



House Bill 96
Testimony – Interested Party
Senate Finance Committee
May 28, 2025

Chairman Cirino, Vice Chair Chavez, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on House Bill 96.

I am Tom Rhatican, 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 and the House leadership for their thoughtful concern and ongoing support for the thousands of parents who exercise their duty as the primary educators of their children by choosing a chartered nonpublic school, which includes Catholic schools, for their children.

In fact, we have seen a three percent increase in enrollment over the past two years as more families are choosing Catholic schools for the first time. Ohio's scholarship 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.

Over the past nine years, the number of African American students has increased both in total numbers and as a 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 students has nearly doubled over that same period and now constitutes approximately nine percent of our Catholic school population – or 25% higher than the public schools.

The number of students with Jon Peterson Special Needs Scholarships and Autism Scholarships has also increased in Catholic schools. Without the scholarships and services that scholarships provide, Catholic schools may not be a reasonable option. Approximately four thousand students received Jon Peterson scholarships this year – double the amount from 2014. Likewise, the number of students with Autism we serve has also doubled.

With an overall increase in enrollment, we are seeing more schools with waiting lists or challenges with capacity. For example, in the greater Cleveland area, 60 percent of the schools have a waiting list – a jump from 30 percent in 2019 (pre-COVID). These same challenges persist in other areas of Ohio.

Across Ohio, many Catholic schools are raising money for expansions to existing facilities and looking at options for new schools, especially in areas that do not currently have a nonpublic option.

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, whereby the student takes the per pupil DPIA of the assigned (low-income) public district to his/her chartered nonpublic school. In doing so, Ohio would permit specialized reading and math intervention, mental health support, and targeted safety upgrades, no matter where their parents choose to send them.
2. Slightly raise and link the Jon Peterson Special Needs Scholarship (JPSN) amounts to the base aid and categorical (disability) aids of the public schools. Or, alternatively, provide a reasonable increase in the scholarship amount. Recall that qualified students who elect JPSN services cannot use an EdChoice Scholarship for tuition.

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

- Health and safety standards
- Prescribed curriculum for certain subjects
- Instructional hours
- Teacher and professional staff licensures
- Rapback (criminal background checks)
- Graduation requirements
- Testing (including “valid and reliable” alternative testing – all approved by DEW)
- Third grade reading guarantee – services and reporting
- Robust approval processes, inspections, and audits on all state funding programs
- New “Student Growth Measures” – to be implemented by DEW in July 2025

Catholic schools are most accountable to the parents. Ultimately, 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.