



FLORIDA CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS
The nonpartisan public policy voice of the Catholic Church in Florida

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**Prepared Remarks for House Pre-K-12 Innovation Subcommittee
Panel on Scholarship Program Outcomes and Oversight
James Herzog, Associate Director for Education
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Good Morning Mister Chair and Committee Members:

My name again is James Herzog and I serve as Associate Director for Education at the Florida Conference of Catholic Bishops. In this role I work closely with the seven Catholic school superintendents in Florida on behalf of our system of schools.

This year there are 240 Catholic schools serving more than 86,000 students from pre-k to 12th grade in Florida. This makes us one of the largest systems of nonpublic schools in the state.

Our schools have a longstanding tradition of actively participating in major state scholarship programs and advocating for reasonable accountability measures.

As part of this participation, we greatly appreciate the opportunity to have ongoing collaboration with Director Adam Miller of the School Choice Office and his staff. It is reassuring to know that the Department has technical experts like Adam and his team who are a phone-call away from helping our schools to navigate the dozens of existing state requirements and compliance deadlines. We anticipate that efforts to strengthen current requirements may well require increased personnel and travel funding for his office. We also greatly appreciate the application and other support services provided by Step Up For Students and the AAA Scholarship Foundation.

Florida continues to be a leading state for policies which support parental empowerment in education. This concept is closely aligned with longstanding church teaching that parents are the primary educators of their children.

As an essential part of the parental choice landscape, the FCCB strongly supports existing state scholarship programs. All told, Catholic schools currently serve more than 26,000 students who receive scholarships under any one of the state's four major school choice programs. Many parents have exercised their choice to enroll their children in an education setting that they determine to best meet their academic and other family needs.

In making the choice for their children to attend Catholic schools, parents often cite a few key reasons when asked about the decision made. These include the safe learning environment seen, the faith-based approach and values shared, and the sterling academic outcomes achieved. Regarding outcomes, our Catholic high schools have a 99 percent graduation rate according to the National Catholic Educational Association. And of those graduates, 86 percent go on to attend a college or university. In the Orlando diocese, our Catholic high schools determined that 99 percent of their graduates attend college or the military.

Parents and other school stakeholders also appreciate the fact that schools are committed to seeking a continuous cycle of improvement through accreditation. That is why the conference developed our own accreditation program starting in 1969 and this program has even been used

as a model by conferences in other states such as Ohio. And it is why our high schools are accredited by AdvancED which is also known as the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. The Conference itself is a member of the National Council for Private School accreditation (an entity that is currently recognized under the VPK statute).

Finally parents who look into our schools also appreciate the fact that teachers and administrators hold certification through the Florida Department of Education. The Department even has a special website which they can be used to look up the certification status of these professionals on a 24-7 basis.

The Conference greatly appreciates the opportunity to be active participants in the discussion about existing program requirements. Here are some ideas which we think warrant discussion:

- At present, the state authorizes at least seven on-site visits per year by the Department to participating FTC schools. It could be helpful to discuss having additional visits possible for school owners who are suspected of trying to circumvent existing requirements by opening up new schools under different school names.
- Finally, it would depend upon the exact details involved, but it may be possible to make the background screening undertaken for owners and operators more consistent among the FTC, Gardiner and McKay programs.

Thank you mister chair and committee members.