

Testimony for HB 9 Conference Committee

February 17, 2020

By Tracey Arnone, Associate Superintendent, Diocese of Cleveland

Chairman Jones and conference committee members, thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. Your willingness to listen to all who will be affected by your votes on this issue gives your constituents the confidence in your ability to make an informed decision for the children in the state of Ohio.

I come to you representing the Catholic Diocese of Cleveland, but I speak for the children that we serve, particularly the children who are most in need, economically, social-emotionally, and educationally. I believe that the effect of the current proposals on the Ed Choice program would significantly reduce the ability of parents to have choices and would be especially devastating to our urban and inner-cities in Ohio.

My experience in education is unique. I have worked equally in both public and Catholic schools as an educator. During the first 17 years of my career, I worked as a public school teacher and administrator. 18 years ago, I made the decision to move to a Catholic school and have been serving Catholic schools ever since. All of my experiences, in both public and Catholic schools, have been very positive and have allowed me to see the power of a quality education in positively affecting our future. I strongly believe as Nelson Mandela did that “education is the most powerful weapon that you can use to change the world.” I also believe that all children deserve the right to a quality education. What is at the center of the decision that you are making is figuring out how can we ensure that all children in Ohio have the opportunity to receive a quality education. I would like to share my thoughts about what a quality education is, how it should be measured, and how the Ed Choice scholarship program is a solution, not a problem, in helping our state achieve the goal of providing an equitable, high- quality education for all children in Ohio.

In looking at the national metrics for determining the quality of public education among the states in our nation, the *US News and World Report* ranks Ohio 18th in overall educational quality, 28th for high school graduation rates, and 31st for higher education attainment. This ranking doesn’t tell the whole story though. There are many public school districts in Ohio that far exceed these numbers and provide an outstanding education for the students in their community. These schools are found in all of the affluent suburbs of our state. In a sense, parents do

have the ability to choose a quality education for their child by moving to these suburbs. Our urban and inner-city schools, however, face a tremendous challenge in providing a quality education for their students. They are chronically underperforming. Many attempts at educational reform have been implemented in these areas, but have not been successful. Ohio, like all of the states in our nation, has a huge educational inequity problem. All students, regardless of the zip code they reside in, deserve the right to a quality education. I would like to focus the remainder of my testimony on the students that make up the bulk of our urban and inner-city public schools. These are the students who will be most affected by changing the structure of the Ed Choice scholarship.

The urban public school high school graduation rate is 72%. The urban Catholic high school graduation rate is 99%. The college enrollment rate for urban public high school students is 46% and their college completion rate is 17%. For Ohio Catholic urban high schools, the college attainment rate is 86%. Research not just from Ohio, but nationally, shows that the more disadvantaged a child is, the greater the relative achievement gains he or she experiences in a Catholic school. (York, 1996) As a matter of fact, a black or Latino child is 42% more likely to graduate from high school and 2.5 times more likely to graduate from college if he or she attends a Catholic school. (Neal, 1997, p. 108)

What is so different at our urban and inner-city Catholic schools? They are educating the same demographic population as their public school neighbors, but with much different results. The difference is that Catholic schools first and foremost teach values and virtues. If you would walk into any of our Catholic schools, you would see a safe and orderly learning environment, but you would also see a culture of something much more: a welcoming community that teaches and models for our students to become good people who know, love, and serve God partly by knowing, loving, and serving others (Porter-Magee, 2020). Parents today, when asked, responded that “strong moral values” is the top reason parents choose to send their child to a Catholic school (CARA Institute, 2017). Another study at the University of Pennsylvania confirms that “success is not the number-one priority for most parents today. They are much more concerned about their children becoming kind, compassionate and helpful.” This is the difference between Catholic and public schools, and it is the reason Catholic schools have a higher graduation and college acceptance rate, especially in our urban and inner-city schools. It is the reason that I am here today urging you not to change the structure of the Ed Choice scholarship. We

also educate each child for an approximate average of \$4,800 per elementary student and \$12,000 per high school student, which is about 75% less than it costs most public schools to educate students. We collected data about how many of our students would not qualify for a scholarship if the changes proposed by the House were enacted and the proposed plan would result in a significant reduction in choice for those who have it now. Catholic schools in our urban and inner-city settings are a solution to the problems that exist with urban education, not one of the problems. Taking away this opportunity for families would make the reality worse for those communities. In fact, in the book, *Lost Classrooms, Lost Communities* (2014), the implication of Catholic school closures in the urban educational landscape is examined. Neighborhood social cohesion decreases, there are higher crime rates, and disorder increases following the closure of a Catholic elementary or high school. (Brinig & Garnett, 2010, p. 890) Again, I respectfully ask you to consider the negative consequences of a decision to phase out the Ed Choice scholarship program.

What I believe is at the root of the problem that we are discussing today is the state report card. Because the state report card is unfairly punishing some of our highest quality schools (i.e. Solon), many schools have unfairly been put on the Ed Choice list of poorly-performing schools. The report card needs to be examined and revised. The current report card is heavily based on academic data that is collected through state testing. If our state is to compete nationally in educational quality, why aren't we using norm-referenced tests that measure both achievement and growth? I would also make the suggestion that what is missing from the report card is a measure of positive school culture. If we hope to form students who become good citizens and who choose to do the right thing for themselves, for their families, and for their communities, we should include a metric for measuring the culture that exists in the schools.

In conclusion, all children in Ohio deserve the right to a quality education. An education shouldn't be based on a person's zip code. The Ed Choice scholarship has provided the opportunity for the past 15 years for students in poorly-performing districts to be able to receive a quality education. Our Catholic Schools produce graduates who are successful, college-ready, and most importantly, who have values that equip them to be leaders that are committed to serving others. The effect of the current proposals for this scholarship program would rob thousands

of students of a quality education and would further increase the educational inequities that exist in our state.

Instead of taking away and changing this scholarship program, focus on amending the state report card so that it more accurately measures both academic performance and cultural health in schools.

Thank you for this opportunity to share my thoughts with you this morning.