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Suzanne Lester  
Principal/Elyria Catholic High School  
Opponent Testimony/SB 241

Chairman Lehner, Vice Chair Huffman, Ranking Member Sykes and Committee Members, I am Suzanne Lester, principal of Elyria Catholic High School.

I would have preferred to testify before the Senate Education Committee in opposition of Senate Bill 241. However, a previous commitment precludes me from doing so.

I am providing the following written testimony as a matter of record before the committee.

I have become aware of SB 241 in recent weeks. It is apparent that this legislation creates a two-tier system for Ohio's nonpublic accredited schools.

With the passage of this bill, independent schools would be afforded a privilege through a newfound Division of Accredited Schools because they are accredited by the Independent Schools Association of Central States (ISACS). ISACS-accredited schools would retain all of the benefits of "chartered status" while exempt from provisions in the Ohio Revised Code and from future Operating Standards.

It is my understanding that there is nothing in ISACS that sets it apart from sectarian accreditation associations in terms of excellence. ISACS is not a standard to properly delineate which schools should or should not be de-regulated by the state.

Elyria Catholic High School and other Catholic schools are accredited by the Ohio Catholic School Accreditation Association (OCSAA). Accreditation for independent schools is not more rigorous than the Ohio Catholic School Accrediting Association and three other sectarian accrediting associations. Just like ISACS, the OCSAA process involves an intensive self study and a visit by an external evaluation team. Along with ISACS, these accreditation associations were approved by the State Superintendent of Public Instruction.

Moreover, what would this bill infer about the vast majority of school providers participating in scholarship programs that include EdChoice, EdChoice Expansion, the

Cleveland Scholarship Program, the Autism Scholarship Program and the Jon Peterson Special needs Scholarship Program?

Although there are several hundred scholarship students enrolled in Ohio's independent schools, they account for less than two percent of the total number of students receiving state-sponsored scholarships. Inevitably, questions would be asked as to why the vast number of school providers are extricated from the Division of Accredited Schools. There likely would be misconceptions that would leave one to believe that parents of scholarship students are forced to settle for schools that are not worthy to be in the same division as schools accredited by ISACS.

The misconceptions would do an injustice for mission-driven schools that are committed to social justice outreach to educate a vulnerable population of scholarship and non-scholarship students. As religious educational institutions, we do so because the true measure of education is not simply enrolling the best and brightest. The real challenge in education is to make a difference in the lives of children who are at-risk and may not have had a good start educationally.

To suggest that the highly restrictive, exclusive and select population of most ISACS schools somehow marks the quality of education in its member schools as superior to that provided by quality charters in OCSAA schools, such as Elyria Catholic, is deeply misleading and unfair.

We celebrate the unique gifts of our students, helping them to become their very best selves and encouraging all to find and pursue their own paths to achievement. At Elyria Catholic, we believe that diversity is our strength. Nearly 22 percent of Elyria Catholic's students identify themselves as Hispanic/Latino, African Americans or Asian.

Thank you.  
Suzanne Lester