

WCRIS Position on Reopening Schools

June 2020

1. WCRIS has a great relationship with DPI and meets with key DPI staff weekly but were not solicited for input on the reopening schools document.
2. The DPI document is just guidance. It has no force of law on our schools. Our schools have their own oversight authorities (parents; oversight boards; superintendents; national sponsoring groups; accreditation agencies). We have been encouraging our schools to also work with local health departments to factor in their community's unique profile when it comes to the virus.
3. WCRIS will have several private school principals at the Assembly Education Committee Wednesday June 24, who will talk about the challenges for private schools re-opening.
4. Re-opening has new Covid-related financial pressures. We are waiting for DPI to decide what formula to follow for spending federal Coronavirus emergency aid for K-12. DPI is not following the US DE guidance on how to divide the money. We are urging DPI to follow the federal government's instructions, just like they always do for other federal education programs.

The DE guidance provides an easier and quicker formula than the one DPI is using. The DE guidance meets the spirit of the federal law to provide relief to schools because of the economic collapse created by COVID-19. Congress provided that money to help ALL schools and all children with these new problems. DPI's decision to ignore the US DE is holding up the funds unnecessarily. (*See the attached WCRIS letter to Superintendent Stanford Taylor*).

For more information contact:

Sharon L. Schmeling
Executive Director
sschmeling@WCRIS.org
cell (414) 322-2537

WCRIS supports the unique missions of member schools through advocacy, education and partnerships, to ensure an extraordinary education and equitable opportunity for each child.

WCRIS is a non-profit, nonpartisan membership organization representing 100,000 children in 600 K-12 schools since 1974, and the official Wisconsin chapter of the Council for American Private Education (CAPE).

Archdiocese of Milwaukee

Association of Christian
Schools International

Christian Schools
International

Diocese of Green Bay

Diocese of LaCrosse

Diocese of Madison

Diocese of Superior

Lutheran Church
Missouri Synod
North Wisconsin District

Lutheran Church
Missouri Synod
South Wisconsin District

Wisconsin Association
of Independent Schools

Wisconsin Conference
of Seventh Day Adventists

Wisconsin Evangelical
Lutheran Synod
Northern Wisconsin District

Wisconsin Evangelical
Lutheran Synod
Western Wisconsin District

Wisconsin Evangelical
Lutheran Synod
Southeastern Wisconsin
District

Associate Members

PHONE
(608) 287-1224

E-MAIL
wcris.staff@gmail.com

WEBSITE
www.wcris.org

ADDRESS
110 East Main Street
Suite 802
Madison, WI 53703



June 15, 2020

Sent via E-mail

Ms. Carolyn Stanford Taylor
Superintendent
Department of Public Instruction
125 S. Webster St.,
Madison, WI 53703

Dear Ms. Stanford Taylor,

We offer greetings for good health and fortitude during a most difficult time, and pray that you and your family are doing well and staying safe.

On behalf of the Board of Directors of the Wisconsin Council of Religious & Independent Schools (WCRIS) and the Wisconsin Catholic Conference (WCC), we write regarding Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds distribution, which promises much needed economic relief for the K-12 education community.

Specifically, we have consulted with the Council for American Private Education (CAPE) and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops on a letter issued by the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) to the Chief State School Officers on Friday, May 22, 2020. WCRIS serves as Wisconsin's CAPE affiliate organization and our national partners reiterate that this letter affirms guidance promulgated by the USDE on April 30, 2020, regarding the distribution of ESSER funds under the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act.

Unfortunately, recent Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) ESSER application materials do not reference USDE guidance, which requires Local Education Agencies (LEAs) to equitably distribute ESSER funds based on the total private school enrollment ("total enrollment") in their district. Instead, the DPI appears to be allowing districts to allocate funds based on the number of low-income (Title I formula) private school students within a school.

We believe this is problematic and urge you to consider the inequities it creates. States employing this Title I methodology are relying on inconsistent data collection, which fosters inequities for *both* public and private students. First, it is inequitable to use Title I data gathered in the *pre-pandemic* 2019-2020 school year for public school children while gathering current income data for private school students, *post the beginning of the pandemic and related economic collapse*. Using these two different points in time for collection does not reflect changes in family income for public school students, which is inequitable on its face.

