

Under the Capitol Dome

a publication from the Wisconsin Council of Religious & Independent Schools

State Lawmakers: More Choice Money, More Regulations

WCRIS has been advocating tirelessly for our members since January in this unique 2023-25 Legislative Session. See the latest updates from Under the Capitol Dome:

More Money

In an unlikely move in June, Gov. Tony Evers exchanged a choice voucher increase for a historic shared revenue bill that aids local municipalities. The deal was signed after months of haggling between the governor and the Legislature, which impeded other legislative work.

The voucher amounts for the 2023-24 school year are: **\$9,893** for K-8 students, **\$12,387** for high schoolers and **\$15,065** for Special Needs Scholarship Program students.

Separately, once the Republican Legislature's reinvented version of the two-year state budget landed on the governor's desk in July, he wielded his powerful veto pen and creatively pieced together an increase in public-school funding for the next 400 years. His wordsmithing helps choice schools too as state law requires voucher amounts to increase when public-school funding increases.

More Regulations

Crime Reporting

A provision requiring choice, charter and public high schools to report instances of certain crimes on their grounds, and during private-school-provided transportation, was snuck into the shared revenue bill, despite consistent efforts by WCRIS to stop it. Reporting begins in the 2024-25 school year. Statistics will appear on schools' DPI report cards. We'll send state agencies' guidance when available.

The Right to Read

Wisconsin joined over half of the country in legislating a potential solution for alarming student reading scores. The draft of the Right to Read Act evolved quickly from four to almost 40 pages as it was fast-tracked by the Legislature. The governor eventually signed it in mid-July.

Beginning in the 2024-25 school year, the act overhauls K-3 reading instruction in choice, charter and public schools. It promotes phonics; prohibits "3-cueing;" forces



WCRIS staff testify before the Assembly Education Committee at the Wisconsin State Capitol in May.

schools to adopt the DPI's services and retention policy; and more.

WCRIS agrees poor reading scores should be addressed, but we opposed the legislation as it threatens our members' autonomy; bars teachers from using **all** literacy tools; and doesn't clarify the retention policy's impact on choice seats.

We persistently presented tangible fixes to the lengthy literacy law. Some requirements were tempered, but choice schools were ultimately included in the majority of the bill.

The DPI is developing guidance. WCRIS is tracking the process to try to ease its effects on our members.

WCRIS Works for All Our Private Schools

WCRIS continues to monitor other legislation that would affect **all** private schools, like requiring schools to have opioid antagonists, anti-choking devices and cold baths.

Thank you to all who contacted their legislators about our proposed health and safety grants. A bill has been drafted, and WCRIS is working with legislators to win private school students the support they deserve.

Top Stories In This Issue

WCRIS Turns 50	page 2
EANS: Wisconsin Leading the Nation	page 3
Ombudsman by the Numbers	page 5

Serving You for Half a Century WCRIS Turns 50 Years Old

The WCRIS Board of Directors, comprised of private school superintendents, principals and jurisdiction leaders, celebrated 50 years of service during its March board meeting in Madison.

The celebration featured cake; a walk down memory lane with an exhibit of WCRIS publications and photos from the 1970s and 80s; and reflection on how far WCRIS has come.

Our organization was first founded as the Wisconsin Association of Nonpublic Schools (WANS) by a group of Catholic, Lutheran and independent Christian school leaders who loosely organized in the 1960s to advocate (successfully) for equitable busing for private school students. The group formalized in the early 1970s.

WANS was renamed the Wisconsin Council of Religious and Independent Schools (WCRIS) in 2000 to reaffirm our identity and define us by what we are – a membership organization that serves private schools – and not by what we are not (nonpublic).

Starting with humble beginnings in a strip mall office on the west side of Madison, WCRIS has now grown to 600 member schools that enroll over 100,000 students. What once only employed one or two staff members, WCRIS now features a busy, five-person staff who work across the street from the state capitol.

WCRIS has become Wisconsin's go-to organization for **all issues** that affect private schools. To best serve our members, we meet with the DPI biweekly and have fostered relationships with other state agency officials.

On top of state-level expertise and advocacy, WCRIS is the state's chapter of the Council for American Private Education, has contacts at the U.S. Department of Education and created the only public-private partnership for ombudsman services, required by the Every Student Succeeds Act. (See page 5.) By virtue of these connections, we also have an accurate understanding of federal education programs. No other organization can claim that.

We truly couldn't be prouder of what WCRIS has achieved for its members in half a century.

We know our member schools have experienced unthinkable triumphs and challenges in the last 50 years. During the inevitable challenges to come, remember:

1. **We are not alone.** WCRIS partners on your behalf with other social and legal groups that support our schools and their missions.
2. **Society needs our schools.** National data show our schools generally perform better than their public-school counterparts. Parents choose our schools because they feel their children are safer. And enrollment is growing.
3. **WCRIS will be there with you.** We're committed to serving our members and protecting their ability to operate schools according to their unique missions and values.

