

Educators take long look at 'national worry'

ST. LOUIS (CNS) — More than 12,000 Catholic educators took time out recently for a long look at what the leading U.S. education official called "the national worry in America" — education.

U.S. Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander was among the main speakers at the 89th annual convention of the National Catholic Educational Association, held April 20-23 in St. Louis.

Alexander and other speakers endorsed the concept of choice in education as a way to improve the nation's schools. John Chubb, senior fellow at The Brookings Institution in Washington, said current public opinion supports the idea of educational choice, which he described as "the fundamental educational reform."

Support for educational choice also was reflected in the slogan for the second national marketing campaign for Catholic schools. The 1992-93 slogan, unveiled at the convention, is "Choose Catholic Schools — The Good News in Education."

The campaign, which grew out of the traditional Catholic Schools Week observance, is a multifaceted effort to promote something Catholics have long taken for granted, according to

Mercy Sister Lourdes Sheehan, USCC secretary for education.

"We've known Catholic schools are good, but we haven't been very good at communicating that to public," she said.

The average per-pupil cost for a Catholic school student is \$1,800 compared to \$5,000 for a public school student.

Alexander said President George Bush's educational choice proposal — now before Congress — would help elementary and secondary school students in much the same way the federal government aids their older and younger siblings through day care subsidies and college grants or loans.

The education secretary acknowledged that "some people are very frightened by the prospect of giving more people more choices in all schools." But parental choice is "such an inevitable, reasonable, thoroughly American idea" that if it meets resistance, then "we're not explaining it as well as we should," he said.

Other speakers stressed the educators' unique role in the lives of the children they teach and the schools' responsibility to continue aiding the poor.

Jesuit Father William J. O'Malley,

author and theology teacher at Fordham Prep in New York, said in an interview with the *St. Louis Review* during the convention that preparing Catholic students in their faith is akin to convincing the grand dragon of the Ku Klux Klan to join a civil rights organization.

The former McQuaid Jesuit High School teacher said students in a Catholic high school religion class may have been baptized, but have yet to be converted from their materialistic views and self-absorption.

Father O'Malley called it "a real conversion" to get young people to leave their "addiction to the mirror." The only person who they believe is important is themselves and maybe a few friends," he said.

One workshop highlighted the ways that three Catholic high schools are helping their students to provide service to the community around them.

Lyn Wolking, a senior at St. Francis Borgia Regional High School in Washington, Mo., said her visits to a local nursing home through the school's Christian service course has led her to a new career choice of geriatric nursing and an awareness that "people are people no matter what their age or what their condition."

Bridget Harrison, a senior at Academy of the Visitation High School in Town and Country, Mo., said she chose to work in a local day care center because "children inspire me and give me hope." The experience also removed her fear of a neighborhood different from her own, she said.

Christian Brother Robert M. Hoatson, director of education at Monastery Parish of the Sacred Heart in Yonkers, said Catholic educators need to return to their original mission to educate the poor.

The U.S. bishops more than 100 years ago decided to establish an extensive parochial school system, he said, because they recognized the common schools of the day emphasized three values opposed to the Gospel message: indifference, naturalism and materialism.

The Catholic school system was established in 1884 "as a parallel system to allow us Catholics, poor, powerless and disenfranchised, to take what is rightfully ours," he said. "And are we now part of the oppression that the bishops of 1884 dealt with?"

Contributing to this roundup were Joseph Kenny, Teresa Coyle and Elizabeth Wimmer in St. Louis.

Church leaders fear Harris execution will bring more

By Patricia Zapor,
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — The execution of convicted killer Robert Alton Harris in California shortly before dawn April 21 ended a series of last-minute reprieves and started what several religious and human rights leaders contend will be an escalation of executions.

Harris' death made California the third state this year to resume executions after decades without them. Executions in Delaware March 14 and Arizona April 6 were the first for those states in 45 and 29 years, respectively. The last California execution was 25 years ago.

Mother Teresa and bishops from the San Francisco and Los Angeles archdioceses and the dioceses of San Jose and San Bernardino were among those urging Gov. Pete Wilson to commute Harris' sentence to life imprisonment.

"You will set out state on one of two paths which have no visible end: the path of humane law-making and law enforcement or the path of fear and revenge," wrote San Jose Bishop Pierre

DuMaine in an April 9 letter.

"Your choice will reach far beyond your personal conscience and political leadership," Bishop DuMaine said. "It will set the citizens of California on a path they will follow long after you and I and Robert Alton Harris are dead."

In the hours before Harris was killed, the Supreme Court rejected four stays of execution granted by the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals. The last appeal came shortly before 4 a.m. when Harris was already strapped into a chair in the gas chamber at San Quentin Prison.

The final appeals on Harris' behalf contended that execution in the gas chamber constituted cruel and unusual punishment prohibited by the U.S. Constitution. The Supreme Court rejected that appeal, with the dissent of justices Harry A. Blackmun and John Paul Stevens.

In his dissent, Stevens agreed execution by lethal gas is extremely and unnecessarily painful, and cited eyewitness accounts of the execution April 6 in Arizona's gas chamber. Donald Eugene Harding took 10 minutes and 31 seconds to die after lethal fumes were released in Arizona's gas chamber.

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A lone death-penalty opponent April 21 faces a police line guarding the main entrance of San Quentin Prison, shortly after Robert Alton Harris' execution in the gas chamber.

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