Secondly, gathering income data for a federal program in June (or later) is outside the norm of usual practice because it is extremely difficult to reach families. To use poverty data from last fall – for either private or public school students – is to ignore the basic reason ESSER funds are being provided, which is to address the economic impact of COVID-19 and record unemployment, affecting family income and tax collections.

The formula outlined in the USDE guidance allows states to avoid these structural inequities. Perhaps these vagaries explain why some states are choosing to place “disputed” funds into escrow, as suggested by Secretary DeVos, until a formal rule is in place.

In fact, numerous states are navigating the confusion by allowing individual LEA’s to determine which formulas to use (Ohio, Illinois, Michigan, Louisiana, to name just a few). However, the LEAs are being advised to set aside the difference in the formulas and not spend it. This is complicating school planning efforts and creating inequities between schools located just across the street from one another.

Alongside that chaos, states that endorse or permit LEAs to use a Title I approach are also complicating the planning that is being done by both public and nonpublic schools to serve all students. Further, this approach will likely require another round of consultation when a final administrative rule is adopted by the USDE. Ultimately, this excludes children from receiving necessary services *now*, during this unprecedented pandemic, when they need the resources the most.

The data collection required by the Title I formula cannot be done in a timely, equitable or meaningful fashion. Under normal circumstances, it can take nearly a full school year to compile and issue income data per school, as you know. In some parts of the state, schools are working a year ahead – compiling data for the coming school year.

Add to that the difficulty of collecting accurate data, and the inequality grows. For example, in Racine one year ago, the district had to physically visit several private schools to collect data to finish its required data collection. That is not currently possible given the state’s mandated school closure, social distancing rubrics, and most importantly, the fact that schools are on summer break.

Therefore, we implore the DPI and Wisconsin school districts to follow the guidance from the USDE (i.e. total enrollment). This is not only simple to do, but also adequately meets the goal of serving all Wisconsin students in an equitable fashion, by providing much needed financial relief to both public and private schools trying to cope with all that the pandemic has thrust on them.

There are 11 states (Alaska, Florida, Georgia, Massachusetts, Nebraska, Nevada, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Virginia, the Virgin Islands) following the USDE guidance, according to our colleagues. Their grant applications are open, with needed money flowing to schools. Wisconsin should be in this number.

This “total enrollment” approach provides a quicker and less cumbersome formula for all parties to administer, enabling both public and private school communities to move forward in a fashion that will aid their students and teachers as they face many unknowns in the coming months.

It is timely. It is meaningful. It is equitable. It is also consistent with Wisconsin’s long-held practice of adhering to USDE guidance for all other federal programs. This creates stability and provides both public and private schools with clear direction and objective standards within which to operate.

As you contemplate this new information, if your schedule permits, we would like to meet with you in the next few days to discuss how we can collegially and proactively avoid the problems noted above that are present in other states.

The WCRIS and WCC Boards and their school communities very much appreciate the work you and the Department are doing to serve all students during this unprecedented health crisis. Your task is not easy.

We pledge the ongoing partnership of our members in that effort for the common good of Wisconsin’s school children.

We look forward to hearing from you at your earliest convenience.

Sincerely,



Sharon L. Schmeling
Executive Director
Wisconsin Council of Religious & Independent Schools
110 E. Main Street, Suite 802
Madison, WI 53703
sschmeling@wcris.org



Kim Vercauteren
Executive Director
Wisconsin Catholic Conference
131 W. Wilson Street, Suite 1105
Madison, WI 53703
kim@wisconsincatholic.org



LUMIN Schools

Developing Christian Learners and Leaders in the Urban Community

TO: Members, Wisconsin Assembly Education Committee
FROM: Nicole Schmidt, Chief Academic Officer for LUMIN Schools
DATE: June 24, 2020
RE: School Reopening post state shut-down

I am Nicole Schmidt, Chief Academic Officer for LUMIN Schools. Thank you for this opportunity to meet with you and discuss the impact of COVID-19 on private schools, and a return to the classroom for Fall 2020 and all that it entails, given a global pandemic.

