

TO: Members, Assembly Committee on Local Government

FROM: Sharon L. Schmeling, Executive Director

SUBJECT: AB 245 - Sales tax increase and school crime reporting requirement

DATE: May 4, 2023

Thank you for your consideration. The Wisconsin Council of Religious and Independent Schools (WCRIS) has no position on AB-245. But we have some serious concerns about some of its provisions. We provide our perspective for information only.

As you may know, WCRIS represents over 600 private schools and over 100,000 students in K-12 schools across the state. About two-thirds of those schools utilize the choice programs to carry out their mission of expanding access to the education they provide.

WCRIS takes no position on the sales tax increase. We would like to address the provision requiring Choice schools to report incidents of crime that take place on school grounds. We fully understand the need for safe schools and are committed to improving safety measures at all schools. In fact, many of our families choose Choices schools because they provide a safe environment for their children.

As you deliberate about the sales tax increase, please consider our concerns with the implementation of the crime reporting requirement. WCRIS voiced these concerns when a similar bill, AB-53, had a hearing this session. Many other groups also opposed this reporting requirement for a variety of logistical reasons, which have been identified for years.

WCRIS is specifically concerned about the following:

1. School safety is an issue that needs prevention efforts. WCRIS is concerned that this provision could hinder educators from calling the police because they fear their cries for help will show up on statistics. Due to general societal violence and mass shootings, we need more school staff comfortable with law enforcement, not less.
2. How do the Constitutional “innocent until proven guilty” protections fit within the context of reporting a criminal charge? A charge does not prove that someone committed a crime. Anyone can be charged. Charges often drastically differ from a layman’s interpretation of the events, for good reason.
3. The 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. limits are too early and too late in the day to hold school administrators responsible. Many administrators do come early or stay late. But

they are more than likely gone before 10 p.m., leaving only security and janitorial staff to lock up. Mandatory reporting should be only required for an hour before the school day begins and two hours after the school day ends.

4. Police departments should be required to collect the information and send it to the Department of Justice Office of School Safety, which can collate it and issue an annual report to each school that could be shared with the public. We should let public safety experts report the charges, not school leaders with no official access to accurate information.
5. Private schools will struggle to comply with additional state-mandated paperwork. Our administrators are already overworked with teacher and substitute teacher shortages. And, such a requirement will make it harder to recruit administrators.
6. The state voucher amount is already not sufficient to cover the full costs of education. This potential reporting requirement will require additional non-remunerated work for our school leaders.

Please take time to resolve or address these issues before including the crime reporting requirement in this bill.

Please don't hesitate to contact me if WCRIS can be of additional service.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sharon L. Schmeling". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Sharon Schmeling
WCRIS Executive Director