Thank you for supporting our organization, and most importantly, thank you for all you do for your students, staff and communities. We look forward to serving you for the next 50 years!



WCRIS Board members and Executive Director at their quarterly meeting downtown Madison on March 21, 2023.

Your Voice in Washington D.C.

Your school is a member of the Council for American Private Education (CAPE) through your membership with WCRIS. WCRIS is the official Wisconsin chapter of CAPE.



**Council for
American
Private
Education™**

CAPE exists to ensure that private schools are represented in federal issues and programs, such as addressing PFAS-contaminated water, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and more.

Out of 38 state CAPE chapters, WCRIS is one of the most active. Learn more at capenetwork.org.

End of EANS

Wisconsin Leading the Nation

WCRIS members pushed Wisconsin into the national spotlight. Our state is one of the few that have used 99%, almost \$140 million, of their Emergency Assistance for Nonpublic Schools (EANS) allocation, a success in the eyes of the federal government.

Many states are failing to use all of their allocations, leaving millions on the table for governors and public schools to use instead of private schools. WCRIS members worked hard to ensure that funding Congress intended for private schools stayed in private schools.

The first round of EANS, the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations (CRRSA)-EANS, has ended. The DPI is working to close its books on the program.

The second round of funding, the American Rescue Plan (ARP)-EANS, is still active but in its final stages. In late spring, the DPI consolidated all the unused funds into a statewide pool for private schools. It was used up within days of the application period opening. The program will end in September 2024.

Schools may be contacted by the DPI or CESA 6 about the closing process. WCRIS will send updates via our Current Events newsletter, as needed.

Title IX

USDE Finalizing Changes

An overhaul of Title IX regulations is expected this fall, according to national education experts. The U.S. Department of Education released its proposed changes in April and is reviewing the hundreds of thousands of public comments, as required by law.

The changes, when finalized, would prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex stereotypes, sex characteristics, pregnancy or related conditions, sexual orientation and gender identity.

The anticipated regulations would permit students to use the bathroom and/or locker room and participate on athletic teams consistent with their claimed gender identity. There's currently no guidance on how schools are to determine students' gender identity.

According to attorneys from the Wisconsin Institute for Law and Liberty (WILL), private schools that are recipients of Federal Financial Assistance (FFA) would be subject to these new regulations. But a school controlled by a religious institution could be exempt from those parts of the law that conflict with the main tenants of its religion. It's unclear how schools would have to defend this.

These changes are still only proposed, but are said to be finalized in October with an effective date being assigned at that time. Lawsuits are expected with the hope that existing interpretations of Title IX would remain until a final ruling is issued.

WCRIS will keep you updated.



Stay in the Know

Scan here to check out the WCRIS website and sign up for our weekly Current Events e-Newsletter.

Greetings From Madison

Get to Know the WCRIS Staff

We're looking forward to hosting in-person professional development events again soon! We interact with several schools daily via phone calls, emails and virtual meetings, but nothing beats creating connections in-person.

While we plan to bring face-to-face events back soon, the WCRIS staff would like to “put a face to the name.”

From left to right, the WCRIS staff are:

- » **Michelle Murphy**, Communications & Outreach Coordinator;
- » **Daniel Henderson**, School Programs Coordinator;
- » **Sharon Schmeling**, Executive Director;
- » **Abbie Pavela**, WCRIS Project Manager and Wisconsin ESSA Ombudsman;
- » **Deborah Greiveldinger**, Executive Assistant.

All of the WCRIS staff are products of, have children attending and/or spouses working at private schools around the country, from Wisconsin to Arizona, Indiana to Texas. Our staff truly “gets” private schools and their missions.



WCRIS staff downtown Madison in March 2023.

To learn a little more about the staff that's dedicated to serving Wisconsin's private K-12 schools, see our favorite and least favorite classes from our K-12 years below, some of which were at your schools:

Murphy

Favorite Class: English
Least Favorite: Geometry

Schmeling

Favorite Class: Civics
Least Favorite: Algebra

Greiveldinger

Favorite Class: Calculus
Least Favorite: Chemistry

Henderson

Favorite Class: Geometry
Least Favorite: English

Pavela

Favorite Class: AP Economics
Least Favorite: Physics

We'd love to get to know you and your school too. If you're a new principal or haven't worked directly with WCRIS before, please send us an email at wcris.staff@wcris.org. We're happy to answer any of your questions and share some of our most-used resources with you.

Best wishes on the school year! To learn more about our staff's credentials, visit wcris.org/about-wcris/staff/.

Thank You, Sponsors!

The cost of your membership dues and benefits stay low because of generous support from partner organizations.

Visit wcris.org/about-wcris/our-partners/ to learn more about each of our sponsors. Please contact them if you're looking for curriculum, needing a student information system, embarking on a construction project or questioning your copier contract:



By the Numbers

Ombudsman Impacts Private, Public Schools Statewide

WCRIS' Project Manager and Wisconsin's federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) Ombudsman, Abbie Pavela, was busy this year ensuring that private schools receive equitable Title services under the federal ESSA.

