

TESTIMONY

of

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to the

PENNSYLVANIA HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

EDUCATION COMMITTEE

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Good afternoon Chairman Sonney and members of the House Education Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to be with you to share a few thoughts about the challenges that will face Catholic schools to re-open in the upcoming school year. My name is Phil Fromuth, I am Superintendent of Catholic Education for the Diocese of Allentown and I am also the Moderator of the Education Department of the Pennsylvania Catholic Conference. Catholic schools provide faith-based education to 140,000 of the 200,000 non-public school students in Pennsylvania. This is my 40th year in the field of Catholic education and the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the landscape of education and will continue to shape that landscape in our Commonwealth more dramatically than any other event in my four decades in education.

As we begin to wrap up the 2019-2020 school year in the virtual world and plan ahead for the 2020-2021 school year, I would like to share a few thoughts and concerns with the re-opening of our schools in a live, virtual or hybrid format in the upcoming months.

I am so proud of our Catholic school educators in the Diocese of Allentown and across the state who 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 that many 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 Sonney for amending the Flexible Instruction Day legislation last year and allowing non-public schools to participate and to the Education Committee for unanimously supporting the amendment.

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, the last ten weeks also 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 going on impacting our nation and our communities, and the pressures on families to balance health and safety issues, work issues, financial issues and the increased responsibilities on parents regarding their child's education. This was 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.

Now, as we look ahead to the new school year, all schools will have challenges, but there are five that I believe are unique Catholic schools.

1. The health, safety and well-being of our students and staff is of primary importance in any re-opening discussion and the accessibility of a school nurse is key. Catholic schools and non-public schools have been losing nursing services from their local public school districts from some time. More and more public school districts are providing the bare minimum of services, essentially amounting to record keeping and periodic screening in our schools. At the same time, the health care demands in our student populations have increased. More students suffer from food allergies, diabetes, seizure disorders and mental health conditions, all of which can require daily services. Care for sudden illnesses, dispensing medication and developing care plans for students with severe and sometimes life-threatening conditions is becoming more and more prevalent, and in the midst of this

reality, an increasing number of our schools each year are receiving notification from their public schools districts that they are cutting back to what they interpret to be their minimum responsibility. This is an area that needs a corrective measure, either from the legislature or from the courts. However, as we contemplate starting the new school with the current guidance from the CDC, nursing services are essential for non-public schools and it is an issue that must be settled for the safety of all students in this Commonwealth.

The recently released Preliminary Guidance for the Phased Re-Opening of Pre-K to Gr. 12 Schools puts a heavy emphasis on Health and Safety plans, as so it should. The health and safety of our students and our employees is of paramount importance and I believe the school nurse will play an integral role at the building level. So, at this critical time in education, in this time where, for so many reasons, we need to get our children back to school, school nursing for non-public schools in Pennsylvania has slipped to measuring heights and weights, eye exams and record keeping for immunizations. Is this the best this Commonwealth can do for their youth on an ongoing basis, yet alone in a pandemic? In the plan from the PDE it is mentioned that “Private and Parochial schools are strongly encouraged to create a Health and Safety Plan tailored to their unique needs.” While we appreciate the encouragement, we would prefer the ongoing interaction with local school health care professionals to help DEVELOP and EXECUTE Health and Safety Plans that include adequate nursing services in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Also, in regard to the re-opening plan shared by the Department of Education, many Catholic schools serve students from more than one county. A number of public school districts also serve multiple counties. The plan does not address situations where one county may be in a different Safety Phase than a neighboring county serving a number of students in a school or school district. Will there be guidance issued when a neighboring county that a school serves, possibly slips back into a more restrictive phase?

2. The allocation of funds from the federal CARE’S Act involving the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund or ESSER Fund is an issue that needs to be resolved soon. From the guidance given by the United States Department of Education, Catholic and non-public schools should receive about \$66 million dollars, however, per the directive from

Secretary of Education Rivera, non-public schools in Pennsylvania will receive only about \$19 million. The public schools have received this federal grant per their total number of students and then allocated funds to non-public schools based on their number of low-income students despite the directives from the United States Department of Education. However, there is to be equitable participation. Students, families, and schools in all 67 counties in this Commonwealth have been suffering from the COVID-19 pandemic and ESSER funds are to be used to help schools and will be essential as all schools look to re-open. These funds may be used in a variety ways to support schools as they deal with the COVID-19 pandemic including: Deep cleaning schools, the purchase of gloves, masks, Chromebooks, thermometers, learning management systems, and professional development opportunities for teachers to name a few potential uses. As you see, these can include expenses to help deliver virtual instruction and to keep the students safe and healthy when they return to school. These are critical funds for our schools to re-open and yet, right now, we are being offered only about a third of the intended amount of this federal funding.

In addition, we wait to see Pennsylvania's plan for the Governor's Emergency Education Relief Fund or GEERS Program as part of the CARES Act. In California, these funds are being used to help all schools, public and private schools to procure necessary PPE's, supplies and equipment. In California, this is being done to support the safe re-opening of all schools and to protect the public health. So, GEER's funds are being allocated to purchase and then distribute such items as no-touch thermometers, face shields, masks, hand sanitizers and other supplies, all leveraging buying power of the state to supply these needed materials to benefit all students in the state. Again, we await the plan for this Commonwealth's use of the GEER's funds.

3. Transportation is an important factor in the re-opening of our schools. Under Act 372 of 1972, public schools are to provide transportation for resident students who attend non-public schools that are within ten miles of district boundaries. We realize that public school districts will have to organize transportation to conform to physical distancing protocols recommended by health officials. With the various models that are being discussed for the return to school at this time such as A/B sections where students report twice a week or an A/B week where students report every other week, these models are being developed to limit the number of students in the school building. Because of class and school size, some of our schools could re-open without size restrictions or use of the previously mentioned options. Yet, I am

concerned that non-public school students could be denied transportation because their local public school district will implement such a model due to public school size restrictions, and then subject their non-public school students to their busing schedule. If a non-public school has met the established safety standards, tax-paying parents who send their children to non-public schools should not be denied busing.

4. As we now begin to develop plans to safely re-open our schools, as all schools look to re-open, will non-public schools have access to adequate supplies to re-open schools such as PPE's, hand sanitizers, and even toilet paper? All re-opening plans cite the importance of gloves, face masks, hand sanitizer, and disinfectants. I would ask if there are any considerations for public schools regarding these important supplies, that the same consideration be given to schools serving the 200,000 students in non-public schools in the Commonwealth as we prepare for the new school year just a couple months away.
5. Lastly, as I mentioned previously, Catholic schools are tuition based, and we rely on the tuition paid by our hard-working parents and funding from the support of parishioners. With so many people unemployed in Pennsylvania right now, it has affected Catholic schools by both the ability of parents to meet their tuition obligations and the level of giving of parishioners to their parishes, particularly since the faithful have not able worship publicly in their churches the last ten weeks. Getting the students back to school is imperative in Pennsylvania in so many ways, but particularly for non-public schools and we are working diligently on our plans to do so. As our parents are and will continue to go back to work, their children need to go back in school. This will be imperative not only for children in Catholic schools, but the safe return of all students in this Commonwealth to their schools and in-person instruction, extracurricular activities, and healthy interaction with their teachers and peers is so important in their development as a student and as a person.

We ask your help in the areas I have shared with you. As I began my testimony, over 140,000 students are receiving an education in a Catholic school in this state.

and we hope that the plan being developed by the Pennsylvania Department of Education to re-open schools is shared in a timely manner that allows for regulatory flexibility and a fair amount of local decision making.

Thank you for your time today and for your service to the citizens for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.