

Luther Preparatory School's decision to enter Parental Choice Programs in Wisconsin

What is Parental Choice

- It is a program in which a parent receives a voucher from the state of Wisconsin that pays the tuition cost of education at participating private and religious schools.
- These three programs are limited to those families living in 1) Milwaukee or 2) the Racine Unified School District with adjusted gross incomes at or below 300% of federal poverty, and to 3) those families living throughout the rest of the state of Wisconsin with adjusted gross incomes at or below 185% of the federal poverty.
- Some have made comparison to the Federal Pell Grant Program in which the government gives money to qualifying students to attend Martin Luther College (MLC). Thousands of WELS members have received such government funds.
- Approximately 275 Wisconsin schools are participating in the program
- 7 of the 9 WELS Area Lutheran High Schools in Wisconsin are participating. One more is considering.

Background

- The Luther Preparatory School (LPS) Governing Board explored and studied Parental Choice for 18 months.
- They examined the doctrines of Church and State, Fellowship, and Stewardship.
- President Crass presented Parental Choice to the synod's Conference of Presidents in May of 2016.
- Six WELS Districts at their June 2016 conventions addressed Luther Prep's consideration of entering the Parental Choice Programs. One district spoke completely against LPS participating. One district listed a page of positive comments and four pages of constructive criticism. Four districts expressed support for the LPS Governing Board to make an appropriate decision.
- Letters and e-mails were sent, phone calls made, and face-to-face comments were given to LPS Governing Board members and administration. Some shared concerns about LPS entering the program. Others gave encouragement to enter the program.
- At its September 2016 meeting the Governing Board voted to proceed cautiously with the three parental choice programs in Wisconsin for the 2017-18 school year. (Note: this decision is for one year only. Another vote would be required to continue for the 2018-19 school year).

Why did the Governing Board make this decision?

- The cost associated with schooling has been a reason some parents have not sent their children to LPS, even though they have desired to do so.
- The LPS Governing Board has stated, “Our single goal is to have as many WELS students as we can on our campus receiving encouragement and preparation for a lifetime of service in the public ministry of WELS.”

What conditions are made on participating schools?

- LPS meets the conditions for financial viability, hours of instruction, occupancy standards, and testing.
- LPS will not be required to change its discipline procedures, curriculum, or graduation requirements.
- LPS will have to accept the voucher from the parent as full tuition and cannot charge additional fees. LPS will still be able to charge room and board in full.
- LPS will have to use a random selection process to determine what applicants are accepted. This means there is a potential that students outside of our fellowship could apply and randomly be chosen.
- Parents of Choice students (not the students themselves) can opt their children out of religious activities.

Are there any potential challenges that could arise from Luther Prep entering the Choice Programs?

- A student outside of WELS fellowship could apply and be selected, even though that is not the desire of the Governing Board. The LPS curriculum is designed for enrollment at MLC. The Governing Board is of the opinion that LPS will not be attractive to those outside of our fellowship because of our purpose and our curriculum which has a heavy emphasis on religion (Biblical/Lutheran doctrine), languages, and music. Every Choice parent has to meet with President Crass to verify residency and income. At those meetings, the aforementioned would be discussed.
It is an unknown whether or not those outside of our fellowship would ever apply. The Governing Board is completely aware of such a possibility and would evaluate Luther Prep’s participation, should it become a reality.
- The “opt out of religious activities” causes concern for some. It is quite obvious that a WELS student’s parents in Parental Choice would not opt their child out of religious activities. More than a thousand students have been Choice students at our Area Lutheran High Schools, and not a one has opted out of religious activities.
- Other challenges? Possibly. Every year Luther Prep faces challenges because we are in the Church Militant.

Are there financial ramifications?

- Luther Prep will pay approximately \$15,000 - \$20,000 each year to participate in the program. More than half of that cost will be for an annual audit.
- Luther Prep always receives \$6,400 in tuition payment for each student. In many cases the cost is shared by parents and aid from Luther Prep. Some congregations and districts also will give assistance.

Parents in Parental Choice would make the entire tuition payment from the voucher they receive. This could free up additional financial aid monies for other families across the country which are not able to participate in Parental Choice.

What occasion could cause Luther Prep to exit Parental Choice?

- If a condition is attached by the state which would force LPS to join hands in false doctrine (sin), then LPS would exit immediately.
- If a challenge arises which negatively impacts the purpose of LPS, then LPS would also exit the Choice Program.
- The Governing Board has exit strategies in place.

Words from Luther Prep's president

“Seven men on the LPS Governing Board were elected by their districts, and the chairman was elected by the synod in convention. These eight men (pastors, teachers, and laymen) represent eight different districts. To a man they completely understand the purpose of LPS. Even more, they support it, promote it, and *guard* it. They have exit strategies in place. They have made the decision for one year only, and will continue to make the decision on an annual basis, understanding what might be fine and workable now might not be in days or years to come.”