



**Public Hearing on AB 697
Before the Education Committee of the Wisconsin Assembly
Wednesday, January 16, 2008, 1 PM**

**Testimony Presented by Larry Kaseman
Executive Director, Wisconsin Parents Association**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

I am Larry Kaseman, Executive Director of the Wisconsin Parents Association, a state-wide organization of 1,000 member families that was founded in 1984. WPA works to protect the rights of parents and families in education, primarily homeschooling.

I want to begin by thanking the Legislature for listening carefully to homeschoolers in 1984, for passing one of the most reasonable homeschooling laws in this country, and for not changing that law. Wisconsin's homeschooling law recognizes the right of parents to educate their children according to their principles and beliefs, not those of the state. This law has served hundreds of thousands of homeschoolers well over the past 24 years. It has also served the state of Wisconsin well. Wisconsin benefits from its strong homeschooling families and its commitment to freedom of education.

I want to make sure the Legislature understands and maintains the distinction between homeschools and virtual charter schools. Homeschoolers take responsibility for their children's education, including setting their own priorities and standards, choosing curriculum, establishing a yearly calendar and daily schedule, and assessing children's learning. On the other hand, virtual charter school parents turn their children's educations over to the state. They follow the curriculum chosen by the state, report frequently to the public school teachers directing their work, and have the state assess their children's learning. Homeschools are private and, like other private schools, do not have to comply with the values and beliefs incorporated into state standards. By contrast, virtual charter schools are supported by public money and are required to comply with state standards. In short, homeschools are very different from virtual charter schools.

I oppose AB 697 for three major reasons. First, the provisions in AB 697 would undermine fundamental principles essential to citizens in Wisconsin. Second, it would violate the sanctity of the homes of private citizens. Third, instead of saving taxpayer dollars, virtual charter schools waste them.

Beginning with the first objection, the Wisconsin Court of Appeals ruled that virtual charter schools are illegal in part because much of the teaching is done by parents who are not certified teachers, and Wisconsin statutes require that teachers in public schools be certified. AB 697 attempts to solve this problem by describing a virtual charter school parent as "providing educational services to the pupil in the pupil's home." **This provision undermines fundamental principles.**

As homeschoolers, we have worked very hard to get the general public to understand that parents have the right to educate their own children according to their principles and beliefs and that parents can homeschool their children without direct oversight or control by the state. The success of hundreds of thousands of homeschoolers demonstrates this, and Wisconsin statutes reflect and support it.

However, AB 697 would require that parents of virtual charter school students be closely supervised and monitored by certified teachers for two reasons. One, the statutes require that teachers in public schools be certified. Two, virtual charter schools receive tax dollars and need to show that this money is being used effectively and not wasted. However, virtual charter school parents are capable of educating their own children, as other parents are, without monitoring and supervision.

The risk from AB 697 is that legislators, the media, the general public, and parents themselves will lose sight of the legal reasons why virtual charter school parents are being monitored by the state and begin thinking that they are being monitored because they are incapable of educating their children without such monitoring. This would undermine and could eventually destroy one of the most important principles of parental and family rights and a key support for families, which are the fundamental unit of our society and every known society. (over)

Second, AB 697 undermines the sanctity of the home. It sets a precedent and provides ways for the government to monitor and supervise what families are doing in the privacy of their homes. It would give the state control and authority over the interactions of parents with their own children in their own homes and give the state the authority to make rules governing these interactions. It would violate basic principles of individual liberties and freedom. It would create dependency rather than independence on the part of parents and children.

Virtual charter school families are required to report frequently to their supervising teacher. Their activities are closely monitored, including the use of web cams that allow public officials to view what is happening within their homes in real time. We don't want public schools in people's homes to become the government's ticket into the homes of private citizens and set a precedent for further government intrusions into family life.

Third, instead of saving taxpayer dollars, virtual charter schools waste them. Under open enrollment, large sums of money are transferred from the school district where a virtual charter school student resides to the school district operating the virtual charter school they are attending. From that district, much of the money goes to out-of-state corporations and educational institutions making a profit by selling computerized curriculum.

To be more specific, for the current school year, the estimated cost per public school pupil in Wisconsin is \$12,000. (This figure is derived by using the actual 2005-2006 per pupil figure of \$10,989 and adding an average yearly increase of 4.5% for the 2006-2007 and 2007-2008 school years.) This year, the school district of residence keeps approximately \$6,000 even though the school does not see the student or do any work except for a modicum of administrative book-keeping. The rest of the \$12,000, an estimated \$6,043, is sent through open enrollment to the district operating the virtual charter school. (The final figure will be determined in May, 2008.)

However, for only \$1,128, any family can purchase a curriculum for elementary students from K12, Inc., the corporation that has contracted with Northern Ozaukee's virtual charter school. Just think how large the discount should be if a school district were purchasing 400 curriculums. Why are Wisconsin taxpayers paying \$12,000 for each virtual charter school student? How is this expenditure justified by legislators, especially those who consider themselves fiscally conservative?

Three additional points: First, some people may say that we homeschoolers are just concerned about the competition from virtual charter schools. Actually, after over six years of effort, there are only about 3,000 students attending virtual charter schools, indicating that these schools are not growing very rapidly despite free computers and curriculum. Although advocates of virtual charter schools have claimed that as many as 80% of virtual charter school students are former homeschoolers, our investigations indicate only roughly one third of the students are former homeschoolers. In other words, homeschoolers clearly are not flocking to virtual charter schools, and we are not worried about the competition.

Second, we are hearing today from families who claim that their children will be harmed if virtual charter schools close and they have to attend brick and mortar schools. Let me point out that these families have several other options. They could purchase a curriculum from a provider such as K12, Inc. and follow its clear instructions on their own. Or, if they could not or did not want to spend that much money, they could develop their own curriculum and homeschool very inexpensively. Of course, this would be different from participating in a virtual charter school. But it is important to remember that these families would have choices besides enrolling their children in a brick and mortar public school. Is it really worth undermining fundamental rights and freedoms, threatening the sanctity of our homes, and misusing tax dollars, just so a few families will be spared the inconvenience of choosing one of the other options available for their children?

Third, AB 697 attempts to provide a stop-gap solution that would have dangerous long-term consequences. It violates a number of what I see as fundamental principles of true conservatism. The basic idea of trying to privatize education by using statutes and public funds is a contradiction and an oxymoron. AB 697 sacrifices the independence of individual citizens, brings the state into the daily life of families, and makes families dependent on the government. It leads to a violation of basic principles of liberty and private interests. It gives the government increased power and authority over citizens and opens the door to government monitoring of the activities of private citizens in their own homes. It promotes government spending and is fiscally irresponsible.

A better solution would be to provide families with economic relief that is not tied to education. This could be done, for example, by increasing tax deductions for dependent children.

It is ironic that lawmakers would try to solve education problems by applying more of the same bad practices and, in the process, undermine one of the few institutions that holds some promise of a solution, namely, the family. I am surprised and disappointed to see conservatives supporting this bill. Perhaps that is because they mistakenly think it will promote the privatization of education in a healthy and effective way. It will not.

I hope the committee will vote to defeat AB 697.

Thank you.