

TESTIMONY OF THE PENNSYLVANIA CATHOLIC CONFERENCE
House Appropriations Committee
May 22, 2009

I am Philip Murren, legal counsel for the Pennsylvania Catholic Conference (PCC). With me is Sean McAleer, PCC's Education Director.

For many years, PCC has received assurances that, in order to provide equitable treatment to the Commonwealth's nonpublic school students, the annual state budget appropriations for nonpublic school student textbooks, instructional materials and auxiliary services would increase at the same percentage rate as the state's public school basic education subsidy. For most of the last 15 years, those assurances were honored.

However, in the 2006 budget cycle, the increase in the annual state budget appropriation for nonpublic school student textbooks, instructional materials and auxiliary services was lower than that for the state's public school subsidy. The public school subsidy increased by 6.5%, while the appropriations for nonpublic school school textbooks, instructional materials and auxiliary services increased by 5.87%. While that differential was not in itself enormous, its effect is compounded in future years because future percentage increases are applied to a lower base amount.

Again, in this past year's budget (2008-2009) the public school subsidy was increased by 5.5%, a substantially greater increase than the nonpublic school student appropriations, which each increased by 3%. Then, in the middle of the budget year, the nonpublic school appropriations were unilaterally decreased further.

Thus from 2005 to 2008, actual Nonpublic School Student Auxiliary Services appropriations increased by \$9,187,180 (11.63%). And, from 2005 to 2008, Nonpublic School Student Textbooks and Instructional Materials appropriations increased by \$4,482,654 (10.28%). During that same period of time, the basic public school subsidy increased by \$733,958,000 (16.34%).

Nonpublic school students thus already face an ever-widening gap in the amounts of resources allocated to the programs that are of direct benefit to them. Senate Bill 850 would widen that gap even further. While it proposes to keep the public school basic education allocations level with last year's (when the Federal stimulus appropriations are included), Senate Bill 850 proposes to cut nonpublic school student textbook appropriations by 12.31% and nonpublic school student auxiliary services appropriations by 11.84%.

Nonpublic school students make up 13.1% of the total K-12 enrollment in Pennsylvania's schools. Their parents pay the same amount of State and local taxes as do the parents of public school students. The State programs that directly benefit these nonpublic school students are not funded anywhere close to the proportionate enrollment

levels as between public and nonpublic schools. The disparity in funding allocated to nonpublic school students is even greater when public school-only State programs (such as Accountability Grants) and local school district expenditures are added to the amounts spent exclusively for the benefit of public school students.

Nonpublic school students and their parents have never asked for fully equal State spending in relation to their public school counterparts, but they have asked for levels of funding that could actually meet their demonstrated levels of need in those relatively few programs that are statutorily authorized and are constitutionally permissible.

Another example of unequal treatment in recent budget cycles has occurred with respect to appropriations that have been designated for technology enhancements. In the past, nonpublic school students participated in the Link-to-Learn program which was open to all students, public and nonpublic alike. With the advent of Classrooms for the Future in 2006, and the de-funding of Link-to-Learn, nonpublic school students were completely shut out, since Classrooms for the Future is directed solely to the public schools. Advocates for nonpublic school families have repeatedly suggested a remedy to this disparity over the past two budget cycles. The suggested remedy is to assign a proportionate share of technology money (13.1%) through an appropriation to the nonpublic school students' portion of the Link-to-Learn program. The enabling statute for this program has already been adapted to allow funding to benefit students in nonpublic schools, so no new statutory authorization is needed.

If nonpublic school students had received a proportional share of the technology funding that has already been allocated through the Classrooms for the Future program, they would have been allocated \$20.3 million. If they would be allocated a proportional share of the \$22 million proposed for that program this coming year, they would be allocated \$2.9 million. That would not make up for past inequities, but it would help.

Nonpublic school families realize that in these difficult financial times cuts may have to be made, but they are very concerned that it be done in a way that is fair and equitable for all Pennsylvania students. Many nonpublic school families are already struggling to pay tuition and fees on top of their school taxes. Because of that fact, they are feeling the impact of the current economic climate even more acutely than their public school counterparts when it comes to family education spending. PCC asks that these families not be further disadvantaged by the State's educational spending choices during this budget cycle.