



House Bill 96
Testimony in support
House Finance Committee
March 12, 2025

Chairman Stewart, Vice Chair Dovilla, Ranking Member Sweeney and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of House Bill 96.

I am Tom Rhatican, an associate director with the Catholic Conference of Ohio, the official voice of the Catholic Church in Ohio on public policy. We have 367 Catholic schools with approximately 113,000 students—or approximately 63% of all chartered, nonpublic school students in Ohio.

I'd like to begin by thanking Governor DeWine for his thoughtful concern and ongoing support in allowing parents, as the primary educators of their children, the ability to choose the education that best fits their children. We've seen a three percent increase in enrollment over the past two years as more families are choosing Catholic schools for the first time. Indeed, Ohio's school-choice programs have transformed the lives of students as more and more families choose Catholic schools for any combination of reasons: spiritual formation, strong academics, and smaller class sizes in a safe and encouraging environment.

Significantly, and over the past nine years, the number of African American students have increased both in total numbers and as percentage of the total student population -- rising from 10 percent in 2015 to 14 percent of the Catholic school student population in 2024. The number of Hispanic-identifying students has nearly doubled over that same period and now constitutes a little less than nine percent of our Catholic school population.

In addition, the number of students with Jon Peterson Special Needs Scholarships and Autism Scholarships have also increased. Both scholarships are absolutely essential for us to serve families with children who require specialized services. This year, approximately 4000 students, or 3.6% of our Catholic school students, receive Jon Peterson scholarships – double the amount from 2014. The number of Autism scholarships has also doubled to approximately 600 students. Across all categories, our Catholic schools have been seeking to enroll every student interested in a Catholic education, including students needing specialized services.

With an overall increase in enrollment, we're seeing some schools with waiting lists or challenges with capacity. For example, in the greater Cleveland area we've seen an increase in the number of schools with a waiting list climb from 30 percent in 2019 (pre-Covid) to 59 percent this year. Across the state, many Catholic schools are raising money for expansions to existing facilities, and in some areas we're seeing interest and support for constructing new schools.

Catholic schools seek to enroll families of every financial background or specialized need. To bolster support in these areas for families and students from economically disadvantaged areas, and with special needs, the Catholic Conference of Ohio is respectfully requesting consideration of two proposals:

1. Extend Disadvantaged Pupil Impact Aid (DPIA) to chartered nonpublic school students. Better enable schools that serve economically disadvantaged students to provide targeted services, to include specialized reading intervention, mental health support, and safety improvements.
2. Slightly raise (and then link) the Jon Peterson Special Needs Scholarship (JPSN) amounts to the base aid and categorical (disability) aids of the public schools.

Lastly, it is important to note that our Catholic schools are chartered by the Department of Education and Workforce and must comply with rigorous accountability, reporting, and audit requirements – always tied to every form of state or federal financial assistance but also in compliance with state “operating standards.” These requirements include:

- Health and safety standards
- Prescribed curriculum
- Instructional hours
- Teacher and professional staff licensures
- Rapback (criminal background checks)
- Graduation requirements, credits, test
- Testing (including approved “alternative” testing)
- 3rd grade reading guarantee (link to EdChoice)
- Administrative Cost Reimbursement (for mandated service costs) and audits
- Auxiliary Services approval processes and audits
- Student Growth Measures (announced by DEW in July 2025).

In the end, Catholic schools are most accountable to the parents. Parents must choose to enroll and continue enrolling their children in Catholic schools based on their satisfaction with academics, learning environments, and spiritual and intellectual formation.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I would be happy to answer any questions.