

MJC  
POSITION ON STATE GRANTS TO PARENTS OF PAROCHIAL SCHOOL CHILDREN  
April 30, 1969

Since 1939 the Milwaukee Jewish Council has served as the human relations and educational agency of the Jewish community of Milwaukee. Its constituent organizations are the American Jewish Committee, American Jewish Congress, B'nai B'rith Anti-Defamation League, Jewish Labor Committee and the Jewish War Veterans. The work of the Council is dedicated to full and equal opportunity in a free society for all Americans without regard to race or religion. We have given our support to public education and to equal opportunity in our public schools because we believe the vitality of public education is essential to our continuing national unity and progress.

We are therefore opposed to those Bills now before the Legislature which would provide for the payment of state funds to the parents of children attending private and parochial schools. The enactment of such proposals holds the greatest danger to the future of public education in our state. To divert the states limited resources from already starved public education at a time when the schools are increasingly burdened by social and educational problems could sound the death knell of our public schools.

A system of grants to private schools would encourage the proliferation of private school systems. In the city of Milwaukee there are such private systems in formation, and they are designed to meet the needs of school children whose parents have lost confidence in the capacity of public education to meet their need because we have failed to provide adequate resources to our public school. The development of competing private school systems, growing out of anger and dissatisfaction with public schools, would be destructive of our democratic heritage.

It would also in the end prove more costly in tax dollars to our citizens. If the legislature establishes a precedent for even the most modest grants, this would inevitably lead toward full support of private education by government. Indeed, such proposals are already being made. You would then have a multiplicity of competing private and public systems vying for the tax dollars. The result could be financially and educationally chaotic.

We recognize and support the right of parents to provide religiously related educations for their children. Indeed, the Jewish community has created its religiously related schools. But we believe, these schools, which serve a private religious purpose, are the responsibility not of the government but of the parents of our own religious community.

We hold that the proposal that the state reimburse parents for a religiously related education is in violation of both the U.S. and Wisconsin Constitutions. Article I, Section 18 of the Wisconsin Constitution provides "nor shall any money be drawn from the Treasury for the benefit of religious societies or religious or theological seminaries". Article I of the United States Constitution provides that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

We do not believe that it is possible to draw a line between the religious and secular elements of a parochial school education. Religious leaders of those faiths which support parochial school systems have made clear that the religious purpose of the parochial school is an integral part of the total educational experience. Accordingly, proposals to make grants directly to parochial school children or their parents are merely a device to avoid the State and Federal Constitutional prohibitions against providing state funds for religious purposes.

Senate Bill 346 would require that parochial schools whose children wish to be eligible for state reimbursement for tuition must declare that all children regardless of race, creed, color or national origin will be admitted. Implicit in this requirement is a fundamental violation of the spirit of the provision of religious freedom contained in our State and Federal Constitutions.

The State government would, in the enforcement of that provision, be required to inquire into the religious beliefs of children in attendance at a church related institution. The religious beliefs of the members of any religious organization must remain free from governmental intrusion. The allocation of government funds to religious schools would impose responsibility on the State for other intrusions into the area of religious practice and belief.

A host of questions arise. For example:

What are the rights with respect to mandatory prayer services of children who are not of the religious faith of the host religious school? Since law bans religious symbols from classrooms in public schools, would parochial schools also be required to remove religious symbols from parochial school classrooms in which so called "secular" instruction paid for with private funds takes place? Does it not create a conflict in religious identity and is it not an assault on religious pluralism to require religious schools of a particular faith to accept children of all faiths or suffer loss of state funds?

These problems all invite governmental interference into the religious affairs of our people and threaten the constitutional doctrines of separation of church and state.

In sum, the Milwaukee Jewish Council opposes Senate Bill 364 and all other proposals to provide state support to religious and private schools, either directly or indirectly, through grants to parents. To enact such proposals would threaten the future of public education which we believe should have our first priority for support.

Further, we believe that such proposals are in violation of the provisions of the Wisconsin and United States Constitutions prohibiting the use of public funds for religious purposes.