DIOCESE OF BAKER

Office of the Bishop
641 SW Umatilla Ave. • Redmond, Oregon 97756
Phone (541) 388-4004 • Fax (541) 388-2566
www.dioceseofbaker.org

8 August 2020

Governor Kate Brown
Attn: Citizens' Representative
900 Court St., Suite 254
Salem, Oregon 97301-4047

Dear Governor Brown,

As Bishop of the Diocese of Baker it is my responsibility to oversee Catholic education in Central and Eastern Oregon. On behalf of Catholic parish schools in Bend, Redmond, Ontario, and The Dalles, I must write in objection to your 28 July decision to impose comprehensive distance learning throughout the state. This sudden change of course seriously undermines our schools' prospects for safe and successful re-opening from the COVID-19 shutdown.

In the past few months principals and teachers at these four schools have set about with great dedication to meet the guidelines issued by the Oregon Health Authority on 10 June, "Safe Schools, Ready Learners," which allowed private schools to choose the instructional model best suited to their location. Having developed their own individualized protocols, principals submitted their plans, confident that our schools would be able to open for in-person instruction in the fall.

Recent guidance from authoritative sources gave them good grounds to think their hopes realistic. The American Academy of Pediatrics "strongly advocates that all policy considerations for the coming school year should start with a goal of having students physically present in school," because, as the CDC stated late last month, "the available evidence provides reason to believe that in-person schooling is in the best interest of students."

On the basis of reports from countries that have opened schools, the CDC goes on to assert that "COVID-19 poses low risks to school-aged children." Mid-July CDC statistics bear this out: "children and adolescents under 18 years old account for under 7 percent of COVID-19 cases and less than 0.1 percent of COVID-19 related deaths." On the rare occasions when they become infected, "they are far less likely to suffer severe symptoms" and "are unlikely to be major drivers of the spread of the virus." If they were, an English researcher concluded, "We would have expected to find more clusters linked to schools. That's not what we found." *Science* magazine concurred: "At least when local infection rates are low, opening schools with some precautions does not seem to cause a significant jump in infections elsewhere."

Though in-school classes pose little risk of infection for children, comprehensive instruction from afar puts their education at risk, for children do not learn by screens alone. Poor, minority, or disabled students with limited or no internet access cannot efficiently accommodate themselves to distance learning; school closures that enforce it seem to have worsened long-standing achievement gaps.

But a diet of pure distance learning is not sufficient nourishment for computer-connected students either. As the CDC points out: "In an in-person school environment children more easily learn how to develop and maintain friendships, how to behave in groups, and how to interact and form relationships with people outside their family.... Such routine in-person contacts provide opportunities to facilitate social-emotional development that are difficult, if not impossible, to replicate through distance learning." In the judgement of 1500 members of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, overreliance on remote instruction risks "scarring the life chances of a generation of young people."

These experts seem to second a remark you made in the press conference of 28 July: "If we don't do this right . . . the very functioning of our schools could deepen existing disparities in opportunities and outcomes for our children, and widen racial and socioeconomic inequality in our society." I agree. And I believe we'll be more likely to "do this right" if you re-establish the June guidelines for private schools and permit them to re-open as planned.

Respectfully,

Bishop Liam Cary