We are a network of Lutheran schools located in urban Milwaukee, Racine and Beloit. At LUMIN Schools we enroll approximately 1,400 students in grades K4-8th grade. We work with three different public school districts to coordinate special education and federal education programs, which our students are entitled to receive by state and federal law.

Our mission is to provide safe, Christian schools focused on educational success, leadership development and spiritual growth. The LUMIN network continues to demonstrate strong academic achievement with three of its four schools in Milwaukee rated Exceeds or Significantly Exceeds Expectations on the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction Report Cards.

We have 97 teachers and 142 staff. Our teachers have the credentials to fulfill the position and our schools are fully accredited and affiliated with the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (LCMS). We participate in the Wisconsin Parental Choice, Milwaukee Choice, Racine Choice and the Special Needs Scholarship Programs. We serve families from 29 different ZIP codes across Wisconsin, and nearly 90% qualify for a voucher through the Parental Choice Programs.

As we reflect on our transition to distance learning since mid-March, we've learned that our students were disproportionately affected by the shutdown because of their severe poverty. Many of them were already struggling to perform at grade level. In order to minimize the back-slide effect in fall, we need to increase resources and support for our students so they can regain the ground that was lost. This will require more funding.

Like every other school, we closed with little notice on March 14, which had a dramatic impact on our students academically, socially, and emotionally. Despite a lack of preparation, we rolled out a distance learning plan to our network on March 16th to be implemented starting March 17th. Our view was that the children needed something rather than nothing. While this was a disruption in their learning and routine, we decided we would build the plane while we were flying it. We were not going to let the perfect be the enemy of the good.

So, teachers across our network made daily phone calls to families to ensure they had consistent access to food, healthcare, learning resources (computer devices and connectivity, paper learning packets) as well as access to their teacher, and other traditional school support.

In the first few weeks, we found that existing educational disparities deepened. Children were not getting nutritious meals, health care, or counseling to help them emotionally navigate this troubling change in routine. They were expected overnight to have more independence and accountability for their learning but with little training in how to do that.

We found that some families did not have access to traditional learning resources like crayons, pencils, books, paper. The libraries were closed so they couldn't borrow them, even if they could get there. Older children were charged with child care and elder care, disrupting their focus on education. We were hearing increased reports of fatigue and trauma.

In addition to students, there has been a significant impact on our staff. For teachers and leaders, this virtual experience has required a new way of teaching and learning, which has made it harder to track students' academic progress and overall well-being.

But, we've also experienced some opportunities. For example, our master teachers stepped up and modeled live teaching and provided training on various instructional platforms. We also leveraged some of our part time staff (lunch servers, teacher assistants) to help with school office hours, phone calls to families who were hard to reach and cleaning the school building.

Despite all this creativity, we found we needed more hours to reach all the children. Children are longing for personal contact, and teachers need more training and support to help navigate these new challenges.

We experienced an overall shift in operations and costs in running a system of schools during distance learning. Specifically, we noticed some savings in utilities and in-person services. We spent more on Chromebooks and consistent access to internet (estimated at \$18,300). We had to get creative and adjust staff roles and responsibilities. We are still awaiting the much-needed federal aid from the CARES Act.

There are considerable challenges for reopening in fall. Most significantly, two rise to the top:

- 1.) The cost of operating school going forward is going to increase. To operate safely and distanced, we need to significantly increase staffing and supplies on hand. As a choice school, we are limited in funding. We have a smaller teaching staff and access to fewer additional resources than public schools.
- 2). Not all suggested guidelines for operating are feasible when so many factors are unknown:
 - a) We don't know our enrollment because parents are not enrolling at the same rate. They are waiting to see what happens with the virus, with their jobs, and which school might best fit their needs;
 - b) We don't know the level of student learning loss;
 - c) Contracts with cleaning companies are expensive and competitive, causing us to use in- house staff and labor-intensive measures for deep cleaning requirements;

- d) **Building readiness:** Smaller, old buildings do not allow space for social distancing. There will be an increased level of staffing needed to support that coverage;
- e) **Daycare and health issues** may prevent teachers from coming back to their profession.

