



PRINCE of PEACE
Catholic Church & School
 1209 Brushy Creek Rd.
 Taylors, SC 29687
www.princeofpeacetaylors.net 864.268.4352

28 July 2020

My dear people:

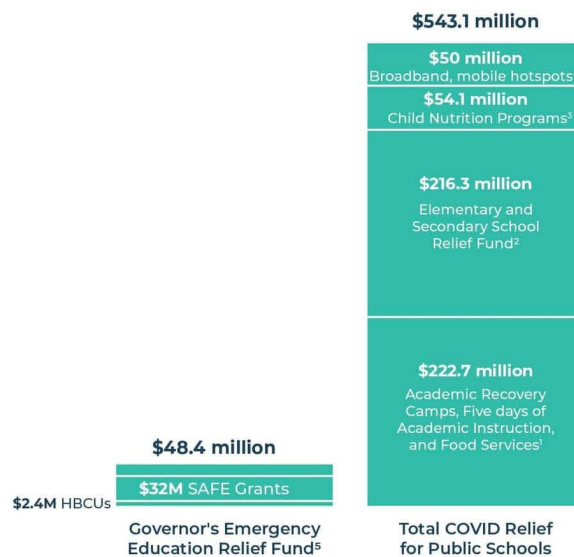
On 20 July 2020, South Carolina Governor Henry McMaster authorized \$32M in grants for middle and low- income families from the CARES Act as **Safe Access to Flexible Education (SAFE) Grants** to use for tuition in private schools. Many families here in our parish have welcomed this news with great joy, because it gives them greater flexibility to choose Catholic education for their children, which they would not otherwise be able to provide due to financial hardship, job loss and other circumstances. At the same time, however, we have several parishioners who are administrators, teachers, parents, and students in public schools. Many are expressing sentiments from concern to anger over what this means for them.

Catholics have a vested interest in making sure that our Catholic schools are viable, as they provide an essential contribution to the life of both the Church and our society at large. At the same time, as citizens, we have a vested interest in making sure that public education is also strong. There are many who feel strongly that the allocation of CARES Act money for families to provide independent and/or private school education is taking away needed money for the public schools that serve the vast majority of our state’s children. As citizens of a free country, we have the right to voice our opinions on this matter and make political decisions accordingly. As your pastor, I would like to offer some food for thought for your reflection.

Some are claiming that the SAFE Grants effectively defund public education. Yet, since 2007, expenditures towards education have increased 20% statewide. And, \$543.1M of COVID relief funding is going to public schools. Here are some of the figures for public education in South Carolina:

- \$10.3 Billion - SC Public Education Budget
- \$1.3 Billion - Cash Reserves held by public school districts (rainy day funds)

EDUCATION RELATED SC COVID RELIEF FUNDING



¹Allocated via H5202 as part of the \$19 Billion Coronavirus Relief Fund
²CARES Act - Flowed through SC Dept. of Education
³CARES Act - Flowed through SC Dept. of Education
⁴Allocated via H5202 as part of the \$19 Billion Coronavirus Relief Fund
⁵CARES Act - Flowed through SC Dept. of Admin

- \$543.1 Million – CARES Act Relief for Public Schools
 - \$222.7 Million - Public School Academic Recovery Camps, food services, and an additional 5 days of academic instruction
 - \$216.3 Million - Public Elementary & Secondary School Relief
 - \$54.1 Million - Public Child Nutrition Programs
 - \$50 Million - Broadband expansion in SC

The moneys for SAFE Grants do not come from any of those above sources. They come from the Governor’s Emergency Relief Fund.

Household Size	300% FPL
1	\$ 38,280
2	\$ 51,720
3	\$ 65,160
4	\$ 78,600
5	\$ 92,040
6	\$ 105,480
7	\$ 118,920
8	\$ 132,360
9	\$ 145,800
10	\$ 159,240

Some are claiming that these grants effectively help children from rich families who can afford tuition. Yet, children at or below 300% of the poverty line are the ones who can benefit from it. This equates to around \$78K for a family of four.

Private school students account for 6% of South Carolina’s K-12 children (50,000 out of 830,000 students). Governor McMaster allocated 5% of the total COVID relief funds to independent and private schools (\$32M of the \$591.5M). The claim that a disproportionate amount of money is going to private school children is not sustainable. While \$32M is a lot of money to private schools, it also represents 0.7% of the total dollars spent annually by the state on K-12 education.

In 2018-9, Greenville County spent \$11,329 per pupil (not including building funds, etc). Local funding is from the individuals in the district paying taxes, including individuals who rely on public schools and those who don’t (e.g. parents selecting independent or private schools, taxpayers without children, etc.). When a taxpayer sends their child to a private or independent school, a portion of their taxes remain with the school without the expenses associated with educating the child. In fact, in 2018-19, Catholic schools alone saved Greenville County \$13.9M alone by their very existence. Imagine the total cost of savings from every private school child in South Carolina, or even just our Catholic schools! If private schools go under because of the economic crisis, then the public school system would be burdened with the weight of the corresponding expense, without any increase in revenue from taxes.

