



PENNSYLVANIA
CATHOLIC
CONFERENCE

October 1, 2020

Good afternoon Chairmen Langerholc and Dinniman and members of the Senate Education Committee.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of SB 1230 “Back on Track” legislation. My name is Sean McAleer, I am the Director of Education for the Pennsylvania Catholic Conference and the Co-State Director for PACAPE, which represents over 90% of all private schools in Pennsylvania. Catholic schools provide faith-based education to 140,000 of the 260,000 non-public school students in the Commonwealth and have roughly 280 schools in Pennsylvania.

As you are certainly aware, the devastating economic effects of the Coronavirus Pandemic have reached nearly every sector of American society. The Catholic schools in the United States and Pennsylvania specifically have been severely impacted as well and their centuries-long tradition of serving families from all walks of life is now imperiled. Education as we knew it six months ago has changed forever and the pandemic will continue to shape the landscape in our Commonwealth more dramatically than any other event either man made or natural.

Catholic education has played an important role in lifting many from poverty to a more hopeful future. This mission is in danger as a result of the economic devastation facing many families across the country and in Pennsylvania. Abrupt unemployment and lost income has meant that families suddenly find themselves unable to make the tuition payments that sustain our schools. Additionally, our parishes which normally provide financial support to the schools to keep tuition within financial reach for families have lost their Sunday collections with the halt to the public celebration of Masses.

For Catholic education leaders in Pennsylvania, the number one concern is **enrollment numbers** - which will determine if they can continue to remain open . Parents are making and reevaluating enrollment decisions now, and many families will need financial aid in order to keep their children in their school. Schools are also facing the prospect of whether or not they will have to permanently close their doors. Last school year at least four dioceses have announced permanent school closures in Pennsylvania and many more will follow without help.

The Public Affairs Agency of the Catholic Dioceses of Pennsylvania Since 1960
214 State Street, Box 2835, Harrisburg, PA 17105 | ph: 717-238-9613 · fx: 717-238-1473

www.pacatholic.org   @pacatholic

Private school closures would also be devastating for families, students and communities. It will be equally devastating, financially, for public school districts. A strategic state investment like “Back on Track” legislation will help prevent a flood of students from private schools into districts that are already projecting major budget shortfalls. Pennsylvania’s school districts would face an unbearable financial burden if current private school students transferred into public schools in significant numbers.

The Catholic Church believes that parents are the first and primary educators of their children, and we are seeking policy solutions to aid all families in meeting the needs of their children’s education, regardless of the educational setting. There are several ways that this assistance might be delivered to our families and the “Back on Track” legislation is one of them.

I am also so proud of our Catholic school educators in the eight dioceses in Pennsylvania that offer Catholic education to students. They pivoted so quickly to provide ongoing educational opportunities and a continuity of education for all our students while they were not physically in school. Our schools are tuition based, so if we were to ask parents to continue to meet their tuition obligations, we needed to meet our part to deliver a quality and challenging curriculum.

We did have an advantage in that most of our schools had either developed or had worked on Flexible Instruction Day plans to continue education remotely either in a virtual format or by packet education in case of inclement weather or other emergency that would prevent school from being open. This was a significant advantage as educators and administrators had already begun to think and plan how to not only deliver quality instruction, but also how to monitor progress, measure academic achievement and plan for the necessary follow up and communication that is so key to effective instruction. My thanks to Chairman Langerholc, Chairman Dinniman and the Senate Education Committee members for unanimously supporting Senator Phillips-Hill’s Flexible Instruction Day legislation and the amendment allowing non-public schools to participate in the program.

However, the Flexible Instructional Day Plans were developed for being out of school for up to five days. So, while our educators may have been ahead of the learning curve, I don’t want to mislead you. Last spring and continuing into this fall were categorized by a fair amount of trial and error. Our educators were both flexible and adaptable as to what worked, what didn’t work and always cognizant of the external factors impacting our nation and our communities, and the pressures on families to balance health and safety, work and financial issues with the increased responsibilities on parents regarding their child’s education. This has been an enormous shift and was not always uniform from school to school or classroom to classroom, but our educators stepped up in a significant way to provide a quality educational experience for the children entrusted to their care.

When the Pennsylvania Department of Education and the school districts in Pennsylvania think about educational options for students nonpublic school students are most often an afterthought. Many of the mandated services public school students receive our nonpublic students do not. The law for these mandated services has not

changed in decades, so you have to ask yourself, how did nonpublic school students lose these mandated services. The answer; school solicitors have offered new interpretations to Pennsylvania's education law that removes the mandates that school districts were mandated to provide to all students in their district boundary regardless of the school they attend. These services are mostly health and safety services that all school age students should receive by law. Nonpublic school students need your help and the "Back on Track" legislation is a step in the right direction to helping all Pennsylvania students.

Please feel free to contact me with any questions,

God Bless,

Sean P. McAleer, MGA
Director of Education
PA Catholic Conference
214 State Street
Harrisburg, PA 17101
717.238.9613 Office
717.514.1882 Cell
717.238.1473 Fax
www.pacatholic.org

2365