

Bishops kick off campaign supporting education tax relief

By Teresa A. Parsons

Bishop Matthew H. Clark lent his support this week to the movement for education tax relief in New York state.

At a press conference Monday morning, Bishop Clark and diocesan education officials issued a joint statement from all the bishops of New York which calls for legislators to recognize parents' "right of choice in education."

Although that right has been upheld in the nation's highest courts, the statement says, economic trends are making the burden of supporting both the public and alternative educational systems more than parents can bear.

"For many parents who lack the financial means, the fundamental right of choice in education is an empty right," the bishops wrote. "For others, it is secured only a considerable sacrifice: the second job, the double shift, the needs that go unmet."

Press conferences were called by all eight bishops in New York state as the first step in a campaign to promote education tax relief legislation sponsored by Republican State Senator John J. Marchi and Democratic State Assemblyman Denis J. Butler. Both are downstate representatives.

Known as the Marchi-Butler bill, the legislation would allow all taxpayers with school-aged children to claim either of the following options:

- a state tax deduction equal to the actual amount of educational expenses incurred up to \$650 per child in grades K-8, and \$1,000 per child in grades 9-12, or
- a state tax credit (or direct reduction in taxes) equal to \$20 per child, regardless of actual expenses incurred.

When fully implemented, the bill would cost the state \$45 million in lost revenue, according to Joseph McTigue, executive secretary of the Council of Catholic School Superintendents.

On the other hand, proponents argue, non-public schools save the State of New York \$2.9 billion annually by providing educational alternatives.

More and more of that burden is being shifted to the public school system. On the state level, the most recent figures available show that Catholic school enrollment declined by nearly 8 percent between 1983-85. In the Diocese of Rochester, the decline for that period is closer to 4 percent, according to Brother Brian Walsh, diocesan superintendent of schools.

Apart from demographics, a major factor in the enrollment decline among non-public schools is rising costs, according to Brother Walsh. Average tuition for Catholic elementary schools is currently \$750 per year and between \$600 and \$800 for high school students.

Without tax relief, Catholic schools risk pricing themselves out of the reach of lower- and middle-class families. "Those who are dropping away first from the option (of parochial or non-public education) are the poor," Bishop Clark said.

The deductions proposed by the Marchi-Butler bill would have a substantial impact on the affordability of Catholic education, according to Bishop Clark. "I think it would make the difference for a lot of people," he said, "and to benefit these schools would be to benefit the community at large."

Its supporters believe the Marchi-Butler bill's chances of passage are particularly good because it is not directed solely at parents of non-public school students.

In the past, legislation proposing tuition tax credits has been viewed as helping a portion of the state's parents at the expense of the majority. Tuition tax credits have also been interpreted as a violation of the state's Blaine Amendment, which prohibits state aid to non-public schools.

Although Bishop Clark said that the state's bishops currently plan no further concerted action in support of the Marchi-Butler bill, he indicated that most would continue to work for its passage individually.

Above all, the bishop said he viewed the press conference as a call to action for parents. "Many parents look to this kind of

opportunity to rally their energies," he said.

Following the press conferences, Catholic school parents in the Diocese of Rochester and all over the state will be invited to regional informational sessions on the Marchi-Butler bill.

"On a broader scale, we'll be organizing legislative grassroots systems in every school in cooperation with the diocesan education office," said Jean Gilbert, president of the local Federation of Catholic School Parents. "We'll be giving them information, training them, and encouraging them to talk to their local legislators."

"We think it's very important to educate parents in the legislative process," she added.

Coordinating the state-wide effort is a committee which includes representatives of the New York State Catholic Conference, Catholic school superintendents, the Knights of Columbus, and Catholic school administrators.

At the local level, parents will be asked to participate in a letter-writing campaign and to visit local legislators to urge them to

support the Marchi-Butler bill.

In the spring, supporters of education tax relief are planning either diocesan-level rallies or visits from small regional contingents to their legislative representatives in Albany.

"This process has been very well planned at the state level," Gilbert said. "We don't have the dollars, but we have a lot of potential. We just need to get organized. We haven't had grassroots support before."

She believes that once established, a grassroots organization of non-public school parents will also be helpful on other education-related issues, such as remedial education, transportation, and textbook use.

The Marchi-Butler bill was originally introduced in 1984. It has been revised several times — most recently last spring, according to Joseph McTigue.

"I think the idea of choice in education is a concept that's on a roll," he said. "We're giving 100 percent with this campaign ... I think the legislature would be wise not to resist this interest."

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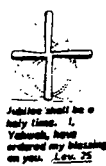
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