

PITTSBURGH CATHOLIC SCHOOLS



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Testimony for the Appropriations/Education Committee

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I am very grateful for the opportunity to speak before you today. As the superintendent for the Diocese of Pittsburgh, I am speaking for the over 12,000 students from preschool to grade 12 as well as their families. These are families who have, for a variety of reasons, chosen to enroll their children in the Catholic schools of Allegheny, Beaver, Butler and Washington counties. Our schools are located in urban, suburban, and rural settings. We have been a faith based educational presence in western Pennsylvania for well over 170 years and have educated hundreds of thousands of students. The past few years serve as an example of our steadfast commitment to this region, and to the students and families that we serve. Our schools are communities of faith formation, academic excellence, and commitment to service.

We all faced extraordinary challenges during the Covid pandemic and are still trying to recover from those challenges. The diocesan schools shut down on March 13, 2020 along with every other school in the state. By March 16, many of our schools in the Diocese of Pittsburgh had implemented a plan to provide synchronous and/or asynchronous instruction to our students. By March 23, all our schools had started such instruction. With the collaboration of administrators, teachers, parents, and students, we continued this new mode of instruction for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year. We resumed in-person instruction in our schools in early September. The perseverance of our school communities in sustaining student engagement during Covid allowed us to keep learning loss to a minimum and actually highlighted the strength of our Catholic School programs.

Results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the first post-Covid national assessment, revealed that Catholic school students outperformed their public and charter school counterparts in all areas. This remained consistent across racial demographics. It was cited that if all U.S. Catholic schools were a state, their 1.6 million students would rank first in the nation across the NAEP reading and math tests for 4th and 8th graders.

Our academic achievement is also highlighted by our yearly testing data. In Spring of 2023 our third through eighth grade students took the Iowa Assessment-norm referenced assessment of student performance and college and career readiness. Overall, our students outperformed the national average by 19-27% in English Language Arts, and by 12-22% in Mathematics across all grade levels 3-8. On average, our diocesan high schools boast a remarkable 98 percent graduation rate, with nearly 99.5% of graduates successfully gaining acceptance to 4-year colleges or universities. Collectively, these schools have secured on average over \$20 million in scholarships per school, averaging an impressive \$156,628 per graduate. Moreover, they offer a diverse range of academic opportunities, including approximately 20 AP courses and 32 honors courses on average per school.

Service to community is a one of the pillars of a Catholic school education. This starts as early as pre-kindergarten as students collect food products for local foodbanks. Our students assist at the Red Door Food Mission downtown, travel to Appalachia to assist with mission work, conduct collections for emergency relief, support the elderly by helping with yardwork and

visits. The list is very long as our commitment to improving our communities is integral to our mission.

While we strive to provide the best education possible for our students, we see the challenges faced by our families, challenges that have significantly increased post-Covid. Over the course of the last few years, we have seen so much more financial need due to changes in employment, health, and economic stability. Our average elementary school tuition rate is \$5600 while the high school average is \$13,500. The average grant awarded is \$1936, but the need per family is over \$3000. To put this in terms of the entire diocese, we awarded \$4,260,000 last year, but the actual need was more than \$15.4 million. Last school year, EITC/OSTC was awarded to 2200 recipients. Clearly the scholarships provided through EITC and OSTC provide students and families with much needed support. Our goal is to be fastidious stewards of this funding.

As for demographic information, our schools mirror the racial/ethnic percentage breakdown for our region. We serve students with a variety of special needs and this represents about 15% of our enrollment. 26% percent of our students at the elementary level are non- Catholic and 14% at the high school level (18% K-12).

I would like to turn your attention to a few other mandated services for Catholic and nonpublic schools that have been problematic causing our schools and students to lose services they are supposed to receive from Pennsylvania.

1. **Nursing Services:** For over 50 years, the statutory and regulatory language applicable to school health services has required that all students of school age shall be provided with school nurse services in the school they attend, regardless of if that school is a public or nonpublic school. The PA Department of Health interprets the statutory and regulatory language to require school districts to provide equitable school nursing services for all school age students – meaning the nursing functions must be the same in every school and the provision of school nurse services is not limited to legally required examinations and screenings. COVID and a variety of new statutory provisions related to the standard of care for a variety of medical conditions have elevated the need for every school age student to have equitable school nurse services. Over the last decade, many school districts have either reduced the amount of nursing services they provide or eliminated nursing services to nonpublic schools altogether. This is all due to their interpretation of the school code. We request a school code amendment to ensure students in nonpublic schools have access to equitable school nurse services regardless of which school district the school is located.

Here is the link for school health services to private schools:

<https://www.health.pa.gov/topics/school/Pages/Private%20School%20Services.aspx>.

2. **Act 195/90/35 Textbook Loan Program for Nonpublic Schools:** For the last 50 years PDE has overseen and implemented the textbook loan program and orders all materials for nonpublic schools each year. The process was always slow because orders had to be mailed back and forth between stakeholders. Roughly 10 years ago PDE updated its textbook ordering process. With the help of PCC and PACAPE it became an electronic ordering system, which was supposed to streamline the process. The new electronic system was called the “Nonpublic Information System-(NPIS)”. Over the last several years, PDE’s textbook ordering process for nonpublic schools has been severely delayed, causing students to start the year off without their needed textbooks. In many cases, students would not receive their textbooks until after the Christmas break. If Amazon and other companies can complete an ordering process within two days, PDE should be able to complete the ordering process within a week as well. Unfortunately, PDE has not been able to do so. Therefore, PCC and PACAPE would like to amend the School Code to allow PDE to use a third party like PACAPE to administer the textbook loan program for nonpublic schools to streamline the ordering process.

3. **Pre-K Regulations:** As you are aware DHS is in the process of rewriting its regulations for pre-k, before/after school, and summer/holiday school programs along with its childcare regulations. Within DHS’s “Rewrite Program” they are suggesting removing any public-school pre-k, before/after school and summer/break course programs from all DHS regulations, so PDE will oversee these educational programs. If public schools are removed from DHS regulations for these educational programs then all nonpublic school pre-k, before/after school, and summer, bible or holiday school programs should be overseen by PDE and removed from DHS oversight as well. They are all educational programs, so PDE should oversee all educational programs just like all K-12 or higher learning programs. This requested change would not need legislation, but just a PDE internal change. We request a change in PDE’s affidavit 5000A form for nonpublic schools. This would fix the issue altogether and bring all Catholic and nonpublic educational programs under one roof at PDE.

4. **School Safety:** School safety for all students, staff, administration, and employees has become extremely challenging for all schools both public, Catholic, and private. Pennsylvania has recognized school safety as a top priority in the budget for over the last decade. We thank the General Assembly for providing the nonpublic school safety grant program to all Catholic and nonpublic schools. The program has allowed Catholic schools to provide a safer learning environment for all schools. The nonpublic safety grant program is vital to school safety and is being delayed due to the budget delays.

We request that the General Assembly pass a Code bill that includes the nonpublic school safety grant program immediately.

As you can see from all the information provided above, our focus is on the children and young adults we serve. They are the reason I am here today and I believe they are the reason you are here too. I humbly thank you for the time I have been given and for the work you do to benefit all the families of Pennsylvania.