

Diocese disputes plan for CARES Act fund distribution

The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania has received \$471 million through the federal CARES Act, relief made available to public school systems through two programs. Per the usual practice, funds are being distributed to public school systems with the understanding that they will be shared proportionally with Catholic and non-public schools. States received federal guidance on how to distribute the funds equitably.

Unfortunately, Pennsylvania Governor Tom Wolf and Pennsylvania Department of Education Secretary Pedro Rivera have ignored the federal guidance and created their own rules to distribute the funds. Rather than assigning the funds based on a per-pupil allocation for each K-12 student, Wolf and Rivera chose to distribute the funds based on the number of low-income students served. The result has lowered the amounts to be given to Catholic and non-public school students to just \$19 million rather than the \$66 million the Pennsylvania Catholic Conference (PCC) believes Congress intended.

According to Jim Gallagher, superintendent of Catholic Schools for the Diocese of Erie, the funds are designed for a number of purposes, some of which are, indeed, to address the unique needs of low-income students. But in addition, they are intended to help with factors affecting all Pennsylvania school students including: training for staff on sanitation and minimizing the spread of infectious diseases; supplies to sanitize and clean facilities; the purchase of educational technology to aid educational interaction between students and their instructors; mental health services and the planning and implementing of activities related to summer learning and supplemental after-school programs.

“Catholic schools willingly complied when Governor Wolf ordered that all schools close in March,” Gallagher said. “We immediately went to work to ensure our students could continue learning on a remote basis. It is not right that our schools are being denied these important funds.” He pointed out that Catholic schools provide significant relief to the taxpayers of Pennsylvania and that parents of students in Catholic schools pay the same school taxes as everyone else.

Sean McAleer, PCC Education director, said the organization is only asking the governor and secretary to 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,” he said.

As with all federal funds, Catholic schools will not receive the funds in the form of money, but rather, as allowable services through the public-school districts that hold the non-public funding.