



WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

EYE ON THE CAPITOL

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COMMON GOOD NOT SERVED BY DENYING BUS SERVICE TO CATHOLIC SCHOOL CHILDREN

By John Huebscher, Executive Director

One of the most important contributions of Catholic thought to public policy debates is the concept of the common good. The common good, like the principle of solidarity, calls on all citizens to think not only of themselves, but also of the entire community. That is why the Catholic contribution to policy debates regularly includes a call to embrace a broad, rather than narrow, definition of the public interest.

Nowhere has this concern for the common good been more evident than our approach to education.

In 2005, this column affirmed the value of good schools whether public schools, religious schools, or independent schools as essential to the development of our children. The piece explicitly defended taxes that support public schools as an investment in the common good for which all should be thankful.

Last year, Archbishop Dolan urged legislators to support a compromise proposal that raised the cap on the Milwaukee choice program and increased funding for the public school SAGE program. As he did so, the Archbishop affirmed that support for parental choice and support for public education are not mutually exclusive positions. He reminded policy makers that the bishops' support for the voucher program is matched by a desire to affirm and improve public schools.

That is why it is so disappointing to see some school districts and legislators trying to cut or limit funding for bus service for children who attend Catholic and other nonpublic schools.

Public funds support school bussing for children in Catholic schools because the people of Wisconsin amended the state Constitution in the 1960s to allow it. In ratifying that amendment, the people made a commitment to the safety of our children, wherever they attend school. The voters of that period rejected an "us vs. them" mentality that views public and nonpublic schools as rivals. Rather, they determined that children should be safe traveling to and from schools and that all schools serve the common good by their commitment to excellence in education.

Here in Madison school leaders argue that tight budgets warrant retreating from that commitment. To save money, they propose that a child who goes to a Catholic school won't get the bus ride available to his next-door neighbor who attends public school. They seek to retreat

from the broad view of the common good endorsed in the 1960s. In its place they offer a contract to parents and a directive to fend for themselves when it comes to the safe transport of their children.

Those who make this argument seem to think that a child's moral claim for safe transit to school is a "privilege" that relies on the generosity of the school board or a "frill" available when budgets are not limited. In fact this claim is a right, guaranteed by the state Constitution, sustained by custom and grounded in a commitment to the common good.

Public school leaders in Madison and elsewhere can better serve the common good by reaching out to parents who choose nonpublic schools and forging an alliance to seek additional financial support for our schools. We should all hope that is what happens in the weeks, months, and years ahead.

Our children deserve no less.

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