

Photo by Ryan Wick

Under the Capitol Dome

WCRIS Battles for Equity in Pandemic Aid

For WCRIS and our schools alike, the COVID-19 Pandemic has been the mother of all anomalies: a blur of impossible and potentially defining decisions, usually made in a hurry, with no practical frame of reference.

As WCRIS careened down the highway of this year white-knuckle driving on this glare ice, we navigated many mile markers of great significance:

Victories for Our Schools

WCRIS petitioned Governor Evers and State Superintendent Carolyn Stanford Taylor to distribute the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act monies equitably to private schools in Wisconsin. This led the DPI to include private schools and staff in the comprehensive state-wide GEER programs it was underwriting, such as professional development on remote learning, school mental health efforts, and the like. Information on how to participate is at www.wcris.org.

Making Inroads

WCRIS joined a national lawsuit over the funding formula for the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) grants. It was led by the lawyers at the Wisconsin Institute for Law and Liberty (WILL).

While the courts ultimately did not rule in our favor, private schools' national advocacy led to

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Invite your legislator to visit your school like St. John's Lutheran, Racine, which hosted Assembly Speaker Robin Vos just before the pandemic.

Congress creating more focused aid for nonpublic schools in its second school-related relief bill (Emergency Aid to Nonpublic Schools, called EANS), passed in December.

Meanwhile, Ombudsman Abbie Pavela worked with private schools and public school districts statewide to get the much-needed ESSER funds into our schools (see the update on page 2).

Working with the Governor

Before states could get EANS funds, their governors had to apply for it. So, WCRIS lobbied Governor Evers successfully to do just that. Now, we are working closely with DPI and CESA 6 on the roll-out of Wisconsin's \$77.4 million in EANS funds. See the WCRIS website for more details. Read our Current Events weekly e-letter for updates.

Story continues on page 2.

Government Power to Close our Schools?

Another battle awaiting resolution is WCRIS's lawsuit against Public Health Madison Dane County, which ordered all school buildings closed in early Fall. With the help of WILL, we got an injunction against the order, allowing our Dane County schools to operate in-person. The State Supreme Court has yet to rule on the case, which will have ramifications statewide in the future because the case will resolve the question of whether county health departments have the statutory authority to issue such orders. Oral arguments were heard in December.

Hours of Instruction Waivers

Alongside the battles fought over school closures, there were successful battles waged to get the

legislature to: provide waivers for the hours of instruction requirements; waivers for some Choice program requirements; and, interventions on behalf of several schools to make sure they got their School Safety grants, despite Pandemic-induced interruptions in the grant process that pushed the clock to the deadline.

Your Invaluable Role

All of this advocacy would not be possible without your work every day, educating children in impossible situations with uncertain resources.

Know that you are not alone and WCRIS is dedicated to being your relentless advocate in Madison and D.C.

WCRIS is here to serve! Contact us at www.wcris.org or (608) 287-1224.

Ombudsman Helps Clean Up the “ESSER Messer”

During the national turmoil over federal ESSER pandemic aid, WCRIS spent weeks behind the scenes working with the DPI and the State Superintendent to reach a middle ground that would speed up the spending process and ensure at least a fair playing field for private schools.

A compromise was reached that required districts to calculate available ESSER funding based both on total and low-income enrollment and hold the difference in reserve until the national disputes played out. This safeguarded the extra funds so that if the courts ruled in favor of private schools, the money would still be available to share.

Meanwhile, Wisconsin Ombudsman Abbie Pavela was called on to mediate between private schools and districts in the distribution of the ESSER funding and in the equitable treatment of private schools during the planning and development of the ESSER programs.

Her efforts created many victories. Here are some highlights:

In one district, staff repeatedly refused to count all of the low-income students attending private schools located in the district and instead insisted on using the Title I counts for the current school year, which does not include students who live outside of the district. This shorted the private schools thousands of ESSER dollars. Through the Ombudsman's efforts, the district was formally reprimanded by DPI and forced to recount private school students to include them in the calculations, thus doubling and even tripling the available funding for each school.

In another district, staff created road block after road block, making it impossible for private schools to utilize the ESSER funding in any meaningful way. The Ombudsman worked over several months meeting with the district and DPI to change the district's policies and create new ones that would actually support the implementation of the funding for the private schools to combat the stonewalling that had been occurring.

All told, the Ombudsman spoke to over 100 private school principals and worked with at least a quarter of the public school districts in the state to ensure that private schools were getting equitable access to federal pandemic relief provided by Congress to every school child.

WCRIS Schools Make History Responding to the Pandemic with Resilience and Creativity

Private schools across Wisconsin have been rallying to the cause of in-person education and finding ways to safely continue live classes since the state's Safer-at-Home order was lifted in Spring 2020.

