

Testimony

Of

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To the

Pennsylvania House of Representatives

Education Committee

February 23, 2021

Good afternoon Chairman Sonney and members of the House Education Committee. My name is Jason Budd, and I am in my 26th year of continuous service to the schools of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. Currently, I serve a dual role with the Archdiocese, as I am the Deputy Secretary for Government Relations, and I am the acting President of Bishop McDevitt HS in Wyncote, Pennsylvania.

I am grateful for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss what we in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia have experienced in the last 11 months relative to the Covid-19 Pandemic.

In March of 2020, like many schools and school systems throughout the country, we quickly learned the threat and paradigm shift that the COVID-19 virus presented to us as educators. Our schools responded quickly and remarkably well in moving to set up flexible instruction within 48 hours of schools closing to in-person instruction. This happened based on a symbiotic relationship between teachers and students, parents and administrations, and the Teacher's Union and senior leadership, and while at times, it was not easy, the students and their future remained our mission. We were also positioned to accomplish this pivot because many years ago, in a winter much like the one we are having now, we experienced too many days out of school due to snow. We endeavored to never allow an external force to disrupt the flow and continuity of education in our schools again. We worked with the Pennsylvania Department of Education for years to establish weather related allowances for versions of online education delivery when weather threatened to close a campus. This mindset and years of preparation placed us in a solid position to adapt to the changing landscape that is and was COVID-19.

While we were able to complete instruction for the year, we were not able to provide most of the social opportunities, and rites of passage that typically adorn and crown the ending of a school year in our system. Students lost athletic practices, games, and recruiting opportunities. They lost proms, award ceremonies, and in person graduation exercises. They lost those moments that bring many generations together to celebrate achievement and the willing advancement into new challenges. As the president of Bishop McDevitt, telling our parents, many of them also graduates of our school, that they would not be able to watch their child walk to the stage to

receive a diploma was heartbreaking. And while these moments may seem insignificant given the loss of human life during this very serious and trying time, these moments are important, and the loss of them has negative effects as well.

Our schools experienced financial losses due to the absence of donation revenue given the economic uncertainty of the virus and the loss of event driven fund-raising exercises. In an effort to alleviate the burden parents were also experiencing we prorated fees for sports and other activities.

As we moved towards the end of the budget year, schools worked to curtail expenses as best as they could, and as a result, we were able to maintain all of our staff, resulting in no layoffs. Our focus continued to concentrate efforts and funding on the student and staff experience during the pandemic, and thus we determined to cancel summer improvement projects, so as to stay that course.

While we initially experienced great difficulty in the collection of tuition, organizations such as BLOCS, Business Leaders Organized for Catholic Schools, helped with emergency grants, and we extended payment timelines for parents.

As we turned our sights on the new school year of 2020-2021, we developed comprehensive re-opening plans based on the Center for Disease Control and the Commonwealth's guidelines. Each school was tasked with establishing a Coronavirus committee and a health & safety plan, to be reviewed for content, strategy, and operational feasibility. These plans have held up tremendously well throughout the year. Key components of those plans included six feet distancing, required use of masks, additional cleaning with newly purchased electrostatic sprayers, modified schedules, and flexibility with parents who desired an all virtual instructional experience for their child if desired.

Additionally, in an effort to be ready for whatever may come in the new year, we invested \$1.4M in new interactive camera systems for our classrooms. These cameras, approximately \$3,000 per classroom, allowed our teachers to connect in real time with students learning from home. They also fostered interaction and dialogue between teachers and student in the classroom, as well as students at home during a hybrid setting.

Our teachers are the unsung hero of this Pandemic. They have adopted so many new skillsets over the last 11 months. The efforts they put into learning the intricacies of these new cameras, the potential blind spots of a hybrid classroom, and dealing with the emotional fallout caused by this crisis has been unheralded. They have spent their own money and time to make themselves the best at what they do, despite the ever-evolving challenges of this historical event. In the opening statement of his February 1st **Wall Street Journal** article, Catholic Schools are Beating COVID, William McGurn echoes the spirit of these sentiments by saying, *“Amid all the pain and disruption, a year of coronavirus has given Americans a new respect for those working to keep daily life as normal as possible, from the frontline nurse to the Amazon delivery man. Near the top of this honor roll is an especially unsung hero: the Catholic-school teacher.”*

Despite all of these efforts' enrollment suffered somewhat due to the pandemic, largely in the younger grades PreK and Kindergarten, where parents just chose to keep their children home instead of enrolling them.

There was considerable cost associated with preparing schools for these new modalities. The availability of PPP funding with its great flexibility helped us enormously with these expenses. However, we received very little help from other governmental programs. Unfortunately, only the School District of Philadelphia shared ANY of the funding it received with any of our schools. We are so grateful for our partnership and "student first" relationship with the School District of Philadelphia.

Sadly, no state aid was provided to increase **Nursing Services** during this historic health crisis. There are not enough nursing services provided in a non-pandemic environment. During this pandemic, the limited nursing staff available was overwhelmed. We feel strongly that this pandemic serves as a warning to all of us that a strong social and academic school environment begins with a healthy school environment, and to say that a nurse in a building one day per week is enough to ensure that healthy environment, is not sufficient, rather, it is indeed negligent.

Since the Archdiocese was one of the only school systems opening campuses in Southeastern Pennsylvania, we experienced **Transportation Issues** with our cooperating school districts in the Montgomery, Bucks, Delaware, and Chester Counties. Many of the school districts within these counties attempted to not provide transportation to citizens of the Commonwealth attending our schools, since their schools were not opening their physical campuses. While it took some wrangling and speedy work by Pennsylvania Legislators to remedy this mistreatment, many of our students unnecessarily lost valuable "in-class" instruction.

At times, we struggled with conflicting information emanating from the Pennsylvania Department of Education and local county health departments regarding COVID levels and what would trigger a shutdown of a building or campus.

The Commonwealth's instructional models based on low, moderate and substantial levels of COVID, did not hold up and were largely ignored by school districts. We identified a surge at Halloween, but not at Thanksgiving or Christmas. We attribute this to calendar modifications we made in our schools, extending "all virtual" instruction periods prior and after each of these holidays. Further, our data consistently showed, and continues to show that nearly all our cases came from outside of school and not in the school building.

While COVID has made us stronger in ways related to customer service, adaptation, technology, and innovation, the financial effects, and delayed capital improvements have set us back in other ways. It will likely take us years to recover from the issues created by the Pandemic.

Again, I thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. I hope that you are able to glean from my words that we love our students, parents, teachers, and school communities. As a mission driven system, we always try and place the students first. Please help us as we continue to positively affect the education of young people in Pennsylvania. Remember us and what we do when arguing the tenets of legislation like as "Back on Track." Please remember that in order to combat a health crisis we need health practitioners, primarily nurses serving our school

communities. Thank you and I will pray for you as you attempt to face this challenge and advocate for all of the students of the Commonwealth.