



MEMO

TO: Senate Committee on Education

FROM: Chris Reader, IRG Action Fund Executive Vice President
Quinton Klabon, Institute for Reforming Government Senior Research Director

DATE: June 12, 2023

RE: Support for Senate Bill 330, increasing per pupil payments for voucher and charter schools

Chairman Jagler and members of the Committee, thank you for holding a hearing today on Senate Bill (SB) 330. Senator Stroebel, a big thank you for authoring the bill in the Senate. Finally, we are extremely grateful to Majority Leader LeMahieu, Speaker Vos, and Governor Evers for finding a bipartisan solution that takes both district and choice school funding seriously. If passed, your hard work will improve children's lives and Wisconsin's economic future.

Today, IRG Action Fund submits testimony in support of SB 330. IRG Action is the advocacy and lobbying partner of the Institute for Reforming Government, a Delafield-based think tank that works to give all Wisconsinites an opportunity to prosper. We support high-quality schools in all sectors but will focus testimony on choice schools specifically.

You already know the success that choice schools have become, especially for poor students. Despite making up a fraction of the overall options, most of the predominantly low-income schools in Wisconsin with the [highest reading proficiencies](#) are voucher and charter schools. They're getting top-tier results across the state, from [Immanuel Lutheran School](#) in Wisconsin Rapids to [St. Mary's Springs Catholic Academy](#) in Fond Du Lac to [The Lincoln Academy](#) in Beloit. They are stars in Milwaukee; schools like [St. Marcus Lutheran](#), [United Community](#), [Mount Lebanon Lutheran](#), [Saint Rafael The Archangel Catholic](#), and [Salam Islamic](#) are helping students defy the odds.

But the days when underfunding sustained them have long since passed, and meager federal pandemic relief has them gasping for air. A substantial increase in choice funding must pass. This is about survival.

Let's start with a fact that may surprise you. A [lower proportion](#) of students are in private schools today than were in 2000. Yes, despite the voucher program's growth and the pandemic pushing kids private, private school enrollment lost ground to public and homeschooling this century. Take out Milwaukee and there are [32,000 fewer students and 215 fewer schools](#) in the private sector since 2000. [43%](#) of school districts now lack a single private option.

Largely, that is because the voucher amount is not enough to keep schools open statewide. Compare the voucher amount in Wisconsin to school spending nationally. It is behind every single state's [per-student amount](#), \$1,000 behind last-place [Idaho](#). Some schools [survive](#) on [private philanthropy](#) to stay afloat and

do stellar work. The rest see their [pool of teachers](#) shrink, watch quality drop, and eventually close for good.

Now, charter schools are unfortunately folding, too. Penfield Montessori, one of the true refuges for special needs children in Wisconsin, likely [shut its doors](#) forever last Thursday. [19%](#) of this Milwaukee charter's [special needs](#) students read proficiently, easily beating the state special needs average and topping Milwaukee Public Schools' [non-special needs](#) proficiency. While SB 330's funding improvements come too late to save Penfield, it would be a lifeline to the standout schools that remain.

Regarding the special needs voucher, the rise doesn't approach the actual cost of serving special needs children, but the significant increase is a striking statement to other states. "In Wisconsin, all children can access the school option that's best for them." (If you hear someone say that voucher schools already get 90% reimbursement, know that they're referring to a specialty program that serves [literally 9 students](#).)

For those reasons, IRG Action supports SB 330's additional funding for charter and voucher schools. This historic increase would keep private schools open in Bonduel and Sparta and give charters in Racine and Hayward breathing room. You saying yes would allow parochial schools to serve more complex special needs and show those children purpose. Outside of Milwaukee, this would allow many choice schools to live up to their full potential, a transformational victory.

While we support the bill, it leaves unaddressed some troubling areas that we must bring to your attention. We strongly hope that state budgets soon will recognize the different needs of students in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program compared to Racine's and Wisconsin's, especially at the elementary level. The funding amount simply does not sustain the high cost of doing business, fixing [one of the worst](#) education ecosystems in the country, potentially needing to spend thousands on [new reading curriculum](#), and getting [-\\$3,300 less](#) per student in pandemic aid than [Milwaukee Public Schools](#). This biennium, their results will plateau and teachers will leave. Without further support going forward, the best voucher program in the country will begin to fall apart. Nevertheless, we appreciate and commend you for the terrific work that you have produced in divided government.

Century-old schools like [Holy Cross Green Bay](#) and [Salem Milwaukee](#) seem eternal, until they're not. Their results and communities can fade with the others'. You've already created an incredible story through this bipartisan compromise. Pass SB 330, and you'll perpetuate that story in the lives of children across Wisconsin; they'll grow up, take on skills and good character, and live lives that fill their parents and communities with pride. Thank you for the hearing today. Please support SB 330 as it comes up for votes.