



## THE DIOCESE OF STEUBENVILLE

OFFICE OF CHRISTIAN FORMATION AND SCHOOLS

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RE: Conference Committee Hearings on HB9

February 19, 2020

Dear Chairman Jones,

I am unfortunately unable to come to Columbus and provide testimony at the committee hearings regarding HB9. However, I would like to offer you some written testimony, in order that you and the committee members might have some insight from the Catholic Schools (which are Chartered Non-Public Schools) of the Diocese of Steubenville, of which your own District 95 resides in.

I would like to begin by recalling how the Christian faith (and the Catholic Church specifically) has, always, understood and taught that parents have the right to make educational choices for their children, and that this right must be safeguarded. For example, the Catechism of the Catholic Church highlights the social justice dimension of publicly supported school choice, stating, "Parents have the right to choose a school for them which corresponds to their own personal convictions. This right is fundamental..." and "public authorities have the duty of guaranteeing this parental right." (CCC #2229) The Catholic bishops of the United States echo this "fundamental right" in their own document entitled *Principles for Educational Reform in the United States* (1995), which asserts that "[these] parental rights are natural and inalienable and **should not be limited to the economically privileged.**"

In this respect, Ohioans have much to be thankful for, in consideration of the publicly supported, state sponsored scholarship opportunities available to parents who desire to place their children in a faith based school. As you well know, the Ohio Ed-Choice Scholarship program provides opportunities for families who reside in poor performing public school districts (Traditional Ed-Choice), as well as families whose income falls below 200% of the poverty threshold, and could not therefore otherwise afford the tuition to send their children to a Chartered Non-Public school of their choice (Ed-Choice Expansion).

I wanted to make the Hearing Committee aware of how the Ed-Choice Scholarship programs, both Performance based (Traditional) and income based (Expansion), have assisted those families who have chosen to place their children in any of our 11 Catholic schools in the Diocese of Steubenville.

For the current 2019-2020 school year, the Diocese of Steubenville reported to the Ohio Department of Education, a total Average Daily Membership (ADM) of 1,377 students (K-12). 252 of those students, or 18%, are currently receiving some type of state sponsored scholarship, either through the Ed-Choice program, or the Jon Peterson/Autism Scholarship programs. Of those 252 scholarships, 196 are Ed-Choice scholarships, and of those 196 Ed-Choice Scholarships, only 15 are Performance based (Traditional) Ed-Choice Scholarships – that’s about 1% of our total reported enrollment.

The fact is, prior to this current school year, there were no Performance based Ed-Choice Scholarship students in any of our schools, nor has there been a single Performance based Ed-Choice Scholarship for the prior 10 years of my time as Superintendent for the Diocese of Steubenville! This is due to the simple fact that the public schools in our area of the state, who are our partners in education, have been relatively strong schools and were therefore not on the Performance based district eligibility list.

All that changed last year when the eligibility list was “unfrozen” and new public districts were added to that list under the state’s new Report Card system. This created the opportunity for the current 15 students we have under the Performance based scholarship. But when the eligibility list for the 2020-2021 year was announced, and several more public school districts were added to that list, NEW tensions between ourselves as Chartered Non-Public schools and our “Partners” in education, our local public schools, have arisen. Much of this is because students who are *currently placed* in our schools, who have never been in a Public school, are now potentially eligible for a Performance based scholarship, to be paid by the local public school – and as the Hearing Committee has no doubt already heard, this has created quite an uproar! It is a “bitter-sweet” opportunity for some of our families to suddenly have the opportunity for the Performance based Ed-Choice Scholarship, but at what is in some cases, an enormous and sudden cost to the operating budgets of our partnering local public school districts. **In speaking with several of our Catholic school Principals, while we are happy for the NEW opportunity some of our families potentially have through the Performance based version of the Ed-Choice Scholarship, we are not happy about how this new opportunity negatively effects our public school partners in education.**

