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Nazi nemesis

Simon Wiesenthal, the 84-year-old famed Nazi-hunter, recalled his dark and disturbing experiences in concentration camps as well as his success in pursuing war criminals during a compelling talk before hundreds gathered at Nazareth College of Rochester's Arts Center last week. Page 3.



Catholic schools brace for decision on choice

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

From the land that gave the nation the Beach Boys and the Brady Bunch now comes one of the few issues with a chance to push health-care reform and Somalia off the front page.

That issue is school choice, embodied in the fierce debate raging over California's Proposition 174, slated for voter approval or rejection on Nov. 2 of this year.

Proposition 174 would amend California's constitution and give parents vouchers of \$2,600 per child to use for private-school tuition.

Such opponents of 174 as the Committee to Educate Against Vouchers in Los Angeles and the California Teachers Association claim that, if approved, school choice will needlessly hurt the public-school system by allowing private schools to siphon off much-needed tax dollars.

"The initiative ... would not reduce class size, provide new textbooks or more library books, or upgrade science labs," states the California Teachers Association. "It would just take money away from our financially starved public schools and community colleges."

Additionally, the committee's literature argues, voucher schools could defraud the public and pass funds to extremist religious groups seeking to open their own schools.

Proponents of school choice maintain that such arguments are smokescreens designed to protect a

failed public-school establishment and unions like the California Teachers Association and the National Education Association that can no longer deliver the kind of education children need today.

Proponents also say that school choice will save taxpayers money because private schools generally operate on lower budgets and with less bureaucratic interference than do their public counterparts. Public schools also would strive to do a better job when forced to compete for students against private schools, choice supporters claim.

School vouchers — and such other proposals as tuition tax credits — have long rested near and dear to the hearts of Catholic school parents because they offer relief from the financial burden of Catholic schooling.

But, according to Julie Sly, director of communications for the California Catholic Conference, the state's bishops have declined to take a formal position on Proposition 174.

Sly told the *Catholic Courier* that unless a proposition directly conflicts with Catholic teaching — such as one the bishops opposed calling for physician-assisted suicide — the bishops generally refrain from taking a public stand on voter propositions.

She added that Proposition 174 involves complicated questions of state financing, and that the bishops usually feel it is best to let the people in the pews decide tax-and-spend issues for themselves.

However, she did note that many Catholic-



school administrators and parents are vigorously working on behalf of 174.

Indeed, Linda Cardoza, a volunteer for Yes on 174, an organization working for the proposition's approval, told the *Courier* that Catholic school parents regularly "raid" her group's

Sacramento office for materials to present at their schools.

Brian J. Bennett, principal of Blessed Sacrament School in San Diego, counts himself among those Catholics and Catholic-school supporters favoring 174. A native of Pittsford, New York, Bennett attended St. Louis Parish School until his family moved to California in 1960.

A 23-year veteran of the urban Catholic school system, Bennett serves as one of Yes on 174's 10 regional coordinators throughout California.

"From my perspective, it's an issue of economic justice for the poor," he told the *Courier* in a phone interview.

Bennett's arguments were echoed by another Bennett, whom the principal jokingly refers to as "Uncle Bill" — former U.S. Secretary of Education William Bennett.

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