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Chairman Thiesfeldt and members of the Assembly Education Committee,

Thank you for allowing us to speak on AB 849. We believe that every student in Wisconsin deserves access to important courses – like physics and computer science. But the sad reality is that for too many Wisconsin students, particularly those in underserved regions, their schools lack certain courses. This contributes to inequality of learning, giving certain students opportunity to achieve their potential while leaving others behind.

What is part-time open enrollment?

Part-time open enrollment, previously known as course choice, allows Wisconsin K-12 students to take courses at other schools and education providers while remaining in their public school. This program has been available to Wisconsin students since 1997, but the current program is very limited and parents lack information about what courses are available.

How does the existing program work?

High school students attending a traditional public school may apply to take a course at a nonresident public school district. The student applies to the nonresident district, requesting to participate in the class. The resident district pays the nonresident district an amount equal to the cost of the course, calculated in a manner determined by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI).

No public transportation is provided by the district. A family may request low-income assistance from DPI to be reimbursed for the costs incurred from transporting the student. Families receive preference if the student satisfies the free or reduced price lunch criteria.

The resident district can prohibit the student from taking the course if the cost of the course would impose an undue financial burden on the resident district. The nonresident district can only deny the application if the student doesn't meet the criteria for being admitted into the course or if space is not available.

Problems with status quo

1. Lack of information

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.

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.

Even with little information available to parents, demand exists for course options. By contacting school districts and submitting open records requests, we found that 18 school districts had nonresident students taking courses at their school – both in the classroom and virtually, particularly in accelerated courses (AP), foreign languages, and the arts (including music). Through the existing part-time open enrollment program, students took Livestock and Equine Management, Mandarin, AP statistics, Horticulture and Landscape, AP Music Theory, and Engineering courses at nonresident public schools. Students are willing to travel to participate in classes at other school districts. For example, a student from Winneconne school district took Advanced Physics Concepts at Neenah school district, about 15 miles away.

2. *Lack of Course Access Contributes to Racial Achievement Gap, Holds back Rural K-12 Students*

Wisconsin students are struggling to compete with their peers and do not have equal access to robust curriculums. Overall, the state report cards show that Wisconsin students' proficiency in math and reading hovers around 40%. 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.

Part of the problem is a lack of course access for certain school districts. In a forthcoming study, we have done an assessment of different areas of the state on course access. For example, surveying all traditional Milwaukee Public Schools,

- 5% offer AP computer
- 16% offer AP economics
- 16% offer AP physics
- 26% offer AP chemistry
- 37% offer AP studio arts
- 42% offer AP US government
- 42% offer AP Spanish

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% offer AP Spanish
- 0% offer AP economics
- 10% offer AP Art History
- 22% offer AP government

- 22% offer AP computer science
- 33% offer AP English
- 33% offer AP physics

3. Law prohibits collaboration between public and private schools

Existing law unfairly prevents collaboration between public, charter, and private schools. During former Governor Walker’s administration, the part-time open enrollment was expanded to allow any public school student to take courses from both public and nonprofit organizations, including private schools (from 2013-2017).

This resulted in 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. The majority of those students enrolled in Notre Dame’s Mandarin and IB German programs. It was a win-win for all.

But in the 2017-2019 budget, this program was rolled back to prevent public school students from taking courses at private schools.

AB 849 would make Wisconsin a national leader in course access

1. Expands the program to allow students at public schools to take courses at private and public charter schools.

The existing law does not explicitly include public charter schools and the bill will require public charter schools to participate in the program. The bill also returns the program to the Walker-era to allow public school students to take courses at both public and private schools.

2. Allow students at private schools to take courses at public and private schools.

The program allows, for the first time, private school students to participate and take courses at other participating schools, including public schools. This will allow an education marketplace to develop because private schools can opt into participation for their students.

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.¹

3. Increase transparency on the program to give more information to parents and schools.

There is very little information about the program from the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) and rarely information posted on school district websites. The bill will require DPI to

¹ 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.

include more information about courses available and all participating schools. The bill will also require participating private schools to include information about the program, if they have opted in.

4. *Provides access to additional funding for rural and economically disadvantaged students.*

Existing law gives economically disadvantaged families access to a transportation voucher from DPI to help cover transportation costs. The bill also gives families who live in rural areas access to a transportation voucher to cover costs. This is vital for Wisconsin rural communities when schools are located several miles apart.

Thank you so much for the time. Do not hesitate to reach out if you have any questions.

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