Our goal is to live our mission wholeheartedly and ensure we can continue to provide equitable access and opportunity for our students, given the current guidelines. Therefore, we have:

1. Assembled a task force for planning for fall, and throughout the next 1-2 years.
2. Committed to deeply understanding the needs of our students, families and staff and use that information to guide our next steps. We've administered a number of surveys to stakeholders and held a Town Hall Meeting with families.
3. Executed wide-spread safety procedures based on health department guidelines
4. Endeavored to more equitably distribute distance learning tools and materials, with whatever means necessary
5. Built off of our early virtual learning success in Spring, and are working on a plan to implement a virtual learning experience option for families who are unable or unwilling to return to the classroom, yet.

Here's what state lawmakers can do to help us address the challenges of re-opening:

- 1) Maintain parental school choice per pupil funding and ensure private schools get equitable access to federal Coronavirus relief funds, which we are entitled;
- 2) Adjust Parental Choice program deadlines and enrollment dates;
- 3) Make it easier for schools and parents to help track days/hours of instruction while still holding a level of accountability;
- 4) Rethink the "Third Friday Count" mechanism. What flexibility are we offering families who want a distance learning option for some or all of the school year? Will schools get reimbursed for them if they are not "present" on the 3rd Friday?

Mary Jo Vitale
Principal
Our Lady Queen of Peace School
Madison, WI 53711
Enrollment: 482 students
Staff: 62

This pandemic has challenged all of us in ways we never expected. As administrators, teachers, families, and students, everyone has been affected by COVID-19. As we continue to mitigate the virus, the effects on us continue to grow and deepen. How we return to a “new normal” will be crucial for all of us to regain a sense of peace, safety, and cohesiveness as we move forward to reopening schools.

Here are the ways that private schools will be affected by the re-opening and current pandemic.

During the lockdown, we all experienced the rapid turnover from classroom direct instruction to distance learning. Every teacher, whether public or private, needed to immediately become experts at transferring classroom educational standards to an online platform. We spent multiple hours in professional development; on information technology tasks supporting families and staff through distance learning complications; in learning and purchasing online resources to support learning; supplying devices and access to all students; designing new assessment strategies, communicating along the way to families, and modifying or canceling important events. All at one time!

We had many families without devices or access that we needed to accommodate for students with special learning styles, and families in need of financial and living expenses. To be specific, we had a few families in which we needed to provide housing support, get WIFI connected to their home, find food support and get the students set up with devices from school. Because of the needs of the family, and their essential work employment, the students still fell behind with school work and were not able to attend online classes. Because of this, I need to employ someone to contact them, set up individual instruction, work with our student service team to set up remediation steps, and follow up with parents. This is one example of several.

Another example was a family who lived out of an area that could get WIFI clearly. His teachers made appointments for him to go to a free WIFI area in town each day. The teacher met via zoom to give the student the instruction he needed. He will need to do this throughout the summer.

With all of those challenges, 90% of our students were able to hit or exceed benchmarks and we have served the students who fell below the benchmark with a summer school program.

Our families went through a lot during this time. First, the shock of the lockdown and homeschooling and then the ripple effect of job loss and furloughs. One family, who was doing

can do this, Another school is already sharing teachers and doesn't have enough resources to add classrooms WITH additional staff to cover. It's a daunting task.

Health: Providing additional cleaning and sanitizing of the building, supplying teachers with PPE and managing student PPE. Creating another nurse's room (we have over 550 students and staff in our building); Staggering start and end times to reduce crowds of students entering and exiting the building. Purchasing thermometers and PPE for daily use if the free ones are not available. Providing additional professional development for staff regarding PPE use and disinfection protocols. Cost is unknown at this time as the rates and needs will vary.

Academics: Making sure that ALL students have access to remote learning and devices. Providing professional development for teachers. Providing teachers with distance learning model and professional development. Modifying assessment standards. Creating a schedule to accommodate for additional classrooms. Creating safety protocols and access for students with special learning styles. Limiting recess and specials. Developing a distance learning program that can immediately be ready if/when we are called to quarantine again. Buying additional books and materials since sharing is no longer safe. We were quite successful with our distance learning program from the spring. In order to keep this trajectory going, we will need to continue to work extensively on building new curriculum and assessments. This professional development for the teachers could range from \$2,500 - \$7,500, depending on the PD chosen to enhance learning.

