

Full and Fair Parental Educational Choice: A Path to Justice

PARENTS KNOW WHAT IS BEST FOR THEIR CHILDREN!

And that includes the right of parents to choose the school or educational environment that is best for their children. This right, however, should not depend on their ability to pay tuition to a private school or to live in a neighborhood where the public school system meets the needs of their children. The National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA) believes that parents who wish to send their children to parochial or private schools deserve their fair share of education tax dollars. Parents like you pay taxes but your tax money allotted to schools does not follow your child to a Catholic school.



St. Gregory the Great, Bluffton, SC

Parental choice in education is a justice issue. The United States is the only Western democratic nation that does not provide a fair share of education tax dollars so parents can choose an appropriate education for their children. This lack of parental access to their share of governmental resources should be of great concern to all citizens, especially parents who want the best for their children.

Recent public opinion polls demonstrate that a strong preference is emerging in the United States for parental choice in education. At this time there are 29 states and the District of Columbia that have passed laws creating 61 publicly financed programs that assist more than 1.5 million families by providing them with financial resources to exercise choice in their selection of a school for their children. Efforts are underway in several additional states to enact similar legislation. Choice programs may take several forms:

- **Vouchers:** some of the funds spent by a public school district to educate a child are given instead

to a family in the form of a voucher or certificate to pay tuition at a school of their own choosing.

- **Tax-Credit Scholarships:** these programs allow taxpayers (corporate or personal) to receive full or partial tax credit for donations to nonprofit organizations that are created to provide scholarships to be used for private school tuition.
- **Individual Tax Credits and Deductions:** these allow parents to receive state income tax credits or deductions for money they spend on approved educational expenses for their children.
- **Education Savings Accounts (ESAs):** state education funds are deposited by the local government into authorized savings accounts that may be used for specific education uses, such as tuition at private schools.

Parental choice is the right thing to do! While opponents of full and fair educational choice argue that providing tax dollars for parochial school education violates the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, that argument is simply not valid. The U.S. Supreme Court has ruled favorably on several programs that provide financial aid to parents, aid which may be used to send children to any school, including one that is religious. While there is optimism about additional legislation being enacted on the state level, there is still much to do to assure that full and fair parental choice becomes a hallmark of education in this country. With growing enthusiasm for choice programs, the time has come for us as Catholic parents and church leaders to mobilize and to present a unified force in advocating educational choice in all 50 states.

As a parent of a child in a Catholic school, what can you do? If you are in a state that offers a choice program, make maximum use of it! If you are not, consider becoming politically involved to advocate for choice legislation in your state. Contact your state Catholic Conference to find out if they are working on this issue – and urge them to do so if they are not. Together, with one voice, parents, educators and public officials who unite in a nationwide effort for parental choice programs can effectively begin to meet the educational needs of every child across this nation. ✚