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February 16, 2022

Chairman Thiesfeldt and members of the Assembly Committee on Education,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today in favor of on Assembly Bill 970, a proposal by Representative Wittke and Senator Roth regarding the expansion of the parental choice programs and creation of education expense reimbursement program.

**1) Expands the parental choice programs by removing barriers for access.**

Assembly Bill 970 removes several barriers from the existing parental choice programs to make it easier for families to access the parental choice programs and for private schools to provide more high-quality options for students.

Under the current law, the Wisconsin Parental Choice Program (WPCP) has several barriers that make it harder for both families and schools to participate. For instance, many schools in Milwaukee and Racine participate in several programs. But students participating in the WPCP must have an income 220% of the federal poverty line while the Milwaukee and Racine programs have an income limit of 300%. This means that families may be denied access to the voucher based on their home address.

Furthermore, enrollment in the choice programs continues to grow. In 2021-22, the WPCP grew by 2,425 number of students. But the WPCP pupil participation limits impacts families in six districts.<sup>1</sup> For example, West Allis-West Milwaukee was rated as “meets few expectations” on the 2020-2021 report cards. Families located in this district are on a waiting list to participate in the choice program due to the pupil participation limits.

Despite these limitations, the WPCP continues to provide families with access to educational options. For example, the Green Bay Area Catholic Education (GRACE) system has more than 2,300 students at its nine schools. About 27% of the student population uses the WPCP to attend one of the nine schools. AB 970 could help more families in the Green Bay area access a high-quality school in the GRACE network if the barriers like income limitation and grade point entry requirements are removed.

Other private schools are also prevented from expanding by the current regulations. For example, LUMIN has a network of seven schools across Milwaukee and Racine. LUMIN wanted to expand to other parts of the state where there are not high-quality options for students. In 2019, LUMIN opened a private school in Beloit. In preparation of the opening, LUMIN staff reached out to the community and interested families to let them know about the newest option in the community. But the WPCP limitations made it harder for families to attend. Unfortunately, a combination of limited participation by families and the COVID-19 pandemic led to the school to close.

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<sup>1</sup> Wisconsin & Racine Parental Choice Program 2021-22, [https://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/parental-education-options/Choice/Data\\_and\\_Reports/2021-22/21-22\\_WPCP\\_6\\_Limits.pdf](https://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/parental-education-options/Choice/Data_and_Reports/2021-22/21-22_WPCP_6_Limits.pdf)

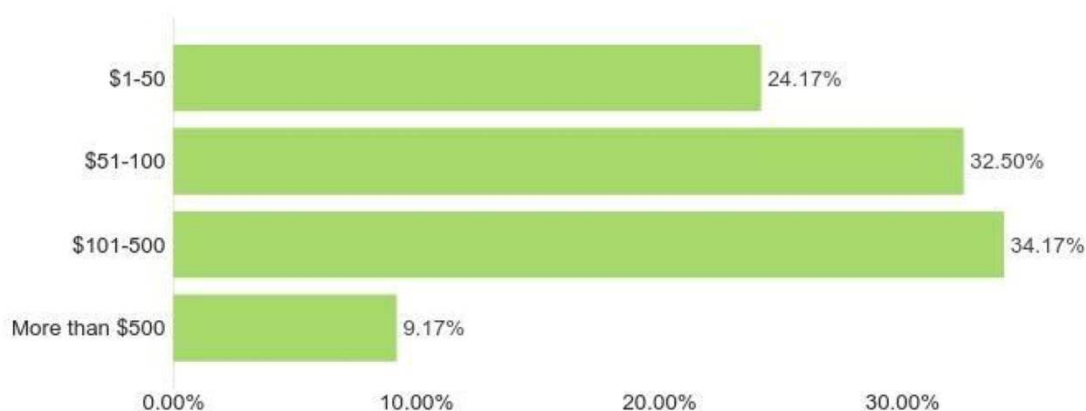


AB 970 is addressing barriers that prevent families from accessing high-quality educational options. This bill will help private schools like LUMIN and GRACE to expand and provide more access for families across the state.

## **2) Provides public school families will access to funds for educational expenses.**

When the pandemic hit Wisconsin in March 2020, parents were scrambling to purchase educational materials for their children so they could learn from home. As the pandemic and rolling school closures have continued over the past two years, parents continue to bear the burden of creating an educational environment at home for their children.

In April 2020, WILL surveyed Wisconsin parents on their experiences with children learning from home during the early pandemic.<sup>2</sup> Our survey results found that parents were spending money on educational materials for their children.



30% of the 400 respondents reported spending money on educational materials and the highest rates were among low-income respondents. It is a reasonable assumption that as the pandemic and school closures continued into the 2020-21 school year that parent's investment into educational materials increased. Indeed, a nationwide analysis in 2021 found an increase of nearly \$232 billion—or 10%—on educational spending during the pandemic.<sup>3</sup>

AB 970 provides public-school parents with critical access to funding that will help cover such costs, including textbooks and curriculum. The bill allows the Department of Public Instruction to approve other educational expenses as well.

AB 970 also allows public school families to use the education expense reimbursement program to attend up to two courses at participating schools, including private and tribal K-12 schools,

<sup>2</sup> <https://will-law.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/survey20presentation20final.pptx.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> EdWeek, "Parents' Spending on Education Boomed During the Pandemic. Here's Why." May 14, 2021, <https://marketbrief.edweek.org/marketplace-k-12/parents-spending-education-boomed-pandemic-heres/>



institutions of higher education and approved educational operators. This will give public school students access to more course options without having to leave their current school.

The impact of the pandemic on student learning loss is still being determined. As parents and teachers work to address to close these gaps, access to additional educational options may help students do just that. For example, a student struggling with reading proficiency may use the resources in AB 970 to access additional curricular materials to supplemental their classroom work. This bills flexibility gives parents and students the option to customize their educational options to help their child succeed.

AB 970 is a bill that will help students across the Badger state access a high-quality education and more educational options.

I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Thank you,

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