



DIOCESE OF HARRISBURG – SECRETARIAT FOR EDUCATION

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Testimony of
Daniel J. Breen
Secretary for Education
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To the Pennsylvania Senate
Education Committee

March 3, 2021

Good morning, Senators on the Education Committee. A special thank you to Senator Martin for the invitation to address you today. My name is Daniel Breen, and it is my honor to serve under Bishop Ronald Gainer in the Catholic Diocese of Harrisburg as the Secretary for Education. I am in my second year in this role and my 30th in education. In our Diocese, we have 35 Catholic schools with approximately 9,200 students and 2,000 employees in 15 counties of Central Pennsylvania.

The Covid-19 pandemic has certainly been a challenge and burden for all of us. I know that it is the biggest challenge of my career, and a challenge that is poised to continue for some time.

When Governor Wolf closed the Commonwealth's schools on March 13, 2020, all of us in education needed to pause and then find a new direction. With great effort and with a clear dedication to our families and our mission, our schools continued to educate on the following Monday, March 16. In that first week, we provided a mixture of assignments and online instruction, as we gathered ourselves, and, from that point on, we delivered the best possible education and faith formation we could through online means for the entire spring. I was humbled and touched at the dedication and selflessness of our educators as they made this switch, and I was impressed with their results, as both an educator and as a father. Their yeoman's effort was the equivalent of repairing an airplane while in flight.

Later that spring, we announced the closure of two Catholic schools, Holy Family Consolidated School in Berwick and Lebanon Catholic School in Lebanon County, due, in large part, to the impact of the pandemic. These schools had pre-existing challenges in enrollment and finances, but the pandemic accelerated these problems. Across our Commonwealth, 19 Catholic schools closed, and, according to statistics from the National Catholic Educational Association, 200 Catholic schools closed in our nation.

Our principals worked throughout the summer of 2020 to prepare for reopening our schools to in-person instruction in the fall of 2020. Our Diocese had a reopening committee that included principals and two epidemiologists, and, using CDC and PDE guidelines, we created a 32-page, comprehensive plan to reopen schools. The plan, which was submitted to PDE, was created because we believed that we could reopen schools safely by following the science and the recommendations of the CDC and the American Association of Pediatrics. That belief was confirmed through our results. While we have had Covid 19 cases in our schools, and a few short-term closures, we have been able to mitigate the spread of Covid 19 in our schools and

operate effectively. I am happy to report that we cannot definitively trace even one Covid case to exposure in our schools.

As we look to this spring and fall, as the battle with Covid continues, what kind of support can the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania provide to our schools, and to schools in general?

Vaccines. Our educators have taught in-person since August 2020, balancing their concerns for their own families with a challenging educational landscape. They have done so often while teaching students in the classroom and online students simultaneously. Their burden would be lessened if they could receive the Covid vaccine as quickly as possible. As educators see peers in other states vaccinated, and as the process of distribution in PA remains uncertain and slow, our educators are frustrated and anxious. Please help us move to Phase 1B.

Personnel in our schools. Pennsylvania law calls for non-public schools to have nurses, but most of our Catholic schools do not. Please ensure that DOH provides nursing staff to our schools. In order to meet the needs of our students and families, we also need more personnel such as additional school counselors to handle the many social-emotional needs of our students these days, and social workers for our schools who can help families with needs such as housing, job training, and more.

Finances. The financial costs of the pandemic are many. Our schools have expended funds on cleaning, PPE, additional staff, educational technology, and much more. While the PPP loans have been impactful, the first round of CARES money, because of the funding formula the Wolf administration used, provided us very little funding. We are hopeful that EANS funds will provide support.

We ask for additional funding from the Commonwealth, including additional funds in NPIS, which can be used for educational technology. We ask, too, for flexible grant money that can be used to help us open school in August 2021 -- timely funds that include reimbursement for out-of-pocket expenses incurred for allowable expenses -- and consistent rules for applying the funds among school districts in Pennsylvania.

Ever-rising costs, unemployment and Covid have combined to make it harder than ever for parents to afford a Catholic education for their children. Across Pennsylvania, we lost a total of 8% of our total enrollment in Catholic schools last spring. While in our Diocese we have gained students over this year, as many public schools are closed, we suffered similar enrollment loss last spring.

We ask for increased EITC and OSTC funding in order to help our families afford a Catholic education and we ask for new efforts in financial assistance such as the creation of Education Savings Accounts (ESA).

Transportation. Our families remain grateful for the Commonwealth's commitment to transporting our students. In order to ensure the fair treatment of our students, we ask for continued busing even when public school districts are out of school for Covid-related issues, or when public schools are offering hybrid, alternating-attendance schedules, as we are committed to full, in-person instruction.

I do believe that there is a public good that comes from non-public education. For centuries, Catholic schools have shaped thousands of Pennsylvania citizens in schools that have

emphasized morality, strong academics, and a commitment to justice and service. Over the past year, our contribution also includes demonstrating that all schools can be open for in-person instruction during this pandemic, provided there is governmental funding and support, commitment and clarity of vision, teamwork, and a collective sacrifice for the good of our children. Thank you for your time today; thank you for your support of our schools; and thank you for your service to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.