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Public testimony on Assembly bill 240

Chairman Krug and committee members, thank you for holding a public hearing today on Assembly Bill 240 which changes the school attendance requirement under Learnfare. Learnfare is a program intended to encourage school enrollment for children aged six through 17 who are children of a Wisconsin Works (W-2) participant.

As I'm sure all of you are aware, W-2 is a program which provides temporary cash assistance and case management services to low-income parents who are working or engaging in activities to help them get ready for work. Therefore, W-2 is a welfare to work program as it's for adults willing to participate in work activities in exchange for cash assistance and assistance in gaining the skills an individual needs to get a job and provide for their family.

Under the current Learnfare program, a W-2 participant is subject to sanctions if their dependent child (aged 6-17) is not enrolled in school or was not enrolled in the immediately preceding semester. AB 240 expands the Learnfare attendance requirement to allow sanctions if the dependent child is habitually truant or was habitually truant in the immediately preceding semester.

"Habitual Truant" is defined as a pupil who is absent from school without an acceptable excuse for part of all of 5 or more days on which school is held during a semester.

Let's look, for example, at the Milwaukee School District. Their 2015-16 School Report Card indicated the attendance rate for all their students was 89%. Looking at the total number of possible school days for their over 74,000 students, a total of over one million school days were missed that school year. Student success begins with attendance and this bill will provide one more mechanism by which we can better ensure our students are in school and getting the education they need.

Keeping Wisconsin children in school and making sure parents are involved in their child's education is vital. Truancy and unexcused absence from school can lead to poor academic performance, is often associated with dropping out of school, and can also sometimes be an indicator of criminal behavior and delinquency.

This bill promotes involvement and engagement by parents in their children's schooling. School attendance is not only mandatory, but key to a child's success. This simple expansion underscores the importance of responsible parenting, child attainment, and could provide another mechanism by which to reduce habitual truancy in our schools.

I ask you to support Assembly bill 240.

Thank you again for listening to my testimony on some simple changes to the Learnfare program. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Yours truly,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Joe Sanfelippo". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "J" and "S".

**Testimony on Assembly Bill 240
By Sally Flaschberger,
Lead Advocacy Specialist
Disability Right Wisconsin**

My name is Sally Flaschberger and I am a lead special education advocate with Disability Rights Wisconsin. Disability Rights Wisconsin is Wisconsin's Protection and Advocacy agency for people with disabilities. A major focus of our work both individually and systemically across the state focuses on special education and the rights of students with disabilities. One of the issues we often work on is related to school refusal, school absences due to chronic conditions, and truancy referrals for students with disabilities related to disability related absences.

Students miss school for many reasons but dealing with chronic medical or mental health conditions can be one of the most impactful reasons a student is unable to come to school. This is very different from a student who is truant. A truant student is a student who misses school without an acceptable excuse or reason. Students with disabilities can be treated as a habitual truant once they reach the 10 days of absence and consequences instead of interventions are imposed on the student and family.

Over the course of the last several years, I have personally worked with several families whose children were absent from school for more than 10 days. Often by the time these parents contact DRW, the students have been out of school many days, aren't receiving any education, and are being threatened with truancy. These students have often not been referred for a special education evaluation even though the parents have informed the school district the absences are related to physical or mental health impairments. Often parents have provided extensive medical documentation and access to medical professionals to verify absences and conditions with no further follow up of school staff in regards to how this is impacting education. In some instances, families have had difficult accessing consistent medical or mental health care impacting their ability to treat their child's condition and to obtain the appropriate excuse for the absence.

During last school year, I worked with a student who was under court order for truancy issues. She had been diagnosed by her outside mental health provider with anxiety and depression and was receiving treatment for a year before she moved to a new school district. She had started to miss school periodically in the last six months of her 8th grade year. During the summer, she had moved to a new school district and was having difficulty attending school due to her anxiety and depression. Her mother worked hard to get her to school. But, day after day she missed school and was counted as absent. The schools answer was to file truancy charges against the student. Several months later, the parent was given information by an outside mental health provider about special education. Learning of this option, the mom requested the evaluation for her daughter. This was seven months and almost 100 days of absences later.

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While the school district had a requirement under special education law called Child Find, the school district personnel never referred this student for an evaluation and never provided information to the parent about how to ask for this evaluation. The requirements under the current truancy law do not require the school to specifically consider a special education evaluation before finding the student habitually truant. A student can be found habitually truant with as few as ten absences in a single school year.

During the 2015-2016 Legislative Session, AB 488 was introduced to include require school district to provide special education evaluations and notification to the parent about requesting a special education evaluation. School Districts have a responsibility to evaluate students if they suspect a disability and to inform parents if they ask for what might be considered a special education evaluation. Chronic absences related to physical or mental impairments could be enough to trigger schools to suspect a disability. These changes would have been yet another trigger for schools to consider the reason behind absences and become a check point to be sure students don't fall through the cracks. This law would have required schools to consider at the 10 days of absence whether a referral needs to happen and more importantly require that parents be given information on how to refer their child for a special education evaluation. It was a simple but important change to the current law.

