

Testimony on House Bill No. 2626
House Labor Relations Committee
September 18, 2008

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Executive Board of the Scranton Diocese
Association of Catholic Teachers

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

My name is William Smedley and I am a Member at Large of the Executive Board of the Scranton Diocese Association of Catholic Teachers and veteran teacher in the Catholic schools of the Diocese of Scranton.

In the late 1970's, teachers from Bishop Hoban (Wilkes-Barre), Bishop O'Reilly (Kingston) and Hannan-Klanowski (Scranton) High Schools organized themselves into unions. They did so not because they sought to become rich, but because they recognized the unique ability of their schools to provide a rich interplay of academic, athletic and spiritual education.

Without a voice in how that uniqueness could be nurtured and improved, however, what they sought would never be considered. Our union's goal has always been to offer parents the quality education that includes a measure of self-determination for teachers. We have negotiated smaller class size, modern curricula, improvements in laboratory safety, better-prepared teachers, and many other issues affecting the Catholic school community.

After encountering significant resistance in growing beyond these three schools, we formed the Scranton Diocese Association of Catholic Teachers (SDACT) as an umbrella organization which allowed smaller schools to form their unions as well. The turning point came in 1984 when then Bishop John O'Connor recognized the need for a Diocesan policy statement which allowed teachers to form unions without fear of intimidation or reprisal. That policy (Policy 417) is, ironically, still listed in the Diocesan Policy Manual today.

In the quarter century that followed, the SDACT has negotiated hundreds of contracts, many of which ran to 40 pages. Only two of those pages, however, dealt with salary and benefits. Our monetary negotiations have never resulted in the bankruptcy of a school. Not one unionized school has ever closed because of excessive monetary demands by the union. All of these contracts were products of collaboration between parents, administrators and teachers. All of those contracts provided mutual gain for the parties involved. Because of those contracts, unionized teachers were able to create an

educational infrastructure which provided educational and spiritual excellence for their students.

Our negotiated salaries and benefits, although far from extravagant, have allowed dedicated professionals to remain in our schools - across two generations – to share their knowledge and professionalism with their students. Without a union, such people will surely no longer staff our schools. Without being vested in the process, without having an independent voice to represent them and their concerns, teachers of the future would not make the same long-term commitment to Catholic education. Prior to 1878, the annual turnover rate of faculty on Catholic schools ran to about 40%. Those days would surely return. What would happen to the quality of Catholic education under those circumstances?

As a union, our equal standing with our employers has enabled us to work together to provide the kind of education valued by parents and the community as well. Parents made the decision to send their children to unionized Catholic schools because of the tangible and intangible benefits they see as important. The SDACT has shaped and formed those important aspects of the educational process which parents value. Without a union, teachers have no input into a thousand critical issues, from class size to course offerings.

Our recently consolidated schools have come together smoothly as a result of the experience, effort and professionalism of veteran teachers, but working conditions have changed dramatically without the SDACT to act as a counterweight to Diocesan mandates. Without the input of unionized teachers, the quality parents have come to associate with Catholic schools will suffer. We, the teachers who have worked our entire professional lives in Catholic schools, know how to solve problems and create solutions. We, who stand in front of students on a daily basis, know how best to serve their needs. But our voice has been stilled. Without the equal standing afforded by a union, our voices will never be heard.

Therefore, we ask that you see the critical importance of House Bill 2626 in our efforts to serve our students, our parents and our communities. With your help, we can continue to provide our students with the best possible Catholic education.