Building and grounds: Additional staffing for additional disinfecting of the school. Conversions of spaces into classrooms. Conversion of outside spaces for classrooms. Looking at spacing out lockers and pods. Signage throughout the school and outdoors. Placing barriers to add additional space for learning and distance for playing. The purchasing of the barriers and room dividers will cost in excess of \$2,500. The purchasing of tents and desks will cost over \$5,000. Making sure all students have individual bins for their own devices, supplies and books. Bins for supplies and for lockers will be over \$6,800.

Staffing: Teachers need to be called to do things outside their regular teaching commitments. Additional staffing in the areas of teacher, student services, and support. This alone will increase our salaries by \$70,000. In addition, we will be challenged to secure enough subs to cover illnesses since many subs are retired teachers and in the high risk area Replacing or providing an alternative job for staff who cannot return to the classroom due to illness, high risk factors, or are caring for someone. Rewording the teacher benefits to accommodate COVID-19 expectations. We will need to call on all specialists to help with additional rooms, dropoff and pick up, lunch, and health protocols. Additional professional development for teachers for new teaching expectations, health, and distance learning.

Distance Learning: We need to make sure all students have devices, know how to use them and take care of them, and are set up accordingly. Securing access for families who don't have it. Distance Learning program set up for hybrid learning for families who cannot learn face to

VERY well in January, found themselves without two jobs by April. They were devastated and obviously would qualify for assistance based off of last year's income. That threw us into finding a way to support these families by deferring tuition, and garnering other support. We had to reallocate funds for families who may be struggling and need additional support. These are just a few of our school's stories. The effects will be long lasting, both financially and emotionally.

Moving forward to the re-opening our challenges are:

Financial: As a private school, our parents pay additional tuition, beyond their taxes, to provide a quality education for their children. This tuition money only provides 50% to 60% of the actual per pupil cost to educate the students. The rest comes from fundraising and parish support. We have had parents whose jobs have been cut back or lost and parents can no longer pay the tuition. With everything closed down including Sunday worship, the amount of dollars the parishes can give the school continues to dwindle. But the expectation of providing a quality Catholic Education does not. It is difficult to maintain quality education when the main source of funding diminishes.

Enrollment: Our enrollment is steady, thanks in part to our rigor and success with distance learning. But it rests on a shaky foundation. Many schools are in a bit more tenuous situation as their communities have been hit in different ways or have different size parishes. We have enrolled several children from the public school as our rigor and success with distance learning has been a draw for some former public school families. We continue to modify our plan to meet the needs of these additional students, while planning a successful learning experience. We are not a voucher school so any financial distress on the families will need to be supported by the parish. Many of our parents have lost jobs, unemployment payments will end in July and then what? How many of our families won't be able to make tuition payments? So, we have to provide more financial aid and what resources do we have to draw from in order to provide for the families in need? The public schools can not absorb the additional costs of educating these students.

Social Distancing: We need to open up in a safe way for both students and staff. Limiting numbers of students per classroom will result in: utilizing and reinventing ALL spaces in the building; making washing/hand sanitizer stations; scheduling for hallway passing; holding modified recess; hiring additional staff; getting safer furniture; erecting barriers; and changing scheduling cohorts to block schedules with teachers rotating.

We will have to hire additional cleaning staff. Installing plexiglass and wall dividers will cost at least \$5,200. We are lucky because of our size, many schools in the Diocese are not as fortunate and do not have the resources or additional support staff to fill the extra classrooms needed in order to provide social distancing. For example, in my school of 480 students, I need to create at least one or more classrooms per grade level, totaling 9 classrooms with 9 staff members to teach in them. With creative hiring and hiring of a couple of extra support staff, I

face or who are quarantined due to illness. Providing students with this hybrid option will mean recording each classroom and providing students with personal devices. This is costing our school in excess of \$50,000 for devices and technical hardware for recording. We will need to purchase and learn new support software. Purchase online access to digital books. Manage additional IT support for staff and families. Additional software and digital tools will cost over \$5,000. In addition, the teachers will be wearing masks or face shields and will need microphones for students to hear them clearly. Estimated cost is an additional \$1,500.

