



Bishop McCort Catholic High School
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Written Testimony to the Pennsylvania Senate Education Committee
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My name is Tom Smith, I am the Principal and C.A.O. of Bishop McCort Catholic High School which is located in Johnstown. Bishop McCort is a private Catholic High School serving students grades 7-12. Bishop McCort has been providing an exceptional education option to families throughout the Johnstown region for 100 years. Presently our student population is 355 with over 50 % of our student body being non-Catholic. The 2020 graduating class of Bishop McCort boasts a 100% graduation rate with 97% pursuing post-secondary degrees and 3% entering the service or workforce. We are extremely proud of the opportunities that Bishop McCort provides its students and are hopeful that these opportunities may be available to all our regional youth regardless of economic constraints.

Bishop McCort is located just 2 blocks from the Greater Johnstown High School. Based on the close proximity you would assume that parents would have a choice as to what environment is best for their children. The Greater Johnstown School District has a median household income of \$28,485 with 33.1% of households below the poverty line. According to the PA Department of Education's Student Performance Profile for 2019 (the latest report), the Greater Johnstown School District's combined scores in course studies were, elementary - 48.4%, middle school - 46.8% and the high school is 58.8%. This is just one example of how some of our public schools are failing their students. Most importantly, students in these failing districts are restricted not only by the zip code in which they reside but also by their economic standing. The tuition for a student to attend Bishop McCort is \$6,995 per year—around 60% less than the \$16,700 Greater Johnstown spends per student. While our tuition falls well below the state average for private schools, cost continues to be an obstacle for many families who would choose a different path for their child.

The Covid pandemic presented a new, unprecedented set of challenges for all schools throughout the state. The response to these challenges has been a determining factor in the satisfaction families have for their present learning environment. Bishop McCort to date has provided in-school instruction for 123 of the 146 (84%) scheduled school days this academic year. The school year was started on time in accordance with our school calendar. When the pandemic demanded

a day or two of virtual education, our faculty provided synchronous learning, teaching each class according to the normal schedule through Zoom. These teachers performed science experiments, public speaking assignments and art projects all in front of the students. In comparison, other regional school districts started the school year mid-September, were out of the classroom more than they were in and a few are still not back to full time in-school instruction. Public schools received the same funding open or closed so there is no incentive to open the doors for in-class instruction. In fact, additional revenue has been funneled to the statewide public school systems as a result of the pandemic. The question must be asked, how are the millions of dollars in funding that the public schools have received through State and Federal pandemic relief grants aiding and/or enhancing the education that they are providing for the families that they serve.

The Jackson family moved to Johnstown in 2018 with their 14 children. The Jackson's are a one income family with Mr. Jackson being a truck driver for the Pepsi Company. They reside in the Moxham neighborhood of Johnstown which is within the Greater Johnstown School District. Upon arrival in Johnstown, they enrolled their school age children within the Johnstown School District. After a brief period of time, they felt that the learning environment was not a good fit for their children. They then transferred to private Christian schools in the area, which was a good experience, but through the pandemic decided that Bishop McCort was a better choice. At present, 3 of their children are students at Bishop McCort and the other school age children are being home schooled. Home schooling is not preferable for the Jackson's but given financial constraints, it is the only option available to them at this time for a few of their children. Due to the caps on the tax credit scholarship programs, it seemed like the Jacksons were not going to be able to afford Bishop McCort this year. But thanks to a generous donor, we were able to secure additional scholarship funds for them. At Bishop McCort, the Jackson's have found a home. Their children have adapted well within the Bishop McCort environment and are prospering both academically and socially.

In closing, the Jackson's are a perfect example of the importance of school choice in present day education. Families should have the option to enroll their children in ANY school that they feel meets a child's specific needs. Children that are forced into a system where they are underserved or distressed are prohibited from reaching their full potential. It seems ironic that a family can choose which grocery store to shop or what doctor to see but are unable to select the education for their child receives. Pennsylvania needs to start funding the student and not the institution. Public schools receive the funding no matter how they meet the needs of the students. Funding should follow the student to the school that is suited specifically for them, be it public or private. The goal of our education system is to provide the best opportunities for ALL of the children within the Commonwealth, not just those that can afford it. Pennsylvania was a leader when we started the Educational Improvement Tax Credit program in 2001, but the program needs to be expanded to keep up with the needs of our children. 51% of Bishop McCort students receive funding through the EITC/OSTC program while 14% qualify but were unable to receive funds. Pennsylvania cannot bow to the union driven initiatives that prevent our Commonwealth from moving in a positive, proactive direction with regards to educating the youth of our state. As the Senate Education Committee, I humbly ask for your consideration in supporting legislation to expand school choice in Pennsylvania.

