

CATHOLIC CONFERENCE OF OHIO

Catholic Conference of Ohio Testimony Before Finance & Appropriations, Primary & Secondary Education Subcommittee in Support of the Ohio Choice Scholarship Program Contained in H.B. 66

March 3, 2005

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, my name is Tim Pond, Director of Governmental Affairs for the Catholic Conference of Ohio. I am here today to express the Conference's support for the Governor's proposed Ohio Choice Scholarship Program.

The Catholic Bishops of the United States in their "Faithful Citizenship: A Catholic Call to Political Responsibility" document made the following statement regarding school choice:

"The education of children is a fundamental parental responsibility. Educational systems can support or undermine parental efforts to educate and nurture children. No one model or means of education is appropriate to the needs of all persons. Parents, the primary educators of their children, have a fundamental right to choose the education best suited to the needs of their children, including private and religious schools. Families of modest means especially, should not be denied this choice because of their economic status. Government should help provide the resources required for parents to exercise this basic right."

The Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program was Ohio's first attempt to provide primarily poor parents with the financial resources to make decisions about the education of their children. Now in its ninth year, the state has helped over 40,000 children attend a school of their parent's choice. A large number of students who have remained in the Cleveland Municipal Schools have also benefited by being able to take advantage of tutoring programs provided by the Cleveland program. Catholic schools agreed to participate in this program because of an abiding commitment to help low income, and especially minority children.

The Conference plans to have several parents whose children are currently attending a Catholic school on a scholarship testify during public testimony next week. You will be able to hear firsthand the value placed on the scholarship program by the parents.

But what about the academic performance of these children? Since one of the main goals of the scholarship program was to see if providing poor parents with the necessary financial resources to choose where to educate their children, would this choice result in better academic achievement on the part of the participants?

The Ohio Department of Education contracted with the University of Indiana's Center for Evaluation to do a longitudinal study of three groups of students. The longitudinal study was initiated in November 1998 when a group of 883 first grade children began using a scholarship to attend private schools. In addition to these children, two primary comparison groups were also identified: (1) approximately 480 first graders in public schools whose families had applied for a scholarship but didn't receive one (because there were more applicants for scholarships than the appropriation could fund, scholarships were awarded on a lottery basis) and (2) approximately 1500 first graders in public schools whose families had never applied for a scholarship.

The most recent evaluation was published in October 2004. This study tracked the three groups of students mentioned earlier through the end of their fifth grade (June 2004). The evaluators came to the following conclusion as it pertains to a comparison between students that had received a scholarship and students whose parents didn't apply for one.

"Across the five years of the present study, the achievement of scholarship students begins and tends to remain higher than that of public school students whose parents have never applied for a scholarship".

The study goes on to compare the group of scholarship students with students whose parents applied but didn't receive a scholarship. "The achievements of these groups were equivalent by the end of second grade in each of the four areas tested. However

scholarship students came to achieve at significantly higher levels than applicant non-recipients in the areas of reading and overall score by the end of the third grade. Each of these differences remained through fourth grade, but each was no longer significant by the end of fifth grade. Further, while there were no differences between scholarship and applicant non-recipient students in social studies when it was first assessed in third grade, the achievement of scholarship students is significantly higher in social studies in fourth and fifth grade.”

The study goes on to say “these results suggest some academic benefit for scholarship students in at least some areas, although the longevity of these benefits is unclear and inconsistent”.

I would be remiss if I didn’t mention the financial sacrifices that Catholic schools have made to educate these children. The 30 Catholic schools that accept children with scholarships in Cleveland have spent between 35–40 million dollars of their own money to educate what for the most part are non-Catholic poor children. This money has come from the generosity of the parishes sponsoring these schools.

Because the Catholic Church believes that parents are the primary educators of their children we offer support for the Governor’s Ohio Choice Program. As we did in Cleveland we are willing to provide an alternative education for parents. The children eligible for the Ohio Choice Program must attend one of the 70 elementary schools in which 2/3’s of the students fail to meet state proficiency scores in reading and math for two consecutive years. The Governor has proposed spending \$9,000,000 on this program to begin in the 2006-07 school year. Approximately 2,600 students would receive a \$3,500 scholarship to attend the chartered nonpublic school of their parents’ choice. In reviewing the list of 70 public schools that would meet the criteria above it appears that we would have a Catholic elementary school fairly close to each of these buildings.

Once again we support the Governor’s program. I would be happy to respond to any questions.