

Testimony of Michele L. Kirk

Financial Secretary, Altoona-Johnstown Catholic School Teachers Association

PA House Labor Relations Committee Hearing of HB2626

September 18, 2008

Mr. Chairman and Members of the House Labor Relations Committee,

My name is Michele Kirk and I am a General Science/Biology teacher at Bishop Carroll Catholic High School in Ebensburg as well as a proud member and an elected officer of the Altoona-Johnstown Catholic School Teachers Association. I am pleased to be able to address the Committee to urge passage of House Bill 2626.

I began my teaching career at Bishop Carroll as many teachers did thinking it was a stepping stone to a career in the public system. I had taught in three public school districts prior to being hired at Bishop Carroll. At that time I was having second thoughts about making teaching a career. After teaching just one year in the Diocesan school I realized that it was exactly what I expected teaching to be like and didn't want to have to think about leaving to find another job. As a single person, I knew in order to be able to support myself I needed better wages and benefits and that might only come from getting a "lucrative" job in the public schools.

At Bishop Carroll I quickly realized that we are a "family" not just a group of support staff comprised of secretaries, cafeteria and maintenance workers, teachers, and students each doing their job. We are all personally vested in making the school the best educational institute and to support each other to be the best we can be. When the opportunity came to me to become a more active member of the Teacher's Association I took it hoping that I could help get our working conditions to a level such that people wouldn't have to leave our school. First, I became a Scholarship committee member then a Building representative, followed by Recording Secretary for many years and now in my current rank of Financial Secretary. I took each position as a stepping stone to help establish better working conditions. This would help to keep those qualified individuals in our school. We accomplished this by strengthening the relationship between the Teachers Association and the Diocese and getting fair and just contracts. These contracts include many adjustments to

working conditions (reducing the number of preps, planning periods, duty free lunch periods, and other specific accommodations to the work day). It's not just salary and benefits that concerned the teachers.

The year I was hired I was one of five new full time lay teachers hired. This was a large percent of teachers being replaced given the fact that the faculty at the time was about 26 full time lay teachers and nine full time religious members. All of those positions were available as a result of the teachers previously holding them leaving to find more 'lucrative jobs.' If we are to educate our students in mind, body and soul we need to keep quality teachers among the faculty for longer than a year or two at a time. Through the works of the union in our Diocese negotiating contracts we have done just that. This year in our school we have only one new lay faculty member on our staff and that position opened up due to retirement of a teacher after 35 years of service to the school. Over the 22 years I have been with Bishop Carroll this has become more and more the norm. In the beginning of my career each year we had to replace several lay teachers not to mention the attrition in the religious faculty. As the union negotiated new contracts this became less and less likely to occur. Teaching positions in the past five years or so only become available when a person retired rather than because they need to leave for better wages or working conditions. The revolving door of replacing full time lay teachers has ceased because the Teacher's Association and Diocese has worked together to maintain quality individuals.

Slowing this attrition has benefited our school in many ways. The most important I believe is in the academics. Teachers develop and teach the curriculum. These people have ownership and take pride in it. Knowing that you have this personal touch in the curriculum allows a person to mold and change it for the better each time they teach it. Returning teachers take satisfaction in their work and will strive to make their subject better each year. The union has helped teachers to gain additional knowledge of the subject areas by getting funding for continuing education credits. Teachers return to the classroom revitalized and ready to share new ideas with their students. Consistency in the faculty leads to continuity of the curriculum that is lost when new teachers are put into the classroom year after year. The stability of the teaching staff helps the learning environment of the students. Students are comfortable and at ease in the familiar environment and in turn are more productive. Having

the same teacher returning year after year creates a comfortable environment that gives the students more confidence in their work allowing them to excel in their academics.

The teachers of the A-J CSTA are asking to be given the rights afforded to other workers to organize and continue working cooperatively with our employers to benefit all involved.

Given that our Bishop is retiring in a couple of years we need the protection of House Bill 2626 to insure the Altoona-Johnstown Catholic School Teachers Association's 25 years of hard work doesn't end up like our fellow teachers in the Scranton Wilkes-Barre Diocese.

Therefore, we ask that you see the critical importance of House Bill 2626 and its importance in our efforts to serve our students, parents and communities as we have been in the Altoona-Johnstown Diocese. With your help, we can continue to provide our students with the best possible Catholic education of mind, body, and soul.