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Column: Fund mandates in private schools



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Nonpublic schools deserve state funding for mandates, just like public schools receive, Long writes. (Photo: Detroit News)

The Michigan Legislature has acted in recent years to better recognize the significant presence of nonpublic schools in communities across the state. With several hundred in Michigan, religious or otherwise, nonpublic schools are rightly benefiting from the Legislature's efforts to ensure every student is learning in an environment that is both healthy and safe.

In two of the past three state budget cycles, nonpublic schools were eligible, along with their public school counterparts, to apply for a school safety grant reviewed and distributed by the Department of State Police. Collectively, 39 nonpublic schools — including Catholic, Jewish, Christian and Lutheran schools — received nearly \$1.2 million of the \$7.5 million available to improve security in their buildings. Last year, both Democrats and Republicans also supported an amendment in the Department of Education budget that allowed nonpublic schools to be reimbursed for testing drinking water for lead.

Mindful of the Flint water disaster and situations across the country where tragic violence has occurred, elected officials in Michigan have thankfully passed measures that better protect the health and safety of students in both public and nonpublic schools. Yet, regrettably, the momentum toward greater protection for all students in this state is encountering legal pressure.

Despite bipartisan efforts to allow nonpublic schools to receive state grant dollars for lead testing and school safety, some advocacy groups are suing the state to prohibit nonpublic schools from being reimbursed for complying with dozens of non-education related health and safety mandates. These mandates include fire drills, criminal background checks, vaccination and attendance records, among others. All schools conduct these activities, but nonpublic schools — most of which operate on a minimal budget — are not reimbursed for the expenses as are public schools.

Since the lawsuit was filed, those opposed to the funding have articulated erroneous and misleading information about nonpublic schools, including the perplexing accusation they solely

educate wealthy white families. In fact, Catholic educational institutions, motivated by faith, serve families of varying socio-economic backgrounds, races and religious beliefs. Nationally, according to [2016 data from the National Catholic Educational Association](#), approximately 20 percent of children educated in Catholic schools were minority students. Over 17 percent were non-Catholics. These numbers reflect current demographics in the six-county Detroit archdiocese. Roughly 45 percent of U.S. Catholic schools participate in federal nutrition programs, providing over 270,000 free meals each day to low-income students.

To help keep expenses down for those in need, Catholic parishes, dioceses and religious orders regularly work with families to make attendance more affordable through scholarship and tuition assistance programs. The presence of Catholic and other nonpublic schools is only possible with the commitment of teachers, staff, and volunteers who welcome all children daily as part of the school family, oftentimes at salary levels well below their public school colleagues.

The reality is that working families sacrifice and save so they can choose to send their children to a Catholic or other nonpublic school. Similar to public school families, many nonpublic school parents commit to a certain number of volunteer hours, they clip box tops and purchase items online that return a percentage back to the school. Yet as taxpayers who also pay tuition expenses, nonpublic school families are paying twice for state-mandated health and safety programs.

Elected officials have taken bold strides of late to better ensure the general welfare of all students. Regardless of the outcome of the aforementioned lawsuit, the parents of over 115,000 nonpublic school students in Michigan desire for their children to be treated no differently by the state than the children of their public school friends and neighbors.

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<http://www.detroitnews.com/story/opinion/2017/07/26/paul-long-private-schools-fund-mandates/104002312/>