



CONNECTICUT CATHOLIC PUBLIC AFFAIRS CONFERENCE

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Testimony of
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In Opposition to HB5003
An Act Concerning Education Funding in Connecticut
Education Committee Public Hearing
February 3, 2022

"Parents are choosing those options...that's where resources should be placed." - Sen. McCrory¹

"We shouldn't be competing against one other with all of our public schools, these are all our kids...." - Rep. Currey²

These two great ideas can be reconciled with these two suggestions:

- 1) Include nonpublic schools students in the overall state student count for school financing.

The Connecticut Catholic Public Affairs Conference, the public policy office of the Bishops of Connecticut, on behalf of our Catholic school families, including over 20,000 students, and our staff, ask that these students and all nonpublic school students be included in the overall count of students in the state of Connecticut.

There are 500, 000 students enrolled in Connecticut's public schools. About 56,000 students are enrolled in some sort of public choice option. Therefore, the inclusion of even fewer students in nonpublic schools over time should not be an issue. Rather than double counting students, allow half of students' allotted funds to follow them to nonpublic schools. This would provide more children with more educational options that fit *their* needs.

- 2) Reinstate nonpublic schools in the Open Choice network.

Alternatively, Project Concern, started in 1966, which later became Open Choice after *Sheff v. O'Neill*, had included nonpublic (parochial) schools for years. A misguided belief that this program violated the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution led to the removal of parochial schools from the program. The recent U.S. Supreme Court decision, *Carson v. Maki*, clarifies that their inclusion would not in fact amount to such violation. We ask for the reinstatement of nonpublic schools in the Open Choice network.

Special education funding would continue to follow students from their home districts to their school of choice as would to the public schools of choice. With surrounding nonpublic schools reporting open seats, students could apply for admission like any other student to the nonpublic school.

Project Concern had been funded by the state and other partners over time. The Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Hartford was one of the founding partners of the program along with the State of Connecticut Board of Education, Hartford Board of Education, the Greater Hartford Chamber of Commerce, the Urban League, and the NAACP, among others. For an example, in 1993, the ECS grant was about \$4,000 per each Hartford public school student. Under Project Concern, the state would grant Hartford \$2,000 for each participating student, which it did not educate, and the receiving district/school would receive a state grant of about \$400-700. There was much debate about changing the

^{1,2} Appropriations and Education Committees Joint Informational Forum on Education Funding, 2/1/2023

grants for the receiving districts and schools in the 1990s until *Sheff*. Catholic high school tuition at the time was about \$2,000 with scholarships available, and Catholic elementary school tuition was a fraction of that.

Our accredited schools are not in competition with public schools. Rather, they provide different options for families, and their vibrancy benefits Connecticut. Presently, many interested families cannot afford Catholic school tuition. To address these financial challenges of families, our dioceses, schools, and foundations provided scholarships to many of our families in need, but we would like to do more. Our schools have room to accommodate more children. We believe in parents' rights to choose the best school for their children.

Connecticut Catholic schools provide rigorous, nationally recognized academic curricula, rooted in basic skills that are coupled with innovative programs that prepare young people for college, career, and life. Our 80+ Catholic schools are part of the fabric of our state and strongly enhance our quality of life. We attract a wide-range of students - 21% of our students are not Catholic, and 31% are students of color.

As always, we support bills that make education more successful and affordable for all. We respectfully request that you consider these options.

Please contact us should you have any questions.

Thank you,

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