

Untapped Potential

WILL's Analysis of Wisconsin's Part-Time Open Enrollment Program and the Need to Expand Course Access

I. Introduction

Wisconsin's part-time open enrollment allows certain students at public high schools to take courses at a nonresident public high school while remaining in their local school. But very little analysis has been done on the program. Through open records requests and interviews, WILL studied 26 school districts across the state to explore how the current program is being used.

The research shows that even though the current program has restrictions, students are utilizing it to access courses at other schools. These courses are often highly specialized – Livestock, Mandarin, Engineering – and not offered at the student's home school. Some take advantage of virtual schools to take courses online.

Unfortunately, our study also shows that there is little to no publically available information on the program. That, coupled with laws that unfairly prevent public schools from working with private schools, limits the program's growth.

Takeaways

- WILL analyzed part-time open enrollment at 26 school districts. Students took Livestock and Equine Management, Mandarin, AP statistics, Horticulture and Landscape, AP Music Theory, and Engineering courses at nonresident public school districts including Elmbrook, Racine, Wausau, Wauwatosa, Green Bay, and Sheboygan.
- Students are willing to travel to participate in classes at other school districts. For example, a student from Winneconee school district took Advanced Physics Concepts at Neenah school district, about 15 miles away. Virtual public schools are also common.
- Yet the program has strict limitations and little publically available information for parents.
- This is a crisis. A WILL analysis of AP courses at Milwaukee Public Schools concluded that only 5% of high schools offer an AP Computer Science course, 16% offer AP Physics, 26% offer AP Chemistry, and 42% offer AP Government/Civics. Northeastern Wisconsin public schools were worse with 0% of high schools offering AP Spanish, German, and or economics.
- A new bill, AB 849 / SB 789, could fix this problem and give children access to more courses.

AB 849 / SB 789, authored by Rep. Thiesfeldt and Sen. Darling would solve these problems. The bipartisan bill deserves passage and would fix a critical problem.

We surveyed courses in high schools in rural Northeast Wisconsin and Milwaukee Public Schools. Although these school districts have stark contrasts in geography, student body, and transportation, they do share a severe lack in Advanced Placement course offerings. Lack of course access greatly contributes to preventing students from realizing their full potential and is contributing to the workforce skills gap.

II. Parents – and Schools – have little to no information on the current program

Simply put, there is little to no way for parents to learn about the existing part-time open enrollment. Consider:

- DPI’s website provides a short explanation of the program but there is no centralized information about the types of courses available or even data relating to past participation.¹
- School districts rarely post information about the program on their websites and it is wholly incumbent on the parents and students to find the list of courses and apply – assuming that they know the program exists.
- WILL simply wanted to know how many students utilize part-time open enrollment. We could not do that. We had to submit open records requests to school districts for that information. To make matters even more complicated, districts have multiple ways and forms of presenting the information – which makes cross-district comparisons hard, if not impossible.

III. Even with limitations, the current program is utilized

Because there is no publically available database or easily accessible information, WILL analyzed 26 school districts to learn about whether students were using part time open enrollment either to take courses in their school or to take courses at another public high school.²

The conclusion – despite what some may say, part-time open enrollment is utilized in a number of ways. Some highlights include:

- **There is a demand for specialized courses that may not be offered at the public school the child attends.** Through part-time open enrollment students took Livestock and Equine

¹ Department of Public Instruction, Part-Time Open Enrollment, <https://dpi.wi.gov/open-enrollment/ptoe>

² Appleton Area, Beloit, DC Everest Area, Eau Claire Area, Elmbrook, Fond du Lac, Green Bay Area, Howards Grove, Hudson, Janesville, Kenosha Unified, Kimberly Area, La Crosse, Madison Metropolitan, Middleton Cross Plains Area, Neenah Joint, Oak Creek-Franklin, Oconomowoc Area, Oshkosh Area, Racine Unified, Sheboygan Area, Sun Prairie Area, Verona Area, Wausau Area, Wauwatosa, West Allis – West Milwaukee school districts.

Management, Mandarin, AP statistics, Horticulture and Landscape, AP Music Theory, and Engineering courses at nonresident public schools.

