

Health and Safety for Private K-12 Schools Wisconsin Grant Program

BACKGROUND

As Wisconsin looks to spend its budget surplus to address education needs, the Governor and Legislature should ensure their actions are equitable. Private school students comprise 10 percent of K-12 enrollment in Wisconsin and should receive 10 percent of any new money appropriated to improve K-12 education.

The important minority of 100,000+ children, who represent all races and classes, who have chosen to attend 800 religious and independent schools across the state, should not be forgotten. Private schools provided in-person instruction throughout the pandemic and paved the way for safe, in-person schooling, which motivated many public schools to follow suit as well.

Catholic Schools, specifically, have led the pack on reading and math scores.¹ Still, the state's children are not proficient enough in reading and math. That can be addressed with this proposal.

The cost of religious and independent schooling is enormous. It's funded through private philanthropy. Recently, some hard-to-access federal pandemic aid has been available, but these funds are difficult to access because the uses allowed by Congress do not coincide with the real needs of schools.

As a result, even today, black and brown low-income children attend private schools with old windows and ventilation systems that can't be upgraded to provide safer air quality, while public school students are happily playing on new athletic fields made possible by federal relief dollars.²

THE PLAN

1. WCRIS believes the state surplus funds should be used to create a Health and Safety Grant Program for K-12 private schools. It would be like Wisconsin's successful 2017 school safety grant program, which received an excellent review from the Legislative Audit Bureau.³ It advances what has been learned from key state and federal programs then and ever since. The grants would fund efforts to:

- a. Address learning loss. Improving private K-12 school and teaching efforts to boost student proficiency through curriculum, tutoring, staff training and education, and teacher licensure;
- b. Improve mental health services for private K-12 school students and staff;
- c. Improve classroom and general building air quality in private K-12 school buildings by repairing or updating windows and doors, or for improving or updating the heating, ventilating, or air conditioning exchange parts or systems. This is a proactive defense against known and future airborne pathogens;
- d. Address school hardening to promote safe buildings with such things as cameras, locks, intercoms, hard core doors, alarms, and staff training around school safety;

- e. Improve private K-12 school water sources and systems to provide safe water via such things as: access to clean groundwater and public water systems, water filtration, or to remove lead pipes and fixtures so safe water is available for students, staff, and visitors to consume. Contaminated water is a known and current major public health threat that impedes proper child development;
- f. Address private K-12 school internet connectivity and usage, whether through student or faculty laptops, cell phones, or improved broadband connectivity or cell phone reception to the school building.

2. Private K-12 schools would be eligible for funds if they have filed a 2022 PI-1207 with the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) verifying their existence as a private K-12 school.

3. Funds will be apportioned on a per-pupil basis, according to the DPI's most recent past Third Friday in September enrollment count.

4. The program would be administered by CESA 6, which works closely with the DPI and recently gained valuable experience in grant-making to private schools through federal pandemic aid programs.

Public schools can also address these issues, if they choose, with any money provided them by the state legislature from a historic state budget surplus. They will also have access to unused federal money controlled by the Governor. Instead, private schools seek access to state General Purpose Revenue because it is free of federal rules and regulations that increase bureaucracy.

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¹ *National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Report Card, National Center for Education Statistics, Oct. 24, 2022*

² *"Flush with COVID-19 aid, schools steer funding to sports," AP News, Oct. 6, 2021*

³ *Report 19-28: School Safety Grants and Plans, Wisconsin Legislative Audit Bureau, December 2019*