

CATHOLIC CONFERENCE OF OHIO

**Senate Primary & Secondary Education Committee
(School Choice & School Security)
Larry Keough/Catholic Conference of Ohio
May 4, 2023**

Good afternoon Chair Brenner, Vice Chair O'Brien, Ranking Member Ingram and Committee members. My name is Larry Keough. I am the associate director for the Catholic Conference of Ohio and legislative advocate for 367 Catholic schools educating more than 109,000 students.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Catholic Conference of Ohio have championed parental choice in education for decades.

The Conference steadfastly supports all six of Ohio's school-choice programs:

Cleveland Scholarship Program;
Ed Choice Scholarship Program;
Autism Scholarship Programs;
Jon Peterson Special Needs Scholarship Program;
Ed Choice Income-based Expansion Program;
The Tax Credit Scholarship Program.

Catholic schools are essential to the implementation of these programs.

As of FY 22:

71 percent of the Ed Choice scholarship students are enrolled in Catholic schools;

60 percent of the Ed Choice Expansion students are enrolled in Catholic schools;
75 percent of the Cleveland Scholarship students are enrolled in Catholic schools;
Nearly 50 percent of the Jon Peterson Special Needs Scholarship students are enrolled in Catholic schools.

Most of our students are from working poor and middle-income families. They may be at-risk for one reason or another, have a varying disability, and/or be merit scholars.

Nearly one-third of our students are minorities. African American and Hispanic students represent approximately two-thirds of our minority students.

But all of our children share a common bond. Once children are enrolled in Catholic schools, they are **Catholic school students**, regardless whether their parents pay full tuition, or they receive parish subsidies, diocesan discounts, or state-sponsored scholarships.

Our support of school-choice programs is predicated upon the Catechism of the Catholic Church that expressly states:

“As those first responsible for the education of their children, parents have the right to choose a school for them which corresponds to their own convictions. This right is fundamental.”

It then follows public policies should affirm the primary role of parents with meaningful choices in where and how their children are educated.

In Pope Francis’ 2016 exhortation, *The Joy of Love*, he reaffirmed the importance of parental rights in education,

“Parents themselves enjoy the right to choose freely the kind of education – accessible and of good quality – which they wish to give their children in accordance with their convictions.”

Parental rights in education remain an essential aspect of the Church’s teaching that the family must be strengthened as the essential unit within society.

School choice is probably more important than ever because it empowers parents to have the fundamental right to select the schools they believe are best suited for their children.

We applaud Sen. O’Brien for sponsoring the Parental Educational Freedom Act. She is a champion for parental rights in education.

SB 11 is the next step in the school choice movement by expanding student eligibility for Educational Choice scholarships.

If the year were 1995 and the General Assembly were attempting to favorably pass Ohio’s first school-choice program, then SB 11 would be ahead of its time.

But SB 11 is before this committee after 28 years of school-choice incrementalism in Ohio.

Let’s remember Ohio’s last budget, HB 110, was a record investment in K-12 education. There is a new funding model for public education. School choice programs are no longer funded through a deduct from school districts.

We also urge support of the following:

Jon Peterson Special Needs Scholarship Program –

Categories of disabilities for the Jon Peterson Special Needs Scholarship Program have been flatlined or received only modest increases over the past decade, but historically maintained parity with the Autism Scholarship. Last General Assembly, the Autism Scholarship increased from \$27,000 to \$32,445 while the JPSNS program cap remained at \$27,000. We are seeking to restore parity with the Autism Scholarship program in category 6 as well as proportional increases in the other categories of special needs 1-5 by the same percentage.

The As Passed by the House version of the budget includes a 12% funding increase in categories 1-5 per the base cost increase and increases category 6 from \$27,000 to \$30,000 of which we are grateful. However, an additional increase in the Senate is needed to realign the Jon Peterson Special Needs Scholarship with the Autism Scholarship Program at \$32,445 for the cap and a proportional increase for each category of special needs.

Our Request – Restore parity of Jon Peterson Special Needs Scholarship with Autism Scholarship and increase all categories of special needs by the same percentage.

Scholarship Granting Organizations – Two years ago in HB 110, the Ohio Tax Credit Scholarship Program was established that allowed tax payers to donate to a Scholarship Granting Association and receive a tax credit.

Our request is to increase donations for an individual taxpayer from \$750 to \$2,500 and for joint couples from \$1,500 to \$5,000. Although we are grateful for the program,

the cap or limit on taxpayers is too limited. Other states such as Florida, Arizona and Pennsylvania have a much higher cap for dollars to be donated to an SGO, which awards scholarships with preference to low-income students.

In addition, please support the provision in HB 33 that extends family income to 450 percent over the Federal Poverty Level in the Ed Choice Income-based Scholarship Program.

School Security – The Executive Budget included funding for public and nonpublic schools to have the option to request building-level funding to hire school resource officers or subsidize those they already employ. HB 33 removes dedicated funding for school resource officers.

Our request: For funding to be allocated for resource officers in public and nonpublic schools.

At this time, I am pleased to answer any questions.