Transportation/Lunch: Schools and families rely on busing. Managing the social distance aspect may require flexibility in school hours or availability. We need to re-evaluate lunch. Lunch needs to be boxed lunches and in the classroom as the cafeteria is used for additional classrooms. Drop-off and pick up timing and routines need to be set up and protocols put in place.

Student Services: Many of our students do not learn best with the distance learning platform. Schools will need to build programming and safe ways to help students who struggle with learning. A comprehensive plan is needed for students with additional learning needs and mental health ramifications from the lockdown and new school routines. Additional staffing is required to work with students who have experienced trauma during the shut down. In order to accommodate students who were not successful during distance learning and/or who are struggling learners, we put together a summer school program. Students who have the highest financial stress are included at the cost of the school. Eight teachers will be teaching throughout the summer for an additional cost of \$5,500 or more.

All of this will have to be done with an uncertainty of budget dollars created by a lack of funding from a reduction in parish contributions, and lack of fundraising for the latter part of 2019-20 school year. In addition to the increased costs, we'll have a lack of revenue from lost fundraising opportunities and other donations, which are critical to the operations of our school. Without the dollar amounts for PPE, disinfecting practices, and other miscellaneous items, I am looking at exceeding \$150,000 on expenses.



WE ARE:
GRACE.

**Testimony Wisconsin State Assembly Education Committee
Kimberly A. Desotell, President
Green Bay Area Catholic Education (GRACE)
June 24, 2020**

Thank you for the opportunity to share the impact of COVID-19, feedback related to the DPI Education Forward plan on private schools and our ability to support a reopening in Fall of 2020.

Kimberly A. Desotell, President, GRACE (5 years at GRACE plus 30 years' experience in public and private education in Wisconsin)

GRACE Demographics:

- Nine preschool through eighth grade schools, one system, fully accredited, 2242 students total
- One of the largest Catholic school systems in Wisconsin
- 300 teachers and staff, teachers are fully licensed
- Participates in Wisconsin Parental Choice Program offering educational options for parents
- 25% free/reduced lunch
- 23% diverse student population
- Partner with four public school districts to coordinate busing, student services and federal education programs as entitled by state and federal law
- Safe, orderly and highly academic programs offered

Related to the DPI Education Forward Plan (June 22, 2020)

- ✓ **Rigor:** Can we ensure reopening focuses on high standards and academic rigor at a time when learning and growth has never been more important?
- ✓ **Safety Logistics:** Can DPI help private schools by involving private school leadership and seeking input regarding our needs and challenges related to this pandemic?
- ✓ **Financial Efficiencies:** Can funding and resources be deployed in a manner that is supportive of private schools and minimizes varied levels of complicated authority?
- ✓ **Planning for Fall:** How do private schools plan for reopening when our teachers are off contract for the summer, and we operate with a very lean administrative team?

Areas of Hardship:

Family Structure: Families immediately lost daily structure and school orderliness which is vital for growth and development of children. Families also were presented with the challenges of inadequate computer devices and WiFi connectivity in homes. In addition, the hardship of families needing to work from home and provide child care for their family while being thrust into the primary role of acting as the teacher for their children presented an insurmountable challenge.

Transportation: Transportation decisions rest with the authority of our local public schools and input from private schools have not been solicited.

Teacher/Staff Challenges: Teachers had to learn overnight how to plan, teach and assess learning online all while working from their kitchens or home offices. Similar to our families, our teachers were forced to do such while caring for their own children at home. They needed to use many personal resources on their own. The level of learning was immense, stressful and also physically taxing.

School Lunch Access: GRACE schools deployed 30,000 meals during the COVID continuous learning months, tackling staffing and logistical challenges to provide a safe environment as well as addressing the health comfort level of our employees and student families. This process involved extensive planning, leadership and self-advocacy to coordinate successful program changes with the DPI School Nutrition Team- four waivers were required.

Teacher Pipeline: Additional teacher hardship presented through COVID is yet another hit on our Wisconsin educator pipeline. We need good teachers; we need strong and efficient paths to degree and licensure. This will be yet another complication in our quest to entice individuals into the field of education.

