



TO: Members, Assembly Committee on Education

FROM: Rachel Ver Velde, Director of Workforce, Education and Employment Policy

DATE: February 16, 2022

RE: Support for Assembly Bill 970, Statewide Parental Choice Programs

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Wisconsin Manufacturers & Commerce (WMC) appreciates the opportunity to testify in support of Assembly Bill 970. I want to thank Representative Wittke and Senator Roth for authoring this important legislation to expand school choice to all families in Wisconsin.

WMC is the largest general business association in Wisconsin, representing approximately 3,800 member companies of all sizes, and from every sector of the economy. Since 1911, our mission has been to make Wisconsin the most competitive state in the nation to do business. That mission includes making sure Wisconsin's youth are prepared and ready to participate in the workforce.

In 1990, Wisconsin led the nation by creating the parental school choice program in Milwaukee to bring education options to low-income students stuck in failing public schools. Since then, the school choice program has been expanded statewide so that students throughout the state have the ability to get a great education. Unfortunately, the statewide program has both income limits and pupil caps that restrict the number of students that can access this educational option.

Assembly Bill 970 removes the statewide pupil participation limits, eliminates the family income limits and creates an education expense reimbursement program (micro-ESA) for public school students. This bill helps us take a giant step forward in reforming our K-12 education system.

Wisconsin has increased spending on K-12 education for the last five state budgets. Unfortunately, even as spending has climbed in recent years, educational outcomes have not improved. And, we have seen this problem made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2016-17 school year, 44.4% of students were proficient in English Language Arts. That number has dropped in subsequent years and hit a low of 33.7% in 2020-21. In math, 42.8% of students were proficient in the 2016-17 school year. The number went up and down slightly the next two years, but then dropped significantly to 33.6% in 2020-21.

These poor outcomes are a huge concern for Wisconsin employers. It is vitally important for employers to have students graduating from the K-12 system that are proficient in reading, writing and math. In WMC's most recent *Wisconsin Employer Survey* that was conducted in January 2022, 88% of employers indicated that they are struggling to hire workers. As employers throughout

Wisconsin have severe worker shortages it becomes even more important that their future employees have basic competencies and skills for the workplace.

That is why our employers are supportive of statewide school choice for all students, as is done in this bill. They want to be sure that students have access to the best schools and the ability to partake in educational options that are the best fit for the student. The micro-ESA program created in this bill will further allow public school students access to wider selection of courses and materials that otherwise would be unavailable to them. The way to improve all of Wisconsin's schools is to create greater competition in the education market. As more students have additional opportunities, this will hopefully drive failing schools and the education establishment to improve outcomes across the board.

WMC urges members of the Assembly Committee on Education to support Assembly Bill 970 in order to ensure that all students have access to a great education.