

Testimony before the Vermont Senate Education Committee

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Good afternoon, Senators, I am Msgr. Bernard Bourgeois, Principal of Rice Memorial High School in South Burlington, a private, Catholic, diocesan high school that has served the community of Vermont for 55 years. I am honored to be here today to testify; it is the first time I have ever done so. As a native Vermonter from Bennington, I thank you for the work you do here. As I am the leader of a complex organization, I know firsthand the difficulties you face in leading the state of Vermont. While my organization is a microcosm of yours, I share in your desire to serve your constituents well. I also know that decisions are not made easily or in a vacuum. Someone will be unhappy at the end of the day and there is little you can do about it! So, I thank you for your service to your fellow Vermonters.

I am here to discuss the dual enrollment issue. To begin with, I think it is a marvelous idea! It is a creative way to look at education and in the end will serve Vermont students well in furthering their education. For those students who are academically eligible, it will be a gateway to college and give them a head start. As you deliberate about education in Vermont, please continue to look at creative and exciting innovations. Without being trendy, education needs to evolve with the times, and dual enrollment is an example of good innovation.

Rice Memorial High School, where I have served for 16 years; 8 as a teacher and 8 as principal, is unabashedly Catholic in its mission and practice. All students are required to take four years of Religious Studies and all students attend all prayer services and participate in them at whatever level they wish. Rice is a college preparatory high school, sending over 90% of our graduates off to four year colleges annually. Our students perform thousands of hours of community service each year, a graduation requirement. They go into the community to work with the poor and homeless, the elderly, the youth, and the disenfranchised. Our athletic teams compete well with Vermont's largest public high schools across the state. Our student body of 398 students is 65% Catholic. Our numbers are up for next year and we are already projecting a student body of 420. Students of all faiths and no faith are welcomed at Rice. Over 40% of our students also share in financial aid, with the average financial aid award at \$2,500 annually. All families who seek financial aid go through a third party application process. As principal, I make the final decision on who gets financial aid and the amount of the award. Rice is accredited through the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, and in fact was the first secondary school in Vermont to have done so. We are also a recognized independent school of the State of Vermont.

Allow me to break down our student body. Of the 398 registered students, 370 are Vermont residents, meaning their parents are Vermont resident taxpayers. If Rice closes its doors tonight, 57 of them will show up at BHS tomorrow, another 57 will be at Colchester, 64 will be at CVU, 48 at South Burlington, 19 at Mount Mansfield, 14 at Milton, and 13 at Stowe. Twelve students would be knocking on the doors of Peoples' Academy in Morrisville, 11 at Winooski, and 11 at Essex. That's about 306 of our students; the remaining 64 students would be scattered throughout mostly northern Vermont. My point is that those 370 students are YOURS. They are VERMONT RESIDENTS. You are the elected members of the Vermont legislature. You have a responsibility for all Vermont residents, including students in private schools.

The families of these students have chosen to send their children to a private, in this case Catholic, school. They have the right to make that choice. They come for various reasons,

such as the Catholic mission, college preparatory classes and atmosphere, family tradition, on and so forth. They pay Rice tuition, are largely responsible for their own transportation, and continue to pay local taxes at the same time. According to one website (<http://www.tax-rates.org/vermont/property-tax>), the average Chittenden County homeowner paid \$4,096 in property taxes in 2013. A significant amount of that money goes toward funding the public school system. Most if not all of our families pay their local taxes with little or no opposition, and receive little to nothing in return from schools they do not use.

We were stunned to learn that Vermont resident Rice students are now ineligible for dual enrollment. It goes against the culture of sharing resources already happening among Vermont high schools and colleges. Prior to this year, Rice students have taken part in dual enrollment, with about 2 students a year taking courses mostly at UVM and another 2-4 during the summer. Mostly, these students had exhausted our curriculum offers and were looking to expand, like Advanced Calculus or a foreign language.

Over the years a good relationship has been built with the public school system of Vermont. Here are some examples. Rice students eligible for special education services receive programming from the South Burlington school district. A number of Rice students have made use of the Burlington Technical Center and the Center for Technology at Essex. We have solid relationships with those schools and our students benefit greatly from their programs. When a Rice student is interested in an athletic or other extra curricular program not available at Rice but offered by their local public school, those schools have all welcomed our students into their ranks for those programs. It is hard for us to understand why dual enrollment would be any different.

From the point of view of this program, I don't see how a Vermont resident student at Rice is any different than a Vermont resident student at Burlington High School. Does the building the student learns in really make that much of a difference? Since this voucher does not pass through the school's hands, I don't see any difference in the two students. By statute, if the 57 Burlington students at Rice sit in BHS seats tomorrow, they are now eligible for this program. They are Vermont resident taxpayers no matter where they are going to school.

I ask that you consider the original intent of the legislation. The beneficiary of dual enrollment is the student who has a chance to further his or her education now - as a senior or junior in high school - and not waste time taking unneeded coursework just to fill hours. The goal of education - public and private - is to tap the potential of each child. Your children are your future. Does it really matter what school they're attending?

One of the core values of our country and state is non-discrimination. Taxpayer money is not supposed to discriminate. I know some are claiming that dual enrollment violates the separation of church and state. No one supports the "Establishment" clause of the constitution more than I. There are no good examples of churches running states and even fewer of states running churches! In the case of dual enrollment, it is not the school that benefits. In fact, it might cost the school money to participate in the program. Rather, the Rice student who is the son or daughter of a Vermont taxpayer is the beneficiary of the program. That student has a right to the same taxpayer funded programs public school students access.

In closing, Vermont resident Rice students are seeking a benefit from their State and the taxes their parents pay. Anything to the contrary is unfair, unjust, and frankly discriminatory. Families who send their children to Rice are doing so for some of the same reasons you created the dual enrollment program: they are looking for creative, innovative ways to educate their children. There is no sin in that! I hope you find it in your hearts to treat all Vermont resident taxpayer families equally, regardless of which school they attend. Thank you for your time.