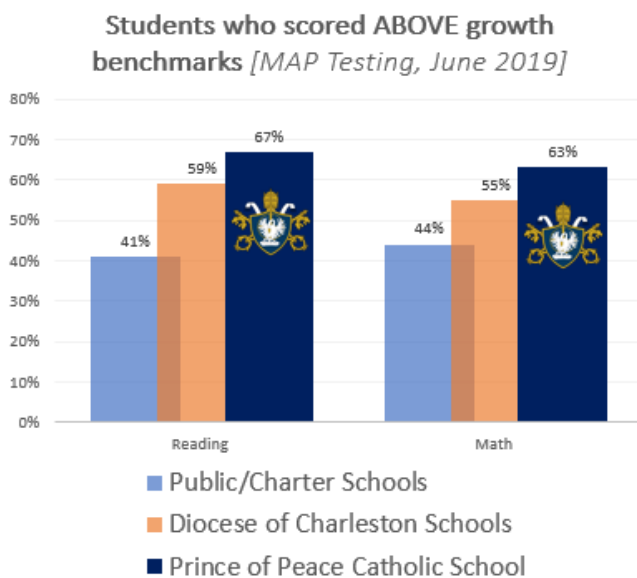


Remember that the money is going, not to schools, but to families. Some people have raised the issue of public funds going to private, especially religious, schools, as a constitutional issue. Yet voucher systems by which parents fund private education have already been upheld as constitutional by the Supreme Court. In 2002, *Zelman vs Simmons-Harris*, the US Supreme Court decided by a 5-4 vote that an Ohio program for school vouchers did not violate the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment, which provides for the free exercise of religion and forbids the establishment of a state religion. Many people argue that the Constitution provides for the separation of church and state in a way which could and should prohibit public funds being used for private religious schools. The interpretation of this principle in constitutional law is evolving, but, as it stands now, it is hard

to see that programs such as SAFE Grants can be overturned. Federal funding is already available to religious schools, via lunch and Head Start programs, and others. This is an expansion of that principle.

It is a fundamental principle of the natural law that parents are the primary educators of their children. Giving taxpayers their own money back to make the choices they deem necessary for the education of their children is not against the Establishment Cause of the First Amendment nor against the moral teaching of the Church. Parents, and not the State, are the ultimate arbiters of education. While the State has a duty to provide education, it does not follow that the State may only allow public funding for public schools.

Some object that these grants are enshrining systemic inequality, because public schools have to accept all children, and private schools are free to deny admission to whomever they like. While it is true that, as a whole, public schools must provide for all children of a certain age, in practice, some individual public schools do not. I am a product of Greenville County Public Schools K-12. I was denied entrance to the public schools my parents and I discerned was better for my educational needs, merely because of the address of my parents, and was thus denied opportunities that greater school choice could have afforded me. I was later admitted to an academic magnet program, which also denied entrance to other children.



Some say independent and private schools are not held accountable for the education of children. Yet, SAFE Grant school recipients are accountable to report student progress and use of funding. Our parish school MAP tests our students just like many other public and independent schools. And, in comparison, our students demonstrated higher above growth benchmarks in comparison to public, charter, and other Catholic schools across the state (June 2019).

The charge that private schools only cater to the rich and can use SAFE Grants as a pretext to just increase tuition, thereby still excluding the less privileged also needs to be

answered. To be a SAFE Grant school, tuition rates across 2 years were requested to verify such an increase was not made. Catholic schools have an intentional desire to try to provide for as many children in as many situations as possible, but that also is only practical when resources and financial viability permit. Many children who would not otherwise be able to afford a Catholic education without making our schools unviable now have an opportunity they did not have before. Catholic education is a ministry to the whole human person and is also an outgrowth of the Church's commitment to social justice. Being able to serve underprivileged kids in a way which does not

threaten the financial stability of our schools allows us to more authentically live out that philosophy.

Furthermore, 13% of the population in Catholic schools in South Carolina are exceptional learners, far above the state average; and 31 out of the 33 Catholic schools in the diocese have programs for special needs. In the last five years our exceptional needs population grew by >500%!

There are no easy answers to education reform. Amid a pandemic where people are stressed and facing challenges they have never seen before; it is even harder to see what should be done. But the important thing here is this: *What serves the children of South Carolina best to allow them to flourish as the glorious creatures they are?* The SAFE Grants are a creative way for parents to exercise their responsibility to educate their children by greater flexibility in using their own money in a way which does not prejudice the funds already allotted to public education. John F Kennedy, our first Catholic president, in 1963 stated, "A rising tide lifts all boats." I hope that our parishioners who have discerned that Prince of Peace Catholic School is the best place for their children will apply for this grant as soon as it is available to them, so that they can see that rising tide which lifts all the boats in this stormy sea of life.

Sincerely in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Fr. Christopher E. Smith". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Father Christopher Smith, PhD/STD

Pastor