



**WISCONSIN FAMILY ACTION**  
Marriage|Family|Life|Liberty

PO Box 7486 • Madison WI 53707-7486  
608-268-5074 (Madison) • 866-849-2536 (toll-free) • 608-256-3370 (fax)  
info@wifamilyaction.org • www.wifamilyaction.org

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**TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF ASSEMBLY BILL 970**  
**ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION**  
**THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 2022**  
**JULAIN K. APPLING, PRESIDENT**

Thank you, Chairman Thiesfeldt and committee members, for the opportunity to testify on Assembly Bill 970. I am Julaine Appling, president of Wisconsin Family Action. Wisconsin Family Action supports this bill. Thank you to the authors and co-sponsors who have put this bill forward.

Wisconsin Family Council, our sister education organization, was started in May 1986, and was begun as a direct result of a major legislative issue in 1983. In 1983, the state legislature was considering legislation that had two primary purposes: 1) to define what a private school is in Wisconsin, and 2) to establish officially what today we call home-schooling. Our statutes refer to this school choice option as a “private home-based educational program.” Founders of our organization worked hard, along with other concerned citizens and private-school leaders to get these educational options codified. I’m thankful everyday for their work and their success.

I relate this story because Wisconsin Family Action and Wisconsin Family Council have always been about educational options. In 1990, when then-State Representative Polly Annette Williams, a Democrat from Milwaukee, authored and successfully passed the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, we were there, supported the measure, and were thrilled when it became a reality—and established the first-in-the-country voucher program that has allowed some parents to get their children out of low-performing public schools and into private schools where they could flourish. We watched in those early years as the program took form, prevailed in some key lawsuits, and began to really flourish in our state’s largest city. We had some issues that needed to be addressed and resolved, and by and large they were. Some private schools were started for the wrong reason and ended up not surviving. These situations acted as a kind of “self-filter” for the program.

We championed and cheered when under Governor Scott Walker the Republican-led state legislature expanded the Parental Choice Program to Racine and then to the entire state as the Wisconsin Parental Choice Program.

Over the years with the formation of School Choice Wisconsin and Wisconsin Institute of Law and Liberty, we have had deep-dive research done that shows that students enrolled in one of our PCP on average do very well, often out-performing their peers in public schools.

In WILL’s most recent *Apples to Apples Study* (issued January 2021, covering 2019 test scores), Milwaukee’s Parental Choice Program Proficiency rates in math exceeded rates in Milwaukee Public Schools by 3.9% and 4.6% in English Language Arts on average.<sup>1</sup> The same study revealed that “Proficiency exceeds traditional public schools 3.05% in the [Wisconsin Parental Choice Program] and [Racine Parental Choice Program] schools.”<sup>2</sup>

This same study reminds us that “[t]he School Choice Demonstration Project (SCDP) was founded by the state in 2006 to conduct extensive research on the effectiveness of the [Milwaukee Parental Choice Program] using a wide variety of metrics. Scholars in the SCDP applied state-of-the-art matching methods to compare students in the MPCP with students in MPS who were similar in neighborhood, race, and prior achievement. Such studies represent the best analytic techniques, short of true experiments, where students are randomly assigned to a

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<sup>1</sup> <https://will-law.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/applestoapplesstudyiii-1.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://will-law.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/applestoapplesstudyiii-1.pdf>

choice school or not via a lottery. Among the findings from this matching analysis are that students in the MPCP were 4-7 percentage points more likely to graduate from high school (Cowen et. al. 2013). Moreover, students in the MPCP were found to achieve higher scores in reading, though similar scores in math (Witte et. al. 2012). Other findings, not related to academic achievement, include lower incidences of criminal behavior (DeAngelis and Wolf 2016) and extensive economic benefits (Flanders and DeAngelis 2017).”<sup>3</sup>

These programs save taxpayers money and in general provide a better return on their tax investment. I’ve seen reports varying from \$13,000 per student statewide average to over \$16,000 per student statewide average. The maximum voucher is \$8982 for non-special needs students, with students with special needs getting vouchers of just over \$13,000. Let’s just assume \$14,500 is the average per-pupil cost for public schools in Wisconsin. That means if every student in the voucher program got the highest voucher payment, which never would happen, taxpayers would save about \$5,500 per voucher student. The actual savings is obviously higher.

Right now, as we know, our Choice Programs are limited to individuals with certain incomes, in some cases to certain zip codes, and also by enrollment caps. It’s time to lift all of those, and Assembly Bill 970 does all that. It’s time to give all parents, regardless of income or zip code or number of people in their school district, an opportunity to choose the best school for their child.

Expanding the Choice Program stands to reap some very positive results economically for the entire state. According to a report released by WILL in 2020, Will Flanders, PhD, takes evidence from a study that documents that Milwaukee Parental Choice Program students are more likely to graduate from college and extrapolates what the economic gains could mean to the state if the programs are expanded. Dr. Flanders posits that Madison could see \$100 million in economic benefits, \$75 million for Green Bay, \$60 million for Appleton and \$24 million for La Crosse.<sup>4</sup> Education isn’t just about today; it’s about tomorrow—and expanding the Choice Programs means good things for Wisconsin’s future.

Our state’s Parental Choice Programs have been tried and tested now over many years. Studies continue to show students in these programs are, on average, certainly performing no worse than their public-school counterparts and in many cases, are performing not just better, but significantly better. It’s time to give this opportunity to all parents across our state.

Wisconsin Family Action believes parents are responsible for the education of their children. The more educational options parents have, the better as they seek what is best for their children. We urge the committee to support AB 970 and move it to the full Assembly expediently.

Thank you for your time today and for your careful consideration of our position on this bill.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://will-law.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/applestoapplesstudyiii-1.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://will-law.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/will-ripple-effect-v3.pdf>