



**Public Hearing on Senate Bill LRB-3144/6 or SB 396
Before the Education Committee of the Wisconsin Senate
Thursday, January 17, 2008, 10 AM**

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

Mr. Chair 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, grassroots 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.

Parents of virtual charter school students deserve respect for their commitment to their children and their efforts to find an approach to education that works for them. As a homeschooler, I am not at all surprised that having their children at home instead of in a brick and mortar school is working well for them. However, I'm concerned about the ways in which virtual charter schools undermine fundamental freedoms.

I am speaking for information, to express several concerns.

First, it is important to maintain 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.

Because virtual charter schools are public schools and receive tax money, they are subject to the same standards, accountability, and regulation as other public schools. Because homeschools do not receive tax money, they are not subject to state regulation.

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Second, virtual charter schools could undermine the sanctity of the home. 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 in 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. At the same time, because virtual charter schools receive tax dollars, they need to be accountable and demonstrate that taxpayers' money is not being wasted. A way needs to be found to gain this accountability without undermining the sanctity of the home. I am opposed to language like that currently in AB 697 that identifies virtual charter school parents as providers of "educational services" because this would allow the Department of Public Instruction to make and enforce rules about parents' interactions with their own children in their own homes.

Third, a way needs to be found to prevent unreasonable amounts of tax dollars from going to out-of-state corporations and educational institutions that are making a profit by selling computerized curriculums. Because costs of virtual charter schools are so different from costs of brick and mortar schools, a new set of standards needs to be developed to determine what is reasonable. At present, 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.

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 bookkeeping. 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?

One additional point: 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?

Thank you for considering the serious and long range implications that legislation on virtual charter schools will have.