- **Certain school districts have a lot of students using part-time open enrollment to attend their classes.** 11 students from outside the district use part-time open enrollment to take courses at Elmbrook high schools. 18 students from outside the district take courses at Racine Unified Public Schools, 11 students take courses at Wausau Public Schools, and 10 students take course at Wauwatosa Public Schools. Part-time open enrollment was also utilized at DC Everest, Green Bay Public Schools, Hudson, Kenosha, and Sheboygan school districts.
- **Virtual public schools are used.** Students from all over the state use part-time open enrollment to take courses that their resident school district may not offer, such as foreign languages, chemistry, personal finance, and economics. The opposite holds true as well. Students attending virtual schools attended classes at the local high schools to participate in classes like band, choir, aerospace engineering, art classes, like drawing and painting, and computer science.
- **Students are willing to travel** to participate in classes at other school districts. For example, a student from Winneconee school district took Advanced Physics Concepts at Neenah school district, about 15 miles away. A student from Campbellsport school district took AP Statistics at Fond du Lac school district, about 17 miles away. Student from Milwaukee Public Schools took band and aerospace engineering at Oak Creek-Franklin school district, about 13 miles away.

Based on WILL's open records requests, Appendix A lists every school district that participated in part-time open enrollment during the 2018-2019 school year. Appendix B is a comprehensive list of classes students have taken through part-time open enrollment based on WILL's open records requests.³

IV. Lack of Courses in Struggling Regions

Overall, the state report cards show that Wisconsin student's proficiency in math and reading hovers around 40%. A deep dive into the data shows glaring problems. Wisconsin's urban districts have one of the worst academic achievement gaps between white students and their minority peers. In practice, the NAEP scores indicate that 8th grade African Americans in Wisconsin are performing academically just one grade ahead of 4th grade white students.

³ Appendices are available at www.will-law.org.

Sadly, student performance in rural schools often looks the same, or worse, than performance in urban schools.

These concerning trends indicate that we need to give students access to as many educational options as possible. Students learn differently so access to additional courses may help a child learn and supplement their education.

WILL was able to gather information about Advanced Placement (AP) courses. Access to AP courses is critical to high school success and every child deserves the opportunity to full-fill their potential. AP courses are a good proxy to determine whether students have access to a wide range of topics and courses. Research has shown that students that take AP courses attend college at a higher rate,⁴ earn higher grades in college,⁵ and are less likely to drop out of college.⁶ We surveyed high school course catalogs in Milwaukee and Northeastern Wisconsin, two parts of the state with struggling K-12 schools.

In Milwaukee, we surveyed every high school in Milwaukee Public Schools.⁷ The following information is based on the 2018-2019 course catalogs for 19 Milwaukee Public School high schools⁸:

- 5% of MPS high schools offer an AP computer science course.
- 16% of MPS high schools offer an AP economics course.
- 16% of MPS high schools offer an AP physics course.
- 26% of MPS high schools offer an AP chemistry course.
- 32% of MPS high schools offer an AP statistics course.
- 37% of MPS high schools offer an AP studio arts course.
- 42% of MPS high schools offer an AP biology course.
- 42% of MPS high schools offer an AP calculus course.
- 42% of MPS high schools offer an AP Spanish course.
- 42% of MPS high schools offer an AP US government course.

This is not just a Milwaukee problem. We surveyed Northeastern Wisconsin, focusing on school districts 40-50 miles north and west of Oconto Unified School District and as far south as Pulaski. Of the nine high schools surveyed:

- 0% of high schools offer AP Spanish
- 0% of high schools offer AP German
- 0% of high schools offer AP economics

⁴ Study by Chajewski, Mattern, & Shaw; Wyatt & Mattern, 2011

⁵ Keng & Dodd, 2008; Morgan & Klaric, 2007; Murphy & Dodd, 2009

⁶ Mattern, Shaw & Xiong, 2009

⁷ Appendix C, with the full list of schools in Milwaukee and Northeast Wisconsin, is available at www.will-law.org.

⁸ Please note: not included in the list of 19 MPS schools are 3 MPS high schools that only offer IB courses, 4 MPS non-instrumentality public charter schools or any alternative high schools.