This now leads me to write to you concerning that “Partnership.” I wish to echo the testimony given by the Catholic Conference of Ohio that *“Through the years, Catholic schools and public schools have been partners in the all-important work to educate Ohio’s children. Recently, this partnership has been strained. Catholic schools are not the enemy of public schools. We should not be pitted against one another as changes are discussed in school-choice programs.”* Many of our schools do indeed enjoy a wonderful working relationship with the public school districts they reside in; a cooperative relationship in addressing and providing Auxiliary Service needs, Title funds distribution, the Child Find process, and student transportation needs. In speaking for myself, I have had several discussions over the years with some of my counterparts in public education, the public school Superintendents, and many of them are very helpful and recognize the “fundamental rights” parents have to make educational choices for their children. And so again I say, as a point of emphasis, that *“Recently, this partnership has been strained. Catholic schools are not the enemy of public schools. We should not be pitted against one another as changes are discussed in school-choice programs.”*

Having said all that, while we believe that it is important for families to have educational choices for children who reside in poor performing school districts, those identified as “eligible” districts should be districts that are **truly** underperforming, and I am not convinced that this is currently the case in our

area of the state, given our history of almost no eligibility for the Performance based scholarship, as already stated above. Therefore, we would advocate that the state take a careful look at how that eligibility is determined, and perhaps make what might be necessary changes that are more equitable and reflective of a public school districts success over time as well as more recent demonstrated improvement.

Finally, I wish to now address what I consider the heart of the matter regarding the Ed-Choice scholarship Program, and in consideration of the particular demographics of middle/south eastern Ohio. Chairman Jones, as the Representative for the 95<sup>th</sup> District, you know very well that our area of the state is both rural and very much suffers from economic hardships. Our Catholic school tuitions are set relatively low, in comparison to other private school tuitions outside of our diocese, precisely because parents would not be able to afford a Catholic education for their children, if the tuition were set much higher. But even with our “much lower tuition” rates, many families who would desire to place their children in one of our Catholic schools, still cannot afford to do so, because of these economic circumstances.

This is why the income-based (Expansion) version of the Ed-Choice Scholarship, has been of great benefit to some of our families, and as I indicated above, the vast majority of our scholarship students are Ed-Choice Expansion/income-based scholarship recipients. Yet, we have many more families whose income falls just above or closer to the 300% poverty threshold who are STRUGGLING to adequately provide for their children and cannot afford private tuition without some kind of significant assistance! Therefore, we would advocate for these children that come from lower middle-income families, who fall through the cracks. Their family income may exceed 200 percent of poverty, but they are still unable to pay tuition at a nonpublic school. In other words, the Diocese of Steubenville Catholic schools would advocate for an “Expansion” of the Ed-Choice Expansion Scholarship program! The House proposal for an increase of income eligibility to 250% of the poverty threshold is simply not enough, and we would STRONGLY urge that the Hearing Committee make its recommendation for an increase to 300%.

Making this eligibility change to the 300% or more of the poverty threshold for the Ed-Choice Expansion/income based scholarship program will have at least two immediate benefits in addressing the crisis and tension with our public school partners. First, many lower middle-income families who currently do not qualify for the income-based scholarship, and were excited about the prospect of “at long last” receiving tuition assistance through the sudden changes to the Performance-based (Traditional) Ed-Choice scholarship, would now qualify for the income-based version, and this would provide much needed relief to those families. Secondly, because the Ed-Choice Expansion scholarship is funded directly by the state, and not the local public school district of residence (as the Traditional Ed-Choice is currently funded), the underperforming public school district would be provided relief from funding these “New Traditional scholarships” – especially for students ALREADY parentally placed in a Chartered Non-Public school, and thereby hold on to the financial resources they will need to help improve performance and hopefully remove themselves from the performance eligibility list! But this double benefit would only come about if the poverty threshold were raised as suggested above, AND the income-based scholarship became the default scholarship, in cases where a family would qualify for both.

Hopefully it is clear by now that I am asking the State to shift the burden of funding state scholarships away from the local underperforming districts and move that funding more towards becoming the direct

responsibility of the State. And this of course will necessitate an increase to those funds allocated to the income-based (Expansion) Ed-Choice scholarship, or the newly proposed Buckeye Opportunity Scholarship, that would replace the income-based program. Regardless of what it is called, our position is that by raising the income eligibility to 300% or more (thereby assisting the hard working lower middle income families) AND adjusting the current report card system for public schools (making it slower to punish underperformance and quicker to reward success), we will have a scholarship program that benefits all parties concerned.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Dcn. Paul D. Ward".

Dcn. Paul D. Ward, Superintendent  
Diocese of Steubenville