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To: Joint Finance Committee Members
From: Ken Taylor, WCCF Executive Director
Re: Milwaukee Parental Choice Program – Program Expansion (#551)
Milwaukee Parental Choice Program – Required Tests (#552)

We urge the Joint Finance Committee to consider alternatives to the Governor's Budget proposal in two specific areas:

Recommendation on the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program Expansion (#551): We urge the Committee to adopt Alternative A.6 which deletes provisions for the expansion of the choice program to families whose income exceeds the current limit. We do not make a recommendation related to Alternatives B. and C.

Discussion: The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program was initiated to provide low-income families with the opportunity to attend a private school in the City of Milwaukee with the hope that overall academic achievement would improve. The program parameters requiring that beneficiaries be from low-income families attending schools within the City of Milwaukee has limited the transfer of public funds to private programs. During a time when public school funding is being reduced substantially, additional controls are being placed on districts' ability to levy funds to make up for those reductions, and property tax revenues may be declining, it seems counter-productive to further deplete the resources available to public schools to meet the needs of all its students, whether they be low-income or not, special needs or not, and talented and gifted or not. Given the disparities in the level of children with special needs enrolled in the Parental Choice Program schools compared to Milwaukee Public Schools, we believe it is likely that further reductions in funding to public schools will exacerbate the growing competition for scarce resources that too often pit groups against each other.

Recommendation on Required Tests for the Parental Choice Program (#552): We urge the committee to adopt Alternative 3 and delete that portion of the proposal that would eliminate the requirement for Parental Choice schools to administer achievement tests that are the same as those required in the public schools.

Discussion: Schools that are receiving public funds and are charged with the responsibility of educating our children, whether they are private or public, should be held to the same standards in testing so that policy-makers and educators can be held accountable for delivering quality educational services to children. Only recently have private Choice schools been required to take the same tests as students in the public schools, and while there may be varying interpretations of the results, there can be little doubt that policy-makers and parents have a right to know how well their child is doing in a Choice schools in comparison to a public school. The most obvious vehicle for ensuring this can be done is to ensure that children are taking the same test across all schools. Choice schools should not be less accountable than public schools.