- 11% of high schools offer AP Art History
- 22% of high schools offer AP government
- 22% of high schools offer AP computer science
- 33% of high schools offer AP English
- 33% of high schools offer AP physics

For example, Coleman High School in Northeastern Wisconsin only offers one AP course *total* and located just over 20 miles away, Marinette High School and Wausaukee High School only offer two AP courses total.

The full breakdown of high schools in Milwaukee and Northeastern Wisconsin can be found on our website as Appendix C.

Across the state, only 16.9% of high school students took AP exams in 2017-2018. While more Wisconsin students are taking exams than in previous years, it is still less than a quarter of the student population. Expanding course choice will allow more students to access AP courses if their own schools do not offer them.

Of course, the survey only looks at AP courses. There's reason to believe that course access is an issue for non-AP courses too. According to Code.org, only 42% of Wisconsin's public high schools teach a computer science course and only 87 schools in the state offered an Advanced Placement Computer Science course.⁹

V. Interest from Private Schools

During former Governor Walker's administration, the part-time open enrollment was briefly expanded to allow any public school student to take courses from both public and nonprofit organizations, including private schools (from 2013-2017). Sadly this was rolled back in the last Walker budget for reasons that have never been fully explained.

But for a brief time, there were partnerships between school districts and nearby private schools, which had space in their classrooms. For example, students from the Green Bay Area Public School District, Howard-Suamico School District, and Ashwaubenon School District took courses at Notre Dame Academy de la Baie. The majority of those students enrolled in Notre Dame's Mandarin and IB German programs. It was a win-win for all. The local public school districts did not need to spend resources to hire qualified teachers for Mandarin courses, Notre Dame presumably had empty seats to fill, and students could stay at Green Bay Public Schools but still take the courses that they wanted.

⁹ Code.org. "Support K-12 Computer Science in Wisconsin." <https://code.org/advocacy/state-facts/WI.pdf>

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February 2020

Karen Konop, outreach Administrator at Notre Dame Academy (NDA) with over 750 students, recently testified in favor of AB 849, explaining their experience in part-time open enrollment, and desire to continue working with Green Bay Public Schools:

“NDA participated in the Course Options program beginning in 2016 when the law permitted private schools to do so. We had students in four different school districts enroll and take classes in Mandarin and IB German. These students were able to do so until the Course Options program ended after 2018 and left these students with no option to continue their studies in these areas.

As individual schools, we are not all able to offer every opportunity in education for all students. However, together we can offer much more and access for all students.”

Notre Dame is not alone in its desire to work with parents at public schools. In an informal survey of private schools, WILL found that over 65% of private schools would be willing to allow students from public schools to take courses at their school.¹⁰ With over 170 private schools located in rural counties across Wisconsin, AB 849 could help students in rural parts of Wisconsin access courses from schools in their communities.¹¹

Alternatively, High Point Christian School testified in favor of AB 849, stating that they would want their students to explore taking courses at neighboring public schools.

“It is not always possible for High Point Christian to offer classes in every topic our students are interested in. AB 849 will allow High Point Christian students to access a course that we don’t offer. We would be willing to work with public schools if there was a change in state law to permit it.”

Current law prohibits collaboration between public, private, and independent public charter schools. With 25 independent public charter schools and at least 790 private schools across Wisconsin, the opportunity for collaboration between schools is great. AB 849 would lift these unfair restrictions.

Interestingly High Point Christian School educates over 230 students in pre-school to 8th grade. This indicates a demand for course access for elementary school and middle school. This is something also that is prohibited by current law and AB 849 would fix.

VI. Conclusion

¹⁰ Out of 28 private schools surveyed, 19 said that they would be interested in participating if the course was expanded to include private school students.

¹¹ Flanders, Will. “The case for school choice in rural Wisconsin. April 2017. <http://www.will-law.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/REPORT-Rural-Schools-Need-to-Expand-WPCP.pdf>

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February 2020

AB 849 / SB 789, authored by Rep. Thiesfeldt and Sen. Darling, would make Wisconsin a national leader in course access, ensuring that all children have the opportunity to reach their academic potential.