

WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

EYE ON THE CAPITOL

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VOUCHERS PROVIDE THE SAME OPPORTUNITIES AS OTHER PROGRAMS

By John Huebscher, Executive Director

Old habits die hard and the idea of providing public support to parents who want to send their children to religious or independent schools has long triggered intense opposition. The reaction to the expansion of Parental Choice Programs to students across Wisconsin shows these habits are alive and well.

Some critics offer the time-honored complaint that providing vouchers to Catholic school students “siphons” money from the public school system. Interestingly, they don’t suggest that offering public aid or scholarships to high school graduates who attend Catholic colleges or universities drains money from the University of Wisconsin system. Nor does anyone suggest that state or federal reimbursement to Catholic hospitals diverts funding from public health entities. Neither do such critics complain that contracting with Catholic Charities agencies to offer community-based services to persons with disabilities or the elderly undermines our county-based human services system. Somehow, only when we help needy families choose private primary and secondary schools are we undermining the common good.

Opponents also express dismay that many of the students who are eligible for the expanded voucher program already attend Catholic and other nonpublic schools. Some critics even complain that this is a new costly “entitlement” for taxpayers.

For two reasons this response seems ironic.

First, many critics of vouchers frequently champion the use of public funds to provide greater opportunity for those in need. They support subsidized access to health care that allows individuals to choose their own doctor, but at the same time are aghast when a similar program makes it affordable for needy parents to pick the school of their choice. One would hope that advocates for the needy would be more open to such a policy.

Moreover, a good number of voucher opponents suggest that religious and independent schools are havens for privileged, affluent families and motivated students. However, the fact that so many children in Catholic schools are from families with incomes below 185 percent of the federal poverty level and eligible for vouchers destroys that stereotype.

A third criticism ignited by the expansion of school vouchers is that support for the program was predicated on the argument it was needed only in areas where public schools were failing. The expansion of vouchers into areas where the local public schools perform well represents a “bait and switch” by the program’s supporters.

Not so. Many voucher supporters, including the bishops, have long made it clear that vouchers were a means to empower parents, not a means to condemn public education. Catholic schools are partners in the common mission of helping families prepare their children to grow into well-educated, responsible adults. In this they are no different from the Catholic healthcare agencies and colleges that also collaborate with public and private sector institutions to meet a community need.

Today's students are facing a different, more competitive world than we faced at their age. We owe it to these children to adapt our institutions and programs to help them meet these challenges. The voucher program may not be perfect, but it offers families the same path to opportunity offered by private partners in other sectors, a service which is a benefit to us all.

Old habits may die hard, but they must adjust to the needs and possibilities that exist in today's world.

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