

TO: Members, Assembly Education Committee

FROM: Sharon L. Schmeling, Executive Director

DATE: May 30, 2019

RE: Assembly Bill 84 – Requirements related to school lunch and breakfast programs

Thank you for the opportunity to provide information about the process for helping children obtain nutritious meals.

The Wisconsin Council of Religious & Independent Schools (WCRIS) represents 800 schools serving 100,000 children across the state. Of that, 329 schools participate in the lunch program, providing free and reduced priced lunches to 39,781 children daily. And, 138 schools participate in the breakfast program, providing free and reduced priced breakfasts to 15,084 children daily, according to DPI October 2018 program enrollment and participation reports.

The participation numbers have declined in recent years, as regulation has increased. The increased rules have created meals that are less enjoyable for the children and require more bureaucracy for the schools to administer, so schools have left the program.

AB 84 seeks to improve student participation in nutritious meals by eliminating any shame associated with receiving financial help for those meals. This is an important goal, which we support.

However, the bill's overbroad language creates some challenges for our schools, and could possibly lead to more schools leaving the program, or declining to participate.

AB 84 prohibits a school from requiring a pupil or pupil's parent or guardian to pay fees or costs charged by a collection agency retained by the school to collect money owed for a free or reduced priced meal.

The term "collection agency" is not defined in the bill. Many of our schools use third party vendors, known as tuition management companies, to bill and collect tuition and fees from families. These firms are part of a school's responsible accounting functions because they ensure that families are treated equally in billing and collections and they also administer the school's financial aid in a neutral and fair fashion. These firms charge each family a nominal fee (about \$50) annually for the benefit of this service.

In general, families who wish to avoid the fee and the associated services can opt out if they agree to pay all of their tuition and fees up-front at the beginning of each semester. In these cases, families pay the lunch fee forward, and what is not used is refunded back at the end of the semester.

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Since this bill applies to any pupil “regardless of the pupil’s ability to pay,” this could mean that even families who don’t qualify for free and reduced priced meals could be barred from using the tuition management company, which will create accounting problems and increase costs for schools. Or, the schools will leave the meal programs.

Further, also problematic is the bill’s prohibition of communicating directly with a pupil concerning the pupil’s inability to pay, or the need to pay money owed to the school for a reduced priced meal.

Most of our schools send reminders about various school topics home with children in a weekly envelope. The children act as couriers and may be reminded by teachers or other staff to make sure their parents read the envelope for information about upcoming tests, money owed for tuition, meals, field trips or other fees. This would be prohibited by AB 84 and would make it impossible for private schools to communicate with their families about their financial responsibilities in a fair and equitable fashion. Generalized communications like this actually prevent children from being singled out.

Another concern we have is the prohibition against doing chores or other work in exchange for financial aid covering a meal. Many of our schools have parent-approved student work opportunities for older children that allows them to contribute towards their tuition and fees through simple tasks after school. Not only does it allow students to cover the costs of the child’s education, but it trains them for the real world of work.

Private schools do not have the taxing authority to simply raise funds to cover families who do not pay their fair share of reduced priced meals. They have to collect from the family who incurred the costs. Private schools need to be allowed to do so in modern and sensible ways. If you want students to have access to the meal programs, you have to be careful about how you regulate them. The zeal to make the meals kinder, might actually prevent access to subsidized meals at all.

We urge you to delete these three provisions from the bill so that private schools will stay in the meal programs and continue to provide students with affordable, nutritious meals.