



State of Wisconsin
Department of Public Instruction

Elizabeth Burmaster, State Superintendent

DATE: December 6, 2007

TO: District Administrators

FROM: Carolyn Stanford Taylor, Assistant State Superintendent
Division for Learning Support: Equity and Advocacy

SUBJECT: Photocopying Birth Certificates for School Admission

It has been brought to our attention that many school districts in Wisconsin have the practice of photocopying birth certificates as part of their admission process for new students. Wisconsin law strictly prohibits copying vital records. The applicable state statute is attached. This prohibition applies to everyone, including school staff, the subject of the birth record, and his or her parents.

In addition, a school staff person may not:

- ask a parent or anyone else to make a copy,
- accept an unauthorized copy of a birth certificate from another person, or
- make a copy of the birth certificate for a school file.

Photocopied records do not contain the security features that are present on a certified copy, i.e., the raised seal and the features that show if an alteration has been made. Copying makes alterations difficult or impossible to detect. Tests run by the State Vital Records Office demonstrate a person can make undetectable changes on a photocopied birth certificate in less than 30 minutes, using standard computer and copier equipment available to the average person. Clearly, these illegal copies do nothing to deter falsification of documents.

Making a photocopy of a true certified copy of a birth certificate for the school file also poses a liability risk to staff and school districts. This situation is also true for schools that legally accept true certified copies of birth certificates and put the legal copies in their files. These documents are prime targets for identity theft because they contain essential information about the person, including mother's maiden name. For persons who are adopted or who have paternity established through the courts, the information contained on their birth certificates may be sealed by a court of law.

There are at least two legal and practical alternative methods that some schools are using to collect the pertinent information and store it in their school records.

- Use an existing school district form to annotate that a school staff person viewed a true certified copy of a birth certificate and checked the information against the information collected or copied on the form.

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- Design a separate form to annotate the viewing of the true certified copy of the birth certificate. Relevant information would be copied onto the form.

If your school district currently has the practice of photocopying birth certificates as part of your school admission process, please take immediate steps to discontinue this practice. In addition, you may wish to destroy any filed copies of birth certificates within pupil records.

Please direct any questions you may have to the State Vital Records Office at (608) 266-1373 or VitalRecords@dhfs.state.wi.us.

c: John Kiesow, State Registrar
State Vital Records Office
Division of Public Health
Department of Health and Family Services