



HB9 Conference Committee

February 17, 2020

Testimony of Mary Fiala, Superintendent of Schools for the Catholic Diocese of Youngstown

Chairman Jones and Members of the Conference Committee.

My name is Mary Fiala, Superintendent of the Schools in the Diocese of Youngstown. We serve 6700 students in Pre-K – 12 in 26 schools in six counties: Mahoning, Trumbull, Stark, Portage, Columbiana, and Ashtabula.

As the people responsible to be the primary educators of their children, parents have the right to choose a school for their children that corresponds with their personal convictions and provides the environment they want for them to grow spiritually, academically, emotionally, and physically.

The state of Ohio has valued a variety of educational choices for students for over three decades that include vocational schools, charter schools, special magnet schools, open enrollment among public districts, and now opportunity for some private education options due to various state scholarships such as EdChoice, Jon Peterson, and Autism Scholarships. The strength of education in Ohio is providing parental choice that includes public education, private education, and homeschooling. One size does not fit all when it comes to children and their education, and no one knows their child better than a parent.

Our Catholic schools respect the work of all in education, both public and non-public. I have been fortunate to get to know and collaborate with public school educators, particularly in the Stark County area, in different initiatives and projects, both as a former Catholic School principal and now as Superintendent. I have the utmost respect for them and find them to be people of great dedication and passion for the care, well-being, and education of their students. It takes a village of dedicated committed educators in all settings to provide for the diverse needs of Ohio's students. We believe all of these options should be open to families. And we should not be pitted against one another when we are all in the same local community serving the people of that community.

I would like to address three areas that continue to surface in these hearings: funding, who we serve, and accountability.

Funding: Our families pay state income, sales, and local property taxes in order to support the common good. Part of the choice they make when sending their children to private school is giving up the free public education to which they are entitled and paying tuition. Our per pupil costs in the Diocese of Youngstown, depending on the school, range anywhere from \$6,000 to \$14,000. Our schools are funded largely on tuition, fundraisers, and philanthropy, as well as a commitment from the Catholic community.

If a detailed analysis is done on the amount of total state dollars that actually flows to families to support just the EdChoice scholarships, I have been told that at best, that amounts to 3% of the total Ohio education budget, and at least, 1%. Much of the financial discussion surrounding these hearings seems to focus on the foundation payment. This does not take into account other sources of money available to public schools. For instance, I live in Perry Township in Stark County. Perry is seeking a bond levy to replace much needed facilities. If the levy passes, another \$80 million will be provided by the state- 62% of the estimated project. Even though our four children never attended Perry Local schools, my husband and I always have voted for the levies. And we will do so on this one, even though it will add approximately \$400 to our property taxes. We chose Catholic school for our children, but we support the work of the local public schools. Other money available only to public schools includes state and federal funding grants totaling millions of dollars.

I have only listened to some of the testimony before this committee. But there were two impressive public school superintendents I did hear. However, when asked how many EdChoice students each had, one had none and the other had 1. My experience as a Catholic school principal, and as superintendent, is that generally, families don't necessarily leave a public school just because they are eligible for a scholarship. But the scholarship has allowed families who don't feel that their current public school is the best for their child the opportunity to find an environment that is a better fit. As a private school, we have the same experience, in that sometimes there are families who are in our schools who feel that the local public school may be a better fit.

I understand that about 93,000 students in Ohio take advantage of public school open enrollment, which means that district money follows those students to their new district. This school year, there are only 30,000 traditional EdChoice scholarships being utilized in the state, whose source of funding would be a similar deduct for a district.

One of the important jobs you have as legislators is to grapple and fix how public schools are funded in Ohio. I would ask that you don't do that on the relatively small investment that is available to families to choose a private school that may be a better fit for their children.

Who We Serve: In my experience as a Catholic School principal for 20 years, there were very few students that, when they applied for admission, I could not accept. If I couldn't accept a student, it was usually due to a special education need that a student had that, in justice, I could not provide. That said, there were many students that I could and did serve well who had special education needs. Right now in just half of our schools that were able to quickly provide the information to me, we serve 203 students with ISPs, 7%, along with other students who have minor adjustment plans.

Often a barrier to choosing our schools is financial. Before the scholarship opportunity, and even in conjunction with it, our schools find ways to provide financial assistance to families, often through the generosity of people who believe in our mission. That struggle continues with the EdChoice scholarship, as the current amount does not cover the per pupil cost; and in many cases, not even the tuition amount charged.

I heard the testimony yesterday of a single mom struggling to provide the best life she could for her child and her gratitude for the EdChoice Scholarship that helped her juggle her many financial and family priorities. I also heard the story of a public school superintendent who owes a great debt to the caring of his public school teachers who believed in him. But what if he didn't have that experience? What opportunity would his parents have had to change his environment? One size does not fit all, and parents deserve the best environment for their child, public or private.

But another requirement we have for our schools is that the family has to buy into our mission, whether they are Catholic or non-Catholic. We work to provide a strong academic program that provides enrichment and support, a caring environment where each child feels respected, but it is steeped in our beliefs and values. We expect parents to be engaged participants in their child's education. Our Catholic schools have a long track record of graduates going into public and community leadership to serve the common good. We need both private and publicly educated citizens to make an impact on the future of our communities, local, national, and global.

Accountability: Probably the most important measure of accountability we have as private schools to our families who either pay tuition or choose us as the place to spend their scholarship dollars is the retention of those families. If we are not providing the best education for their child, they choose to go elsewhere. Every child in our schools has another option.

We have always had a standardized testing program in which we monitor the progress and growth of our students. We use the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills and Cognitive Abilities Test, the Star Literacy and Math Tests, the Aspire, PSAT, and ACT. Results are examined and used to inform instruction for students. But all of those tests are a snapshot of one moment in time. Our teachers monitor the day in and day out progress of students to insure that they are accomplishing the standards. We need standardized measures to assist in the overall evaluation of our schools. But no one measure, given on one particular day, will ever tell the whole story for any school.

That said, we had 261 EdChoice third graders last school year. By the end of the year, all but around 20 had not passed the third grade reading guarantee. If you want to use this metric as a comparison point, you need to compare the students in our schools who take the test with the public school scores of the schools from which they came from or would attend.

In Conclusion: As legislators, you passed legislation last July that families and schools used in good faith to plan for the 2020-2021 school year. The current delay means that more than 30,000 students statewide already participating in the program are not able to renew at this time.

The public district eligibility bar for the traditional scholarship was not altered to compile this list. I can appreciate that sometimes unintended consequences cause us to pause and feel the

need to make corrections if possible. But the uncertainty of new legislation is creating hardships for families who planned to rely on the EdChoice scholarship for the 2020-2021 school year.

As you grapple with this, I would ask that you protect the current law for the 2020-2021 school year. As you are well aware, developing fair metrics for school evaluation is a complicated issue. To make quick judgments now just because of the increased number of schools that fit the current metrics is not doing justice to the complexity and importance of the task.

As you move forward in looking at the possibility of moving more to an income-based program, the financial availability for that will need to be addressed. With the data from our district that we are able to verify on our current traditional scholarship holders, at least 640 would also qualify for income-based. However, there is not enough money allocated for any increased need for income-based eligibility scholarships.

Any changes to the current program should grandparent present scholarship recipients and their siblings. Parents whose children are awarded EdChoice scholarships should be able to depend on the availability of those scholarships for the duration of their children's K-12 education.

Thank you for your time and attention.