

Blue-ribbon panel dismisses myth of 'elitism' Urges aid for Catholic schools

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

On June 16, a blue-ribbon panel chaired by Hugh Carey, governor of New York from 1974-82, released a report calling for a number of measures by which the state can aid Catholic schools and other non-public schools.

In so doing, the panel asserted that the state will only help itself if it helps non-public schools. The panel based many of its conclusions on data found in an exhaustive study of Catholic schools that was released in May by the University of the State of New York.

Entitled *Roman Catholic Schools in New York State: A Comprehensive Report*, the study noted that Catholic schools are academically successful; relieve the state of the financial burden of 280,000 students; and are as adept at educating poor, minority and at-risk students as are public schools.

Using the study and the assistance of other experts, Carey and his colleagues concluded Catholic schools particularly help students who are "at-risk," that is, hampered by poverty, prejudice, single parenthood or by a lack of educated family members.

In fact, contrary to the commonly held belief that Catholic schools are elitist and exclude poor or potentially difficult students, 15 percent of the students in New York's Catholic schools have "multiple risk factors," whereas 13 percent of the students in public schools statewide have multiple risk factors.

"I think that's probably the most valuable part of the report," stated Timothy W. Dwyer, superintendent of schools in the Diocese of Rochester. "It's an objective reinforcement of what we've been saying all along."

Because of privately financed operating costs far below those of public schools, Catholic schools also save the state considerable money. Catholic schools educate 9.2 percent of all the state's students, the panel's report noted.

"Should Catholic schools cease to exist ... dollar-strapped public school districts already experiencing increased pressure to limit rising costs, would bear the additional financial burden associated with educating resident students now attending Catholic schools," the panel report stated. "This could necessitate further State taxes for all New Yorkers since additional revenues would be required."

Indeed, using per-pupil cost figures derived from the report, the *Catholic Courier* calculated that if every Catholic school in New York state were to close tomorrow, public school districts statewide would need to

raise at least \$2.2 billion in additional revenues just to educate these students at current public-school costs.

Given the positive role Catholic schools play in the state's overall educational framework, the panel asserted, "all efforts deemed to be constitutional should be made to assist Catholic schools in overcoming their financial crisis."

The state already aids non-public schools through such measures as textbook aid and mandated services reimbursement. But the panel report specifically called for state income-tax credits for "tuition and other education-related expenses for one's own children," and "for donations (by personal and corporate taxpayers) to schools, programs, and scholarship funds for the benefit of other children."

The panel also recommended that non-public schools be included in any state-funded school programs using and/or teaching high technology.

Carey elaborated on his panel's recommendations in a phone interview with the *Courier* from the Washington, D.C., office in which he currently works as executive vice president of W.R. Grace & Co.

Tax credits for non-public school parents may be an old idea, Carey acknowledged, but observers need look no further than President Bill Clinton's budget to see parallel recommendations, he said.

In his recently approved deficit-reduction plan, the president included an earned-income tax credit offering refunds to families with incomes below \$25,000. Carey stressed that his panel wanted to "empower" struggling families who desire a non-public education just as Clinton wants to empower poor families trying to get a leg up in the economy.

"If it's a good idea for the Clinton budget, why isn't it a good idea for the New York state budget?" Carey asked rhetorically.

He added that unlike the school voucher concept, in which the government foots a portion of the tuition bill so that parents can send children to the schools of their choice, tax credits merely enable families to use their own money for education, not the government's.

Unfortunately for non-public schools, few state legislators are inclined to agree with the former governor's logic, remarked Joseph T. McTighe, executive secretary of the New York State Council of Catholic School Superintendents.

"This is going to be an extremely heavy lift given the current political climate," McTighe said. "(Legislators) have advanced tax credit initiatives in the past but didn't get far."

Both Carey and McTighe agreed that for any tax-credit

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2. Tax credits for donors
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initiative to be successful, Governor Mario M. Cuomo would have to support it.

Yet, in an era of budgetary constraints and revenue shortfalls, the governor's office is hardly ready to support tax credit initiatives without careful consideration, according to Robert Lowry, assistant secretary to the governor for education and the arts.

Lowry noted that giving a tax break to hundreds of thousands of non-public school parents could cost the state several hundred million dollars in lost tax revenue at a time when overcoming state budget deficits has become a yearly ritual.

Given the current budgetary climate, McTighe noted that state legislators might be more likely to support the recommendation that personal and corporate donors to public and non-public schools receive a tax break. Such an idea presents a "win-win" situation since it would benefit public and non-public schools alike, McTighe said.

"I think we can really form a coalition of public and non-public supporters," he said of the recommendation's legislative chances.

Nonetheless, Lowry noted that giving tax credits to those who donate to any school, public or non-public, would make projecting revenue difficult for the state since it would be hard to predict how many people and businesses would become donors each year. The governor's office would hesitate to support an initiative that only makes projecting yearly tax revenue more difficult, he emphasized.

More likely to fly with state legislators, however, are the panel's recommendations on technological aid to non-public schools, observers believe.

Indeed, the blue-ribbon panel noted that Governor Cuomo himself stated in this

year's Message to the Legislature that he wanted the state education department and other agencies "to develop a capital financing plan in the next year to enable public and private schools, colleges and universities ... to develop on-campus networks to allow students, faculty, and researchers to benefit from advances in telecommunications, high-performance computing, and networking."

Regardless of whether politicians buy the panel's recommendations, some of their constituents — namely, parents — may be encouraged to enroll their children in Catholic schools once they learn of the report, according to Dwyer.

"On the radio, in the news, we can cite some of the findings in this report," the superintendent said. "We have statistics we can brag about."

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