

Opening Statement of Chairman Ron Johnson

“The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program: A Pioneer for School Choice Programs Nationwide”

July 20, 2015

As prepared for delivery:

Good afternoon and welcome.

I would like to open this by thanking St. Marcus Lutheran School for hosting this important hearing. Some other schools also offered their facilities and staff when the committee was planning this hearing, and I would like to thank them for their generous assistance. Most of all, I would like to thank every parent in the audience today for taking the time and making the effort to attend this hearing.

We all have one thing in common: We all want a prosperous America. An important step is educational success for all children.

The issue of school choice is particularly important to me. In many cities, public schools are working poorly. Children trapped in these schools have a reduced chance of escaping poverty. A child’s future should not be pre-determined by ZIP code or by a lottery to get into one of a few good schools.

As chairman of the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, I have the opportunity to oversee operations across the federal government. One of the areas of jurisdiction that my committee oversees is the District of Columbia, which has some of the worst public schools in the nation. But Washington also has its own school choice program, and this fall, Congress is going to debate whether to continue this program, which has given thousands of poor children a better shot at a good education.

Fortunately, being from the great state of Wisconsin, I know that Congress can gain insight from the oldest and largest urban school choice program in the country, the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program.

I would be remiss if I didn’t point out that the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, and dozens of school choice programs across the country, would not exist if it were not for the tireless effort

Contacts:

Melinda Schnell, Communications Director: Melinda_Schnell@ronjohnson.senate.gov

Patrick McIlheran, Communications Advisor: Patrick_McIlheran@ronjohnson.senate.gov



by the late Assemblywoman Polly Williams, who helped draft the legislation in the Wisconsin state Legislature that created Milwaukee's program.

Just as crucial was Dr. Howard Fuller, who unfortunately cannot be with us here today. Dr. Fuller, who was then the superintendent of Milwaukee Public Schools, chose to put students' needs first by embracing school choice. He continues that legacy through his education reforms efforts at the Black Alliance for Educational Options. The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program was signed into law by Governor Tommy Thompson in 1989. It has grown steadily. Now schools in it educate more than 24,000 children in Milwaukee, a number that suggests many parents find it a valuable way to choose an education they find well suited to their children.

I hope in this hearing to find out why. Why are parents choosing to make the effort to apply for the program and choose a private school for their children? Does the program produce better results? Are students more likely to graduate from schools the program opens up to them? What is happening in these schools that contributes to those results?

The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program has survived a series of legal challenges in the 1990s, but in recent years it has faced new scrutiny from the current administration. Since 2011, the U.S. Department of Justice has been investigating the program based on complaints from activist groups alleging discrimination against students with disabilities. To date, the Department of Justice has not found any evidence of such discrimination.

Last month, I wrote to the Department of Justice to gain a better understanding of the investigation. The Department of Justice has declined to provide even basic information and has asserted that it will continue to monitor Milwaukee's program. I invited the Justice Department to testify today. Unfortunately, the department declined.

I will continue to pursue answers from the department and will consider all available options, including subpoenas, to obtain transparency. Wisconsin parents, teachers and children deserve that.

Today, we will hear from individuals who have participated in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, from an expert who has researched the program for more than 20 years, and from another expert who can speak to the legal challenges facing the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program and other school choice programs around the country. I thank you all for being here today, and I look forward to your testimony.

###

Contacts:

Melinda Schnell, Communications Director: Melinda_Schnell@ronjohnson.senate.gov

Patrick McIlheran, Communications Advisor: Patrick_McIlheran@ronjohnson.senate.gov