As each of our 600 schools across the state worked to protect their staff and students, they created workarounds and established new norms for K-12 education in the 2020s. And parents were thrilled. Enrollment at many of our in-person schools increased, as parents clamored for in-person education.



WCRIS Principals testify before the Assembly Education Committee with WCRIS Executive Director Sharon Schmeling.

A Capitol Summons

In a special invitation-only Assembly Education Committee hearing (6/24), five WCRIS principals testified on their response to COVID. Their stories were powerful, leaving legislators amazed at how our schools bravely forged the unknown, finding safe ways to hold in-person classes, while many public schools were virtual only.

Our stories were well told, thanks to principals: **Brian Betts**, Immanuel Lutheran, Wisconsin Rapids; **Kim Desotels**, Grace Catholic, Green Bay; **Dr. Kenneth Fisher**, Wisconsin Lutheran High School, Milwaukee; **Nicole Schmidt**, Lumen Lutheran Milwaukee & Racine; and **Mary Jo Vitale**, Our Lady Queen of Peace Catholic, Madison.

WCRIS Choice Handbooks Provide Help You Need

WCRIS has released an updated edition of its Choice Handbook, and created a whole new handbook for the SNSP program.

The SNSP Handbook outlines — all in one place — the necessary requirements and considerations that schools will need to understand before joining the programs. They cover many relevant and mandatory state rules, which are hard to find or buried deep in the DPI website.

Members can get these handbooks for \$50 a book. Additional copies of the WCRIS 2020-21 Legal Handbook, are also available.

You can order more by downloading a form at www.wcris.org/WCRIS-Pubs-Order-Form-2021.pdf and mailing it with a check to WCRIS.

Gov.'s Proposed Budget All Bark, No Bite

The Governor's proposed \$91 billion 2021-23 budget is filled with promises from the campaign trail, but the legislature says it's dead on arrival.

The budget calls for restriction on the Choice programs including enrollment freezes. It also puts limitations on the widely-used K-12 Tuition Tax Deduction, which WCRIS was instrumental in creating back in 2013.

The State's Republican leadership says this budget is "worse" than the Governor's 2019-2021 budget. They have vowed to start from scratch, creating their own version.

The budget must be passed by June 30. But, it could drag out if the two sides can't agree on a compromise. Spending will continue at current levels in the meantime. There is no government shutdown.

Stay tuned to our weekly **Current Events** for updates on the State Budget.

The EANS Saga Continues...

Part II Signed By President; WCRIS Members Advise CESA

A second EANS bill was signed into law by President Biden on March 11. It provides an estimated \$67 million for Wisconsin.

The major difference between round one and two of EANS, is that round two will not provide reimbursements.

Meanwhile, Wisconsin's work on EANS I continues with WCRIS input. Eleven WCRIS principals are meeting with CESA as part of an EANS Stakeholder group:

Kris Austin - Ozaukee Christian School, West Bend
Donna Bembenek - Catholic Memorial High School, Waukesha
Heather Corn - St. John's Lutheran School, Mayville
Brian Couch - Seton Catholic Schools, Milwaukee
Gerard Faller - GRACE Christian Academy, Green Bay
Kim Frederick - Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary School, Sun Prairie
Cindi Hummitzsch - Grace Christian Academy, West Allis
Jeff Lanier - St. Mark Lutheran Church, De Pere
Lori Saqer - Messmer Catholic Schools, Milwaukee
Jane Schueller - Diocese of Green Bay, Green Bay
Mary Jo Vitale - Queen of Peace, Madison
Ted Neitzke - CESA 6, Oshkosh
Abbie Pavela - WCRIS, Madison



Photo credit: St. Mary Catholic Schools - Neenah

The group will help inform CESAs of how the EANS distribution process is working.

Some of the areas that the group focused on in its first meeting in mid-March were professional development needs of WCRIS school staff and vendor selection.

The stakeholders will meet as needed during the EANS funding period, which runs through September 2023.

WCRIS Board Members:

Chris Cody - WCRIS Board President LCMS - South Wisconsin District

John Davis - WCRIS Board Treasurer, ACSI

Phil Punzel - WCRIS Board Vice President, WELS - Northern Wisconsin District

Peggy Schoenfuss - WCRIS Board Secretary, Diocese of Superior

Mark Buteyn, CSI

Nat Coffman, WAIS

Michael Lancaster, Diocese of Madison

Jim Moeller, WELS - Western Wisconsin District

Sue Burns Nelson, Archdiocese of Milwaukee

Sue Nelson, Wisconsin SDA

Tom Reichenbacher, Diocese of La Crosse

Jane Schueller Diocese of Green Bay

Donald Schult Jr., LCMS - North Wisconsin District

Daryl Weber, WELS - Southern Wisconsin District