



Interested Party Testimony for Senate Education Committee (HB 33)

May 4, 2023

Good morning Chairman Brenner, Vice Chair O'Brien, Ranking Member Ingram and Committee Members. My name is Frank O'Linn. I am the superintendent of schools for the Catholic Diocese of Cleveland, which educates more than 38,000 P-12 students in 106 schools across 8 counties of Northeast Ohio. Thank you for the opportunity to testify regarding the budget bill, House Bill 33.

We commend the effort to continue to increase school funding for all sectors, traditional public, charter, vocational, STEM school, etc, by continuing the phase-in of the inputs-based model, including using fiscal year 2022 data, and funding students where they are educated. We are grateful for so many things Ohio provides for all of its school students, as my colleague Larry Keough of the Catholic Conference addressed in detail.

We also applaud the movement to provide increased student access to the EdChoice state scholarships. We appreciate that the House's amended substitute bill increases EdChoice eligibility to 450% of the federal poverty level, and we also support SB11, Senator O'Brien's bill to expand EdChoice scholarships to be universally available.

In addition to keeping with the direction to fund students where they are educated, including funding parents who wish to place their children in non-public schools, there are many benefits to universality.

Reducing Barriers

First, universal access would remove barriers that prevent families from choosing schools. For example, appended to this testimony (Appendix A) is a letter from a parent at St. Anthony School in Akron, written in his native Karenic language, with translation below by his child. St. Anthony opened in 1954 to serve the children of Akron's North Hill neighborhood, which back then were mostly Italian immigrants. Today it is home to one of the nation's largest populations of refugees from Myanmar (Burma), many of whom fled persecution and stayed at refugee camps in Thailand before immigrating to the U.S.

While the school tries to assist, language and other barriers are sometimes too much as they report significant numbers of interested parents falling out of the process while verifying residence or income through an online application in a language foreign to

them. Despite our best efforts, the digital divide in our communities most affected by poverty still remains, such that accessing the online application system is a challenge. Making scholarships universal would simplify eligibility, removing such barriers for our most disadvantaged families and also reducing the system bureaucracy required to verify it.

Eliminating Stigma

Universality would also eliminate any stigma associated with the programs, which is a barrier particularly in the many schools in which only a portion of attendees qualify for the scholarship. Wherever a threshold is set, whether 250%, 450%, or some other number, there will be communities with both sides of the cutoff, including taxpaying Ohioans who are no less deserving of quality educational opportunity.

Speaking of stigma, the new language forbidding requirements for applicants to disclose low-income status is already the practice in our Catholic schools, as we separate school admission from the financial aid process. Acknowledging that many students desiring a Catholic education will receive scholarships less than half of the cost to educate (especially in our high schools) is a good reason to support amendments that my colleague Larry Keough described to increase the tax credit scholarship limits.

Improving Efficiency

Each student educated on state scholarship represents substantial savings on average compared to the taxpayers' obligation in district public schools (\$14,685 per pupil in FY22), and our nonpublic systems have room to educate more students. Universality would enable the state's savings to grow and be sustained over the long-term.

You can think of Catholic schools as a public-private partnership for parents with scholarships. The 106 schools in the Diocese of Cleveland expend well over \$300 Million to educate the 38,476 students in grades P-12. Tuition, whether paid by state scholarships or by parents, guardians, and families, accounts for roughly 70% of revenues in the system. The rest - at least \$100 Million in our diocese alone - is made up of local and diocesan philanthropy, endowments, parish subsidy from churches, and other annual giving. Making choice universal enables more Ohioans to participate, a win-win for parents and the state.

Ohio's Existing Experiment with Universal Choice

While questions abound as to what impact universal school choice might have on existing patterns and systems, one part of Ohio has long experience from which we can learn. A shining example of universality already exists in Cleveland, where the

Cleveland Scholarship began in 1996, first with numerous restrictions to scholarship access and growth. Over the years, those restrictions have fallen away, making the scholarship universally available to any resident of Cleveland since 2015.

Meanwhile, the public schools' Cleveland Plan, launched in 2012 via [H.B. 525](#), called “to ensure that every child in Cleveland attends a high-quality school and that every neighborhood has a multitude of great schools from which families can choose.” Primarily focused on district and charter schools, Cleveland has made parental choice a cornerstone of its improvement strategy, which has since demonstrated growth in public school graduation rates, K-3 literacy rates, and high-quality preschool seats. The progress is simultaneous with a robust charter sector and our nonpublic schools, which historically and [continually perform well](#) by [comparison to their nearest public](#) counterparts.

As the charts below illustrate, the universal availability of school choice scholarships has not dramatically altered enrollment patterns among traditional public, charter, and nonpublic schools. In this urban city that has been experiencing long-term population declines, there has been steady enrollment as well as robust funding delivered to public schools by the funding formula both before and since the new Fair School Funding Plan model's implementation (Appendix B).

Our Catholic elementary schools are primarily neighborhood schools that reflect the diversity of their surrounding communities. Catholic high schools, which draw from wider geographic areas, tend to be less racially isolated and produce higher graduation rates and college acceptance rates for those who attend on the Cleveland scholarship including [being 5 times more likely](#) to meet the “prepared for success” benchmarks.

Finally, the notion of choice, empowering parents and guardians to choose the best placement for their children, is what parents desire. Recent listening sessions across the city, as Cleveland searches for a new public school CEO, revealed that “Championing school choice for families and students” emerged as the [top positive trend](#) from stakeholders. This is an example of a healthy choice ecosystem at work.

Ohio's Catholic schools are all chartered non-public schools, which are accountable to Ohio's Operating standards, report test scores of all scholarship students, and are directly accountable to parents. They provide a valuable good to the state as well as to families and society, and they have available capacity. For these reasons, as many Ohioans as possible should have the opportunity and support to choose nonpublic schools for their children.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today, and I look forward to answering any questions.

Appendix A: Letter from a Parent

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(ကျွန်ုပ်တို့၏)

Translation:

March 3, 2023

We want to thank all teachers and all that contributed to helping our family. May God bless you all and provide you with all the goodness he can. Amen.

Thank you all St. Anthony teachers for having a good heart and for helping us with providing for our children and to help them prosper. You do not discriminate and are people who love our family regardless of our status and ethnicity. You help us to find a path for our children so we want to thank you with all of our hearts. If it were not for your help, we ourselves could not help our children with finding a good school and path for education. The scholarship process was very difficult because it was not in our language. But you helped us every step of the way. Without your guidance, we would not have been able to get a scholarship for our child. Because of you all who did not look at us different and helped us so much we want to thank you with all of our hearts.

~Member Yar

Appendix B: Enrollment and Funding of Traditional Public and Cleveland Scholarship Students

