

TO: Members, Joint Finance Committee

FROM: Sharon L. Schmeling, Executive Director



DATE: April 9, 2021

RE: Federal Pandemic Relief for Nonpublic Schools

There are over 800 private K-12 schools enrolling more than 100,000 students in Wisconsin. Our association works closely with the Department of Public Instruction to facilitate participation in federal and state programs which our students, staff and schools are entitled to receive.

We are very grateful that Gov. Evers applied for the Emergency Assistance to Nonpublic Schools (EANS) provided by Congress for Pandemic relief. The Governor's application was necessary for Wisconsin to receive payment. Since the United States Department of Education approved the Governor's application, we have been working closely with DPI and CESA 6 to assemble a workable process for our schools to apply for these funds. The Governor's office, DPI and the CESAs have been very responsive to our schools needs. The problems are not their doing; the problems were created by Congress.

As you may know, private schools across the state have been on the front lines of in-person instruction since August and were among the first brave educators to return students to the physical classroom. They raised money from the private sector, which has been under its own financial limitations through the Pandemic, for laptops, personal protective equipment, hot spots, disposable lunch serving materials, Plexiglass barriers, water bottle filling stations, hand sanitizer dispensers, and a million other things needed to safely return children to the physical classroom.

Their reward for this? Congress has made \$77.4 million in EANS aid available that, for the most part, is totally inaccessible and largely unavailable to solve real problems the schools are facing with COVID 19.

My counterparts in other states are equally frustrated by the lack of utility of these funds, which if unused by the private schools will, according to law, revert to the public schools for their use.

Congress has limited EANS funds to "12 allowable uses," which for the most part were tackled and conquered in Spring 2020 when schools first confronted what was needed to return to in-person instruction after the

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Governor's Safer At Home order expired. The minute the law was passed, it was outdated in its actual application to solving real world problems. Congress did not contemplate the speed at which the private sector moved to restore in-person education to our children. Some say we would have been better off financially if we'd kept children out of our school buildings for a year, as many public schools did.

For example, we have schools enrolling low-income, minority children in the inner city of Milwaukee whose parents do not want to return them to the classroom until the school's windows and ventilation are updated to address COVID 19. While these very same schools have access to hundreds of thousands of EANS dollars, they cannot be used for upgrades to windows and ventilation systems.

Meanwhile, the area public schools that have not returned to in-person instruction, are receiving millions of dollars in federal aid to upgrade systems that have not been used by students for over a year. The inequity of that is stunning.

There are myriad reasons and justifiable limits on how federal funds can be used in religious and independent schools. It's a waste of time to debate these issues, which cannot be changed anytime soon, while children need to be provided safe spaces NOW.

The bottom line: the only way nonpublic schools in Wisconsin can be served by this federal money is if the legislature replaces federal COVID aid with state GPR and allows nonpublic schools to make air safety upgrades to their physical plants, just as was allowed by the 2017 School Safety grants, which funded doors, locks and alarms to keep our students safe from violence. That program worked quickly and successfully to secure school buildings across the state and received high marks from the Legislative Audit Bureau.

We urge you to consider making budget adjustments that would free-up funds for nonpublic schools for air safety so our students and staff are as safe as their public school counterparts.

We stand ready to work with all interested parties who want to support the safe, in-person learning of over 100,000 K-12 students in Wisconsin.