

# Christine Flowers: Stop Wolf's theft of funds from non-public schools

When it comes to the issue of Catholic school education, I admit to being what many have accused me of in other contexts: Completely biased. Having spent 15 of my 19 years of education in Catholic institutions (St. Mary's Academy, Ancilla Domini Academy, Merion Mercy Academy and Villanova Law School), and having spent another three years teaching in a Catholic girls high school (Villa Maria Academy), it is safe to say that I am a true believer in the value of a faith-based experience. This disclaimer is addressed to every reader out there who questions my impartiality: I have none.

That being said, I am also an attorney who understands that there are specific rules and guidelines governing the separation of church and state, and that federal or state aid to private institutions, whether faith-based or secular, demands significant oversight. There is no space in this column to cover the sometimes bitter (bitter as in Lemon Test), sometimes confusing and sometimes glorious history of First Amendment litigation when it comes to school funding battles, but suffice it to say that what I am about to tackle has nothing to do with the Bill of Rights, and everything to do with the Bill of Goods being sold us by Gov. Tom Wolf.

Pennsylvania recently received \$471 million in funding from Washington as part of a Coronavirus funding package known as the CARES Act. That funding came with specific directions from the federal government that it be distributed equally between public and private schools. The directions can be found at this link: <https://oese.ed.gov/files/2020/04/FAQs-Equitable-Services.pdf>.

It's important to remember that these are not federal Title services but are, rather, emergency funding to support American students in a wide variety of educational settings who have been negatively impacted by the pandemic. The disruption has been devastating, and cuts across race, ethnicity, age, geographic and, yes, faith lines. Catholic and other private school children are as harmed by the pandemic and its repercussions as children in public schools.

But Gov. Wolf has decided to set these groups against one another, playing games with some of the most vulnerable among us: Kids. Instead of equitably dividing the funds based on actual need, he has decided to place an ideological thumb on the scale and favor public school children, for reasons completely unrelated to the goal of treating victims of this crisis equally. Instead of allocating the full amount that is owing to children in private schools, approximately \$66 million, Wolf has allocated only \$19 million, thereby misappropriating \$47 million in federal funds.

According to Sean McAleer of the Pennsylvania Catholic Conference, "Catholic and nonpublic school students matter," said McAleer. "We are asking Mr. Wolf and Education Secretary Pedro Rivera to please follow the federal guidelines! In a time when thousands of Pennsylvania's children and families are suffering and struggling to make ends meet, the administration has chosen to cause further harm by refusing to allocate money as directed by the federal government."

The Wolf administration has explained its decision to deviate from the equitable guidance provided by the federal government as an attempt to assist low income children, and has apparently made the decision that since there are more low income children enrolled in public schools, that it will ignore federal guidance and engage in its own version of social engineering. Pennsylvania is diverting federal tax monies paid by Catholic and nonpublic school students to advance its own agenda. Here is confirmation of their reasoning: <https://www.education.pa.gov/Schools/safeschools/emergencyplanning/COVID-19/CARESAct/Pages/Equitable-Services-Reservation-Guidance.aspx>

Viewed in this context, it is clear that Wolf and his administration have decided that Catholic and non-public school students are second-class citizens, and are advancing their own ideological agenda based on a skewed understanding of who is suffering the impact of this crisis. This is reprehensible, but not surprising given similar judgment calls made by this governor (e.g. keeping abortion clinics open as essential services).

I spoke with Bud Tosti, principal of St. Katharine of Siena School in Wayne, and he expressed his concern for the devastating impact this move will have on his students:

“I believe what Gov. Wolf has decided in terms of keeping millions of dollars away from thousands of students across the state is both unjust and cruel. It basically sends a message that our designated population who pay state and local tax dollars for public schools, yet choose to send children to non-public schools are second-class citizens and not deserving of educational funding at a time when all schools are in a crisis mode thinking about what September will bring. It is an unjustifiable and a biased decision on his part.”

I agree. I would urge all of those reading this column and who believe that all students have dignity and value to contact Harrisburg and register your anger. Do it now.

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