

Statement Regarding the Support of School Choice

Good morning. Thank you for your time this morning. As superintendent for the Roman Catholic Diocese of Toledo, I represent 62 schools in 19 counties across northwest Ohio where over 1,200 faculty and staff educate over 16,400 students every day.

With the recent debate over school choice legislation, it feels like non-public schools—and especially our Catholic schools—have been roughed-up by a bully on the playground. Between the political fodder of teacher unions, misleading narratives, and even the uncharitable comparisons of non-public schools to ECOT by politicians and public superintendents alike, I will be thankful to return to a semblance of normalcy when the General Assembly works out a compromise for families and school choice.

Today I would like to make three points regarding school choice:

1. School choice provides a public service to the state of Ohio.
2. School choice is a matter of social justice.
3. School choice is a fundamental parent right.

For 150 years states have been using iterations of school choice programs and today there are 27 states that have some form of school choice. As a result of that history and breadth of programming, there are a few things we now know about school choice. First is school choice saves tax payers money. In Ohio alone if you took the total number of non-public school students who do not receive any state scholarship and multiply it by \$10,000, (which is well below the average for some districts) you would approach \$1.2 billion dollars each year. Non-public schools are serving tax payers and public schools by sharing the effort of educating our young people.

We also know that all schools including public schools perform better in choice environments (Hoxby, 2003; Greene & Marsh, 2009). There is compelling evidence that suggests that a competitive education market correlates to higher student achievement.

One talking point that has surfaced in this recent debate is that local dollars should not leave a district. However, this argument fails to consider precedent. In Ohio, nearly four out of five districts participate in inter-district open enrollment. From 2008 to 2018 the number of students open enrolling in the state increased by 75% to just over 80,000 students. The very talking points that are being disseminated regarding local tax dollars are ignored when the choice is between public districts. Therefore, if school choice is a public good, limiting options for families to use non-public options becomes a matter of social justice.

School Choice is a matter of social justice.

In 1986, the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith connected school choice to an issue of social justice in that "whenever the State lays claim to an educational monopoly, it oversteps its rights and offends justice...The State cannot without injustice merely tolerate so-called private schools. Such schools render a public service and therefore have a right to financial assistance" (*Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation* 94).

We certainly support parents' choices for their children in what groceries to purchase or from what grocery store they shop. We certainly support parents' choices for which pediatrician they prefer for their child. And if one considers the growth of the school choice program, one could certainly conclude that in Ohio we

support parents' choices in education. From 2008 to 2018, school choice scholarships have also grown over 340%. This tells us that parents are not only finding and using options for school choice but they are also telling other parents about their experiences.

It would be both unjust and uncharitable to remove the possibility of a scholarship from a family hours before they had been promised one. One principal told me just last night about a situation with an eighth-grade boy who has been accepted to St. John's Jesuit in Toledo, but is currently in enrollment limbo. It would be further unjust to limit or roll-back opportunities for future families on the basis of public outcry in press conferences or politically motivated pressures.

Philosophically, a comparison between public and Catholic schools is like comparing apples and oranges. An argument of congruent accountability is trying to be made on the basis of presumed equivalent outcomes. However, there is more to Catholic education than just college and career readiness; our fundamental goal in Catholic education has remained unchanged for centuries. That is, we partner with parents to form children who participate in society as faithful disciples and one day, saints.

Our values and virtues that we profess and practice each day are not just add-ons to our educational programming. We present objective truth from our classrooms thus justifying the need for virtues. In 2019, the Manhattan Institute pointed out, "It is a myth that public (and charter) schools are values-neutral. All schools reflect some underlying value system, and it is useful to consider how these values differ across schools." It should be self-apparent that a values-neutral approach is itself a value, and in justice, we should support parents from low-performing buildings or low-income situations with an option for the value system that best reflects their preferences.

School Choice is a fundamental parental right.

As Catholics, we support a parent's right to be a primary educator, as well as the importance of providing parents with educational options. As Ohioans, we recognize this right in the Ohio Revised Code (3321) by reserving the right for parents to ensure a child's enrollment in a school.

Recently at a public forum denouncing school choice a comment was made about parents having the ability to make these educational choices. The speaker said, "Sometimes parents make mistakes," suggesting that parents may not know what is best for their children. Parents do make mistakes; as a parent I make mistakes regularly, but a parent's right to be a parent is fundamental, so their educational options cannot be limited by zip code or financial means.

Another talking point that has surfaced in this recent debate suggests non-public schools do not have the same oversight as public schools and therefore cannot be trusted. In addition to meeting the operating standards required by the department of education, we employ a form of oversight that we have been using for nearly 240 years in Catholic education. Namely, the relationship between parents and a principal and between parents and a teacher.

True school choice includes options for public education, non-public education, or the homeschooled. Committed to the virtues of charity and justice, we support maintaining or growing the number of families who were already promised a choice in their children's education. Thank you.