



## WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

### EYE ON THE CAPITOL

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#### **CATHOLIC SCHOOLS WEEK: HELPING CATHOLIC SCHOOLS LIGHT THE WAY**

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Just over 200 years ago, Thomas Jefferson wrote his famous letter citing the need for a “wall of separation” between church and state; and almost 200 years ago, Mother Elizabeth Ann Seton founded the first Catholic free school in the United States. Much has changed since. The importance of Catholic schools, as a vital ministry of the Church, has not.

Jefferson dreamed of a nation of family farmers and local merchants, each owning their own land or business, working for themselves in close proximity to their families. Most children would learn their values -- and their trades -- from their parents. Jefferson also hoped government would be small and limited.

The America Jefferson envisioned has not come to pass.

Government’s scope has expanded. Few areas of human activity go untouched by law and regulation. As for home, family, and education, Jefferson’s dream of small farms and businesses has long since given way to Alexander Hamilton’s vision of a nation built on manufacturers and large commercial concerns. Fathers, and more recently mothers, have left the home to work for someone else. Children are now educated in schools. They don’t learn the family trade, but rather, how to compete in a much broader world. Many parents have less “face time” with their children and have adapted new ways to transmit the values and lessons they want to impart.

These trends make Catholic schools even more important. As patterns of living change, institutions must adapt. And they must do so in ways that sustain the parent’s ability to form the moral character of their children.

Our Catholic schools have readily done this. They have helped immigrants from different nations speaking different languages merge into our nation’s mainstream. Catholic schools have helped parents adapt to working outside the home by offering flexible schedules, childcare, and other ways to involve parents in the lives of their children at school. The schools have broadened their instruction and curriculum to adapt to an evolving economy that became national, then international in scope.

Like our schools, our public policies must also adapt in ways that foster, not frustrate, the parents’ role as primary teachers. Thus, in addition to the financial contributions we make to

education, we Catholics should also make a civic contribution by advocating for policies that help schools achieve their mission.

In the years ahead, we need to ensure that growth of government does not afford an excuse to marginalize religion, but rather fosters a new openness to how religion and society can interact for their mutual benefit. Public policies should enable government support for parents who choose religious schools. At the same time, we need to make sure that government services like transportation are not denied or cut back when governments do their budgeting.

We need to ensure that the demands of work in a global economy do not negate parents' opportunity to form the faith and character of their children. We can do that with policies that structure work so parents can spend time with children.

We also need policies that make it easier for all schools to access the new technologies that connect every school to the global classroom, a necessity in this Internet age.

Catholic Schools Week is a time to celebrate our schools' legacy. Let's also make it a time for resolving to advocate for their future.