

Larry Keough/Catholic Conference of Ohio
Interested party testimony/HB 110 (biennial budget bill)
Senate Primary & Secondary Education Committee
Wednesday, May 5, 2021

I. Introduction

Good afternoon Chairman Brenner, Vice Chair Blessing, Ranking Member Fedor and Committee members.

My name is Larry Keough. I am the associate director in education at the Catholic Conference of Ohio and legislative advocate for Catholic schools.

We thank each of you for your public service, especially over the past year with monumental challenges in education with a plunging now recovering economy during a pandemic.

As each of you may know, Catholic schools currently provide educational opportunities for more than 108,000 students enrolled in 369 Catholic schools.

But the role of Catholic schools in serving the needs of families arguably has been even more important in the past year. The science is clear -- there is no substitute for in-person learning. To that end, Ohio's Catholic schools have persevered to deliver in person education or a hybrid approach while protecting the health and safety of our school employees and students.

II. School Choice

The scholarship amounts in school-choice programs have been fixed over the last couple of budget cycles.

The gap between the scholarship amounts and tuition is widening. Parents whose income is over 200 percent of poverty contribute to

the difference between the scholarship amount and tuition. Schools also rely on financial assistance from parishes, grants and contributions from benefactors. But making up the difference between the scholarship amount and tuition becomes more difficult for parents every year as tuition increases to keep pace with expenses.

This problem is especially so at the high school level, where the median tuition ranges from \$9,200 to \$12,000 while the scholarship remains static at \$6,000.

Our request:

Increase the scholarship amounts at the high school level for performance-based Ed Choice, Ed Choice Expansion and the Cleveland Scholarship Program from \$6,000 to \$8,000;

Increase the scholarships amounts at the K-8 level from \$4,650 to \$5,500 in each of these programs.

We ask that this request be seriously considered as revenue streams ascend and discussions are underway in the Senate to consider direct funding of school-choice programs in lieu of deducting scholarship amounts from district allocations

These increases also can be justified by formulas in the Fair School Funding Plan. For example, foundation funding specifies a general phase-in percentage of 16.67 percent for FY 22 and 33.33 percent for FY 2023, well above our requested increases in the scholarship amounts.

Student Eligibility – We are concerned about confusion over which students are eligible for Ed Choice Scholarships for the 2021-2022 school year.

At issue is the interpretation of student eligibility in SB 89 and HB 197 for entering kindergarten students, siblings of scholarship students and students transitioning from eighth to ninth grade. We ask that eligibility for these students be clarified in HB 110.

Direct Funding of Scholarships:

If the Senate supports direct funding of scholarships in lieu of deducting the scholarship amounts from the school district, we recommend that sufficient dollars be appropriated to accommodate additional students over the biennium and ensure the appropriations are protected from a line item veto.

Increase the appropriation for Ed Choice Expansion

In 2020-2021, for the first time, all students entering any of grades K-12 became eligible for Ed Choice Expansion Scholarships, and the poverty threshold for students to be eligible for a scholarship increased from 200 to 250 percent over

Given this expanded eligibility, we recommend that the appropriation for Ed Choice Expansion be increased near or at FY 21 levels.

II. Auxiliary Services & Administrative Cost Reimbursement

We ask you to support funding levels for Auxiliary Services and Administrative Cost Reimbursement as approved by the House.

As Catholic schools continue their outreach to students who are at-risk and have varying exceptionalities, Auxiliary Services are more important than ever as they provide instructional materials, textbooks, speech and hearing services, remediation and special education services.

We support the permissive language in the House budget for Catholic and other religious chartered nonpublic schools to have the option of receiving direct state aid from Auxiliary Services.

III. School Transportation

We support the provisions in the House budget for school transportation, which include but are not limited to:

Transportation plans, which are to contain transportation routes and schedules, shall be provided to the chartered nonpublic school by July 1;

A student transportation plan shall not result in a student arriving at a chartered nonpublic school more than one hour before the school's start time and not more than one hour after the end of the school day;

Eligible K-8 students shall not be transported in vehicles operated by a mass transit system, unless the district enters into an agreement with that school authorizing such transportation;

In addition, we request the following that when there is a declaration of impracticality and parents are offered payments in lieu of transportation, we ask that the payment be increased from \$250 to the state average to transport a student, which is \$1,077.

V. Conclusion

At this time, I would be pleased to answer any questions.