I would encourage your committee to consider the unintended consequences of applying the habitual truancy standard to this program. We believe this may impact families who are already struggling to deal with the needs of their child with a disability.



Metropolitan Milwaukee
Association of Commerce

AB 238, 240, 243

MMAC Testimony

April 18, 2017

**Steve Baas, Senior VP for Governmental Affairs and Public Policy
Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce**

Milwaukee's economy is global. Employment and capital investment decisions compete every day with the trends that both shape and shake our future. Investment will flow to regions that provide a stable platform from which employers can best innovate, produce and serve their customers.

For the first time since 1950, the working age population of the world's advanced economies are declining, and will continue to do so through 2050. Lower birth rates (dropping in half) and an aging population of non-working dependents will strain many economies.

Employers in the Milwaukee Region are feeling the ebb in the flow of this workforce tide. The metro area is projected to see the gap between available jobs and available workforce grow to 100,000 by 2023. These unfilled job openings are the projected result of modest economic growth, an aging workforce and a working age population (15-69) that will number 6,000 fewer than today.

We cannot afford to follow a course that leaves any talent on the sidelines. In 2016, 66% of African American Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) students scored in the lowest category on the state exam in math and scored only 58% in ELA. Unless these results improve, too many of our citizens will be benched from an economy that needs productive, adaptive life-long learners.

Metropolitan Milwaukee is trapped in a cycle that drains the potential of far too many of its citizens before they even reach a classroom. What we know about giving children their best chance is not new in this community — or others. Chances for success are greatly enhanced if children are born at a normal birth-weight to a non-poor married mother with at least a high-school diploma. For a significant number of children in Milwaukee, this is NOT the case.

- 87% of all African American children in Milwaukee County are raised in families at or near poverty level income.
- 79% of Latino and other non-white children at or near poverty level.
- 86% of all Wisconsin births out of wedlock were to African American mothers, 10% higher than the U.S. average.

The statistical outcomes for these children as they grow older starkly defines the loss of potential:

- The cumulative risk an African American male high school dropout has of being incarcerated by his mid-30's is 70%.
- Only 50% of fathers under age 30 without a post-secondary degree are living with the mother of all their children.
- 33% of children born to low-income, low-education parents meet a succeeding benchmark (such as graduating from high school, waiting to have a child until after teenage years, or avoiding criminal behavior) by adulthood.

And the cycle for low-education, low-income children repeats in the following generations:

- 78% of high-school dropouts had their first child by age 25, compared to 3% of young men with a bachelor's degree or higher having a child by age 22.
- 22% is the unemployment rate of young people between 20 and 24 without a high school degree. For those with a bachelor's degree, unemployment is under 5%.

In short, if we do not do a better job of how we educate, graduate and incorporate people of color into our workforce, our regional economy – and thereby our Wisconsin economy – is unsustainable for the long term.

This somewhat lengthy introduction provides the context in which I will provide much briefer testimony in support of AB 238, AB 240, and AB 243. Neither of these bills will on their own solve all the challenges I've listed, but each in its own way provides a positive step toward creating a system of incentives that will move us closer to our goals.

AB 238

We know the odds of success for uneducated and undereducated individuals. By creating a pilot program tying Housing Choice Vouchers to work and training programs, AB 238 attempts to create an incentive that will help individuals receive the training necessary to successfully integrate challenged individuals into the workforce. It is our hope that this pilot program will result in the integration of more work-ready individuals into our economy and ensure that the taxpayer dollars put into the Housing Choice Program put a roof over the head of success rather than failure.

AB 240

In my opening statement, I highlighted the importance of education to both personal success and to the creation of a workforce pipeline capable of sustaining a growing economy. K-12 education is an integral part of that talent pipeline. There are schools throughout Milwaukee that are doing heroic things every day to educate an extremely challenged population of children. Even the best schools, however, cannot educate a child who is not in the classroom. In the 2014-15 school year, the truancy rate in MPS schools was 46%. That is over 32,000 students

who were habitually truant. By adding habitual truancy to the attendance requirements under Learnfare, AB 240 makes a strong effort to make sure our schools have the opportunity to get the children of parents on public assistance the education they will need if they are going to break out of an intergenerational cycle of dependency.

AB 243

Matching workforce needs with worker availability remains a stubborn problem throughout the metro Milwaukee area. Part of this problem stems from a location mismatch between where the jobs are located and where workers live. While at the MMAC we continue to support transit and transportation initiatives to help connect workers to jobs, looking at the feasibility and desirability of relocation grants for workers who would like to move closer to employment opportunities is another creative approach to the issue that should be investigated. Given the workforce challenge noted earlier, all approaches to getting un-and under-utilized talent off the sidelines of our economy and into jobs deserve a serious look at whether they are possible, desirable, and cost effective.