

# USCC official praises Bush choice proposal

WASHINGTON (CNS) — The U.S. bishops' top education official praised President George Bush's school choice proposal as "a positive step in keeping the issue of educational choice for low- and middle-income parents in the forefront of the national policy debate."

Mercy Sister Lourdes Sheehan, U.S. Catholic Conference secretary for education, made the comment in a June 29 press release and urged Congress "to create a constructive climate for discussions of this initiative."

The \$500 million pilot plan, called the State and Local GI Bills for Children, would provide \$1,000 annual scholarships to low- and moderate-income students in public, private or religious schools.

"We are convinced that moving this initiative from the level of a political policy debate to that of a legislative reality necessitates the development of strong bipartisan interest and support," Sister Sheehan said.

"We strongly believe that the enactment of parental choice legislation will affirm the rights of parents, help improve our nation's elementary and secondary schools and offer needed educational opportunities to low- and middle-income children," she added.

President Bush defended his proposal during a two-hour visit at Archbishop Ryan High School in Northeast Philadelphia in July.

He said the proposal "is not a question of church and state, it's a question of family."

At a July 21 luncheon attended by Philadelphia Cardinal Anthony Bevilacqua and 500 parents, teachers and students, Bush acknowledged that his bill faced a high hurdle in Congress.

"We are moving into a very political environment in Washington," Bush replied when a priest asked whether the program could be approved. "I don't know whether this Congress is going to take up and support this legislation or not."

The president attacked the National Education Association, the country's largest teachers' union, as "not willing to look at the big picture" in opposing his proposal. "The NEA crowd is fighting any kind of change. They like it the way it has been."

"I don't like it the way it has been," he said. "And I want to help those public schools get better and I want to see families have a choice to send the kids to schools they want."

The proposal calls for initial funding of \$500 million to use in selected school districts as a demonstration project.

Cardinal Bevilacqua said parents, aunts and uncles and "even grandparents" sacrifice to send 117,000 children through the archdiocesan school system.

"It's significant that you have selected Philadelphia for this visit to a Catholic school," the cardinal said. "Because it is

in Philadelphia that Catholic education first prospered."

Among those attending the box-lunch gathering was Maria Tamburrino, a widowed mother of 12 with children at West Catholic High and St. Irenaeus-St. Clement schools.

Saying she supported the Bush proposal, Tamburrino said her children work extra hard to stay at their schools.

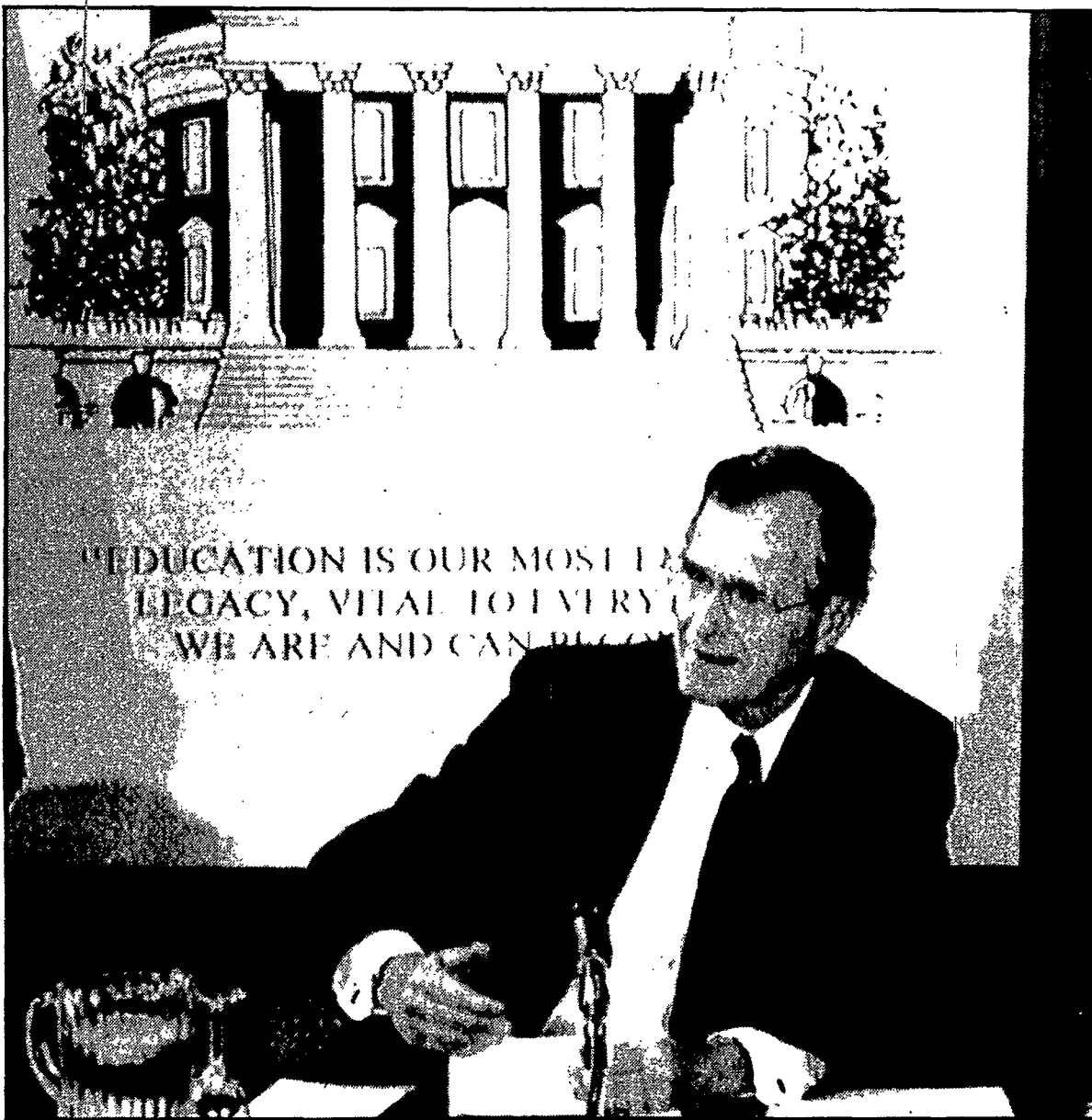
"My children come home, do their homework, work to help pay the tuition," she said. "I'm afraid if this doesn't go through they may not be able to go to Catholic school."

Rita Schwartz, president of Local 1776 of the Association of Catholic School Teachers, was skeptical about how Bush could deliver on his proposal.

"I like the idea," she said. "But everything is going to have to happen on the state level. It's not going to happen in Congress. It hasn't happened yet and he's the education president."

Last year, Pennsylvania's Legislature considered an educational opportunity grant bill somewhat like Bush's proposal. The bill passed in the Senate but was defeated in the House.

William McCusker, principal of Archbishop Kennedy High School in Conshohocken, said the president's proposal was "good, but it doesn't go far enough" as a demonstration project.



President George Bush opens the plenary session of the education summit at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville in 1989. The president was recently praised by the U.S. Catholic Conference for his school-choice proposal.

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