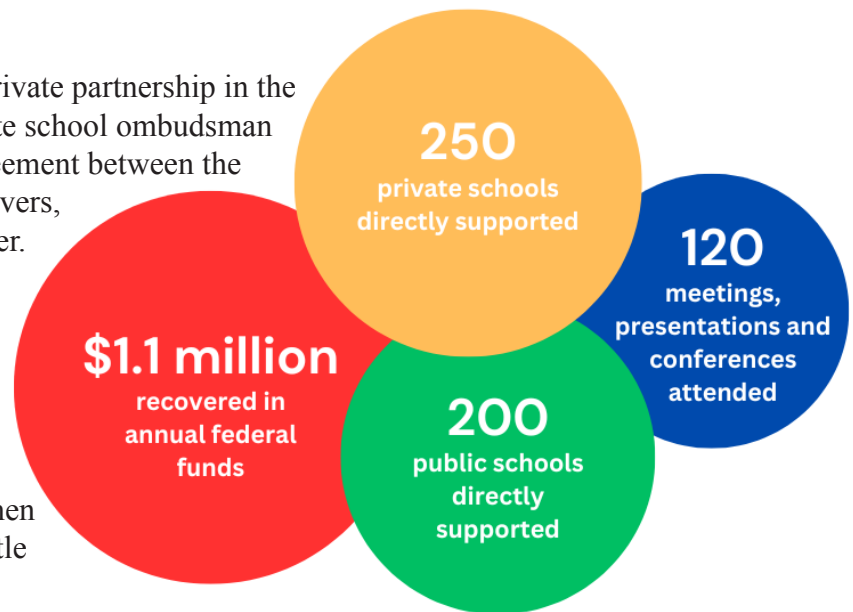
Just this year, she consulted with almost **500** private and public schools; provided expertise at **120** local, state and nationwide meetings; and helped recover **over \$1 million** of annual ESSA funds that were being allocated inequitably or not being allocated at all.

These numbers are just an estimate, but are a testament to how WCRIS works, oftentimes behind-the-scenes, for our members.

In 2018, WCRIS innovated the only public-private partnership in the nation to provide the federally-required private school ombudsman for the ESSA, a partnership that required agreement between the then-DPI Superintendent, Democratic Tony Evers, and former Governor, Republican Scott Walker.

WCRIS is proud to announce we just signed another three-year contract with the DPI to have Pavela continue to provide essential ombudsman services statewide.

Pavela is one of the longest-serving ombudsmen in the country. If you have questions about Title services, please contact the WCRIS office.



Making Your Job Easier New Handbooks Coming Soon

All three of WCRIS' handbooks – the Legal, Choice and SNSP handbooks – are currently undergoing edits.

With the passage of new laws this legislative session about crime reporting, reading regulations and more, you're going to want to have these new editions on your desk.

As a member benefit, each WCRIS member school will receive a free copy of the updated Legal Handbook. It'll be mailed to your school after publication in 2024.

New Choice and SNSP handbooks will be available to order at a discounted rate for members.

In the meantime, stay tuned to our weekly Current Events newsletter for updates on new laws and handbooks.

WCRIS Webinars Grab Your Lunch to Learn!

WCRIS' Lunch & Learn webinar series is returning this fall. We served nearly **200 schools** last year so we're excited to bring the series back for the 2023-24 school year.

Topics include saving your school money, transportation, school safety, federal programs, choice and more – featuring guest speakers and subject matter experts.

Keep an eye out for the schedule in our Current Events newsletter and visit wcris.org/school-resources/lunch-learn-webinar-series/ to learn more.

Our Lunch & Learn webinar series is free for all WCRIS members. If you have a suggestion for a topic, please send it to wcris.staff@wcris.org.

Thank You for Being a WCRIS Member!

Schools that belong to WCRIS receive the following:

- » Government relations services on state and federal issues;
- » Membership in and advocacy by the Council for American Private Education (CAPE);
- » Access to legal experts who know and care about your school's unique missions;
- » Technical assistance with state and federal programs, by real people in real time;
- » Subscription to "Current Events," a timely e-newsletter with private school news, state and federal updates and program reminders;
- » A free copy of the WCRIS Legal Handbook, which compiles all of the state laws that regulate private schools in one place;
- » Discounts on all other WCRIS publications, such as the Choice and SNSP handbooks;
- » Access to member-exclusive resources, like the Media 101 and New Principal guides, in WCRIS' online Membership Portal;
- » Exclusive access and discounted rates for professional development events and webinars;
- » Ability to post open positions on WCRIS' Job Board.

And more! Please don't hesitate to reach out with questions about school operations, health and safety regulations, state and federal programs and anything in between. We're here to serve!

