. See Department of Education Fiscal Year 2025 President's Budget
[3] Currently Operating Charter Schools | Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

In addition to district-authorized schools, public charter schools are authorized by entities, as defined by state law. For example, the City of Milwaukee authorizes seven public charter schools, serving over 2,800 students and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee authorizes 14 schools serving over 5,600 students.[4]

The support for public charter schools continues because of the innovative qualities and high-quality education. Charter schools must provide equal access to students, meet state and federal requirements for students with disabilities and are additionally accountable to their authorizing entity. As such, many Wisconsin public charter schools are considered high performing, according to the Wisconsin state report card.

Furthermore, WILL research has found that public charter schools in Milwaukee had proficiency rates higher in both English Language Arts and math on average to their traditional public-school peers. For example, public charters authorized by a state entity had 3.7% higher in ELA and 4.6% higher in math on average than their traditional public-school peers at Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS). MPS authorized public charters saw 8.5% and 8.8% higher proficiency respectively in ELA and math respectively.[5] As the state continues to struggle with achievement gaps for low-income and minority students, public charter schools are an important avenue for providing high-quality options for at-risk students.

Wisconsin students and families benefit from the Charter School Program

In 2017-2018, Wisconsin received a $95 million grant from the Charter School Program grants for the purpose of planning, opening, or expanding charter schools across Wisconsin.[6] For the last five years, the state allocated millions of federal dollars to support the growth of charter schools. This funding has helped start and support several charter schools across the state.

For example, in 2020-2021, the state provided Solon Springs School District, a northwestern rural school district serving less than one thousand students, with an implementation grant to create Eagles' Wing Public Montessori elementary school.[7] Today, this public charter serves students grades K4 through sixth and is rated as "meeting expectations" under the state's report card for 2022-2023.[8]

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[4] https://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/parental-education-options/Charter-Schools/xls/2023-24_List_of_ICS.xlsx
[5] https://will-law.org/apples-to-apples-2023/
[6] https://dpi.wi.gov/parental-education-options/charter-schools/grants
[7] dpinr2021-34.pdf (wi.gov)
[8] Report Cards - 2022-23 (wi.gov)

This funding also benefited existing high-quality public charter schools like the United Community Center's Acosta middle school in Milwaukee. In 2018-2019, the public charter school received a grant for implementation.[9] Today, the public charter school serves over 180 students, primarily Hispanic and is rated as "exceeds expectations" on the state's report card for 2022-2023.[10]

Similar trends continued over the last five years across the state. The 2019-2020 grant recipients include an expansion grant for Sheboygan Area School District for the Etude Elementary School[11], a school that is "exceeding expectations" for its elementary students and showing growth in student reading and math proficiency.[12] In additional grant rounds, the Milwaukee Academy of Math and Science received an expansion grant[13] to support the school serving over 230 primarily African American students and rated as "exceeding expectations."[14]

The U.S. Department of Education issues funding in addition to the state entity grants.[15] The Wausau School District received such a direct grant to support the creation of the Red Granite Charter School, a Waldorf inspired charter school authorized by the local school district that will open in 2024 for pre-kindergarten through third grade.[16]

These few examples demonstrate the impact that the Charter Schools Program grant has had across Wisconsin. Public charter schools are found in rural and urban districts, serving a diverse population of students, and helping provide high-quality education for all families across the state.

Public charter schools are popular and serve students nationwide

While the Charter Schools Program's impact in Wisconsin has been well documented, this grant program provides critical support for public charter schools across the country. Demand for public charter schools rose significantly during the COVID pandemic. In fact, enrollment increased in public charter schools across the country by more than 240,000 students during the pandemic.[17] Parent and families support for public charter schools

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[9] Federal grants to support 26 new and expanding charter schools (wi.gov)
[10] Report Cards - 2022-23 (wi.gov)
[11] DPI awards $7 million to 11 new and expanding charter schools (wi.gov)
[12] Report Cards - 2022-23 (wi.gov)
[13] dpinr2021-34.pdf (wi.gov)
[14] Report Cards - 2022-23 (wi.gov)
[15] https://oese.ed.gov/offices/office-of-discretionary-grants-support-services/charter-school-programs/state-entities/
[16] Red Granite Charter School awarded $1.9 million grant - Wausau Pilot & Review (wausaupilotandreview.com)
[17] As the Pandemic Set In, Charter Schools Saw Their Highest Enrollment Growth Since 2015, 42-State Analysis Shows – The 74 (the74million.org) See also National Center for Education Statistics. (2023). Public

continues post-pandemic. A 2022 national survey conducted by The Harris Poll found that 81% of parents support expanding the number of slots in existing public charter schools in their area and 78% want more public charter school offerings in their area.[18]

Following the COVID pandemic, students and families have been encouraged to find a school that is the best fit for their child. This has prompted educational entrepreneurs across the country to develop new learning models. Public charter schools have been an important avenue for many of these schools to develop.

In a 2023 study by EdChoice and Hanover Research, they surveyed 59 educational entrepreneurs about the barriers to success. 73% of the respondents identified lack of funding and resources as a barrier.[19] Grants like the Charter Schools Program provides critical funding to help educational innovation occur across the country.

Public charter schools are also helping some of our most vulnerable and struggling students across the country. A 2021 meta-analysis of research on charter school effects and competitive influence by the National Bureau of Economic Research identified trends from three decades of research, including that charters located in urban areas boost student test scores, particularly for Black, Latino, and low-income students; that attending some urban charter schools increases college enrollment and voting; among other important findings.[20]

Given the important educational opportunities public charter schools are providing for students across the country, we request that you support educational opportunities by rejecting budget cuts to the Charter Schools Program and instead support increased funding for this critical program.

Sincerely,

Kyle Koenen
Policy Director
Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty

Cory Brewer
Education Counsel
Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty

Charter School Enrollment. Condition of Education. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. Retrieved [date], from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cgb.

[18] https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED625440

[19] https://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Surveying-Educational-Entrepreneurs-PRINT.pdf

[20] https://www.nber.org/papers/w28477