Financial:

- **Schools:** The unknown costs of additional cleaning and sanitation, Plexiglas barriers, additional staffing, PPE, logistical coordination of students, re-configured offices to account for safe visitors and medical needs of children, hand sanitizer, loss of revenue from parish investments are all unknowns to our budget. Our parishes are struggling also as they were closed down due to the Stay-at-Home Order and public health protection recommendations. Our parishes provide an incredible investment in our schools. How do we provide a quality, values-based education without adequate revenues needed to run our schools?

- **Families:** The deep impact to families regarding their ability to pay tuition due to tight finances, as many parents facing unemployment or being furloughed, impacts private schools in an incomprehensible manner.

Here is what you as lawmakers can do:

- **Funding:** Follow the process and formula you created for School Safety Grants. The money was divided equally among public and private schools and flowed quickly with reasonable oversight and accountability. The funds actually made school buildings safer, as the legislature intended.
- **Regulations:** Look for ways to say “yes” to schools wanting to be creative and nimble when trying to reinvent education, given COVID-19. You should be trying to remove barriers and regulations that hamstring our ability to respond to the new reality that is needed to maintain student health and safety. Creating some immunity from liability would be enormously helpful.

Please give serious consideration to proposals that simplify and stream line the choice programs and recognize the difficulties of documenting hours of instruction, accreditation and the myriad of other criteria that no longer make sense in a world of COVID-19, social distancing and state lock down orders.

- **Technology:** Address the state’s lack of broadband access. Help all students obtain the needed laptops and hardware for remote learning, regardless of whether they are enrolled in public or private schools.

Thank you for your time and I’m happy to take questions.

Testimony by Brian J. Betts, Principal
For the Wisconsin State Assembly Education Committee
June 24, 2020

Reopening schools in Fall 2020

Thank you for this opportunity to provide information about the impact of COVID-19 on private schools, and our efforts to resume “a new normal” school term for Fall 2020, after being physically closed by the Safer at Home state order this past spring.

I am Brian J. Betts, Principal, at Immanuel Lutheran School in Wisconsin Rapids. We are a rural school located in central part of the state. At Immanuel Lutheran School we enroll 181 students in grades 4K-grade 8. We work with 2 public school districts to coordinate busing, special education and federal education programs, which our students are entitled to receive by state and federal law.

We have 15 teachers and 14 staff. Our teachers are fully licensed and our schools are accredited. We participate in the Wisconsin Parental Choice Program and Special Needs Scholarship Program. Our families come from low income and recently will deal with the closing of Verso, a major employer in our community.

Here’s what we have learned from the nearly 3-month stint of at-home learning that will impact what we do in Fall. Immanuel was able to pivot in one day to go from in person learning in the school to a virtual learning model with the students in their homes. This instructional practice required teachers to adapt to using Zoom and Google Classroom to provide instruction to students in grades 3-8. Teachers in grades 4K through grade 2 recorded video instructional lessons that students and parents had access to support learning. During this time some families had challenges to be able to have reliable Internet to be able to support this learning at home. Students also did not all have the same support from parents due to their schedule. Some families worked from home which had requirements by employer to perform daily tasks and some worked outside the home as essential workers leaving in some cases students at home to learn and function on their own. The time of day in which the students were asked to be on line may not have always worked due to the schedule the family was working with due to closure. We learned that the amount of content we could cover online was not the same as in the classroom. Another finding was that it was difficult to have a high degree of accountability and assessment could not be standardized so it was not possible to accurately measure student achievement. All students were promoted to the next grade. The school worked to encourage and support to promote learning through virtual conferences with student and parents. This took a larger amount of time due to not being able to meet in person.

Immanuel Evangelical Lutheran Church and School
111 11th Street North – Wisconsin Rapids, WI 54494-4598
Church Office (715) 423-3260
School Office (715) 423-0272
Fax (715) 423-2853
www.immanuelrapids.com

Jonathan Petzold, Associate Pastor
Tara Barrett, Director of Christian Education
Brian Betts, Principal
Susan Cour, Admissions
Cortney Hahn, Athletic Director
Teresa Wells, Child Care Director

The impact on children has been in many developmental areas. Academically the students did not have the same instruction and feedback with teachers to provide appropriate ways to properly give student assessments to accurately track growth and academic progress. Students who have IEP's did not have the instructional needs met by the teacher due to learning environment. Students accountability to follow through and remain engaged in learning was challenged due to not being in the classroom. This impacted them academically with how much content could be taught during this process. Socially and emotionally the students did not have the opportunity to gather in person and work on these life skills. They need to learn how to work collaboratively in our world and these things can be done on a limited basis virtually but gaps still exists that limit growth when not in person. Students and families commented in lower grades on how they missed getting together to be able to interact and play which is how learning takes place in early elementary grades. Working parents who supported their children many times did the lessons provided by the teacher in the evenings which was not always the best time for instruction but was the time in which parents could work with child.

The impact on our staff has been different depending on the area of employment in the school. Some of the part time staff, aides, and hot lunch staff have been laid off and have filed for unemployment and still are waiting to receive any benefits from this program. They have a loss of income due to the closure which has impacted their personal finance. The teaching staff has had to adapt to a new schedule of working with families outside of the traditional hours of instruction to meet the needs of parents who are partnering in education due to their work schedules in an effort to support student learning. Some teachers had a major learning curve to adapt to the new technology which they had limited training and experience.

The impact on our finances has been challenged due to having to purchase additional resources to assist in learning in a virtual environment. The school purchased document cameras to assist the teachers as they prepare lessons and teach online. The school has also had to purchase PPE and additional hand sanitizers to meet the needs of providing additional protection to employees and those in our building. Additional cleaning and barriers have had to be implemented into the building to meet reopening guidelines.

The issues with re-opening in Fall will be to meet the requirements to provide for a safe environment for the students and staff. New procedures and policy will need to be developed and implemented to provide for a changing landscape in education. There will be a screening process for students and staff and having thermometers to be able to do this effectively will be challenging to efficiently do this in the building. It has also been challenging to be able to get PPE and cleaning supplies needed to meet the new requirements.

The long-term challenges for our staff are meeting the diverse learning needs that may need to be implemented. The classroom teacher will be responsible for instructing students in the classroom but also for those students who potentially will be absent for an extended time due to having to possibly self-quarantine. Some families may also want to have instruction in a virtual environment for part of the year due to wanting to social distance for a longer time period. Staff will have more management to provide for support in the classroom for additional cleaning and sanitation that was not done in the past as well as developing and implementing practices to social distance students in the classroom and move throughout the building.

Immanuel Evangelical Lutheran Church and School
111 11th Street North – Wisconsin Rapids, WI 54494-4598
Church Office (715) 423-3260
School Office (715) 423-0272
Fax (715) 423-2853
www.immanuelrapids.com

Jonathan Petzold, Associate Pastor
Tara Barrett, Director of Christian Education
Brian Betts, Principal
Susan Cour, Admissions
Courtney Hahn, Athletic Director
Teresa Wells, Childcare Director

The issue that concerns us most is the interruption in instruction that Covid-19 has caused for learning and education. There has always been a high regard to health and safety for all of those in schools. As directions and guidelines are presented, schools must be allowed to implement the guidelines in ways they feel will work for their individual buildings and space restrictions. There will also need to be considerations to how to meet hours of instruction when students are learning outside of the classroom. Learning and instruction can take place in a virtual environment but schools need flexibility in how they meet state requirements.

Here's what state lawmakers can do to help us address the challenges of re-opening schools this fall:

Support flexibility. Reduce bureaucracy. Banish rigid administration. Trust Parents. It will be vital to allow options to meet requirements for instruction because students may be learning in virtual AND in-person environments. Parents will be seeking options that provide the level of safety they prefer for their child, depending on personal and community dynamics. It is important that schools are allowed -- and even encouraged -- to be flexible in meeting the academic needs of students. One size no longer fits all.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Brian J. Betts

Brian J. Betts, Principal

Immanuel Evangelical Lutheran Church and School

111 11th Street North – Wisconsin Rapids, WI 54494-4598

Church Office (715) 423-3260

School Office (715) 423-0272

Fax (715) 423-2853

www.immanuelrapids.com

Jonathan Petzold, Associate Pastor

Tara Barrett, Director of Christian Education

Brian Betts, Principal

Susan Cour, Admissions

Courtney Hahn, Athletic Director

Teresa Wells, Childcare Director