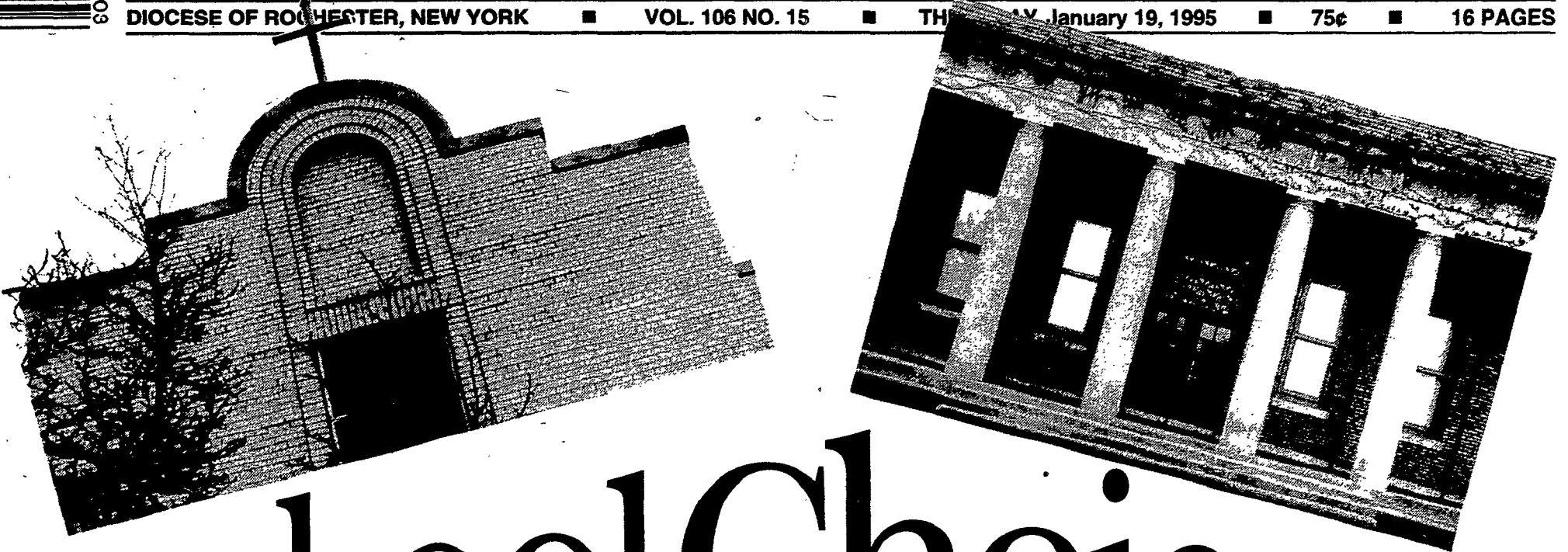




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School Choice ?

Supporters think '95 may be year initiatives garner states' approval

WASHINGTON (CNS) — With state legislative sessions having begun meeting this month, school choice lobbyists are gearing up for what they hope will be a big year.

In Minnesota, for example, the push is on to widen educational choice options to include religious schools, and a Catholic lobbyist is urging lay Catholics to get behind the issue quickly.

"If we really want to change the system to get a voucher this year, we'd better make it a matter of serious attention," said Eugene Piccolo, education director of the Minnesota Catholic Conference who also directs the Choice in Education League in Minnesota.

The league is promoting educational vouchers — tax funds that could be used at any school — to provide equitable access to all schools. The statewide campaign recommends a voucher system as a just method to open the private-school option to more families.

Piccolo stressed the need for supporters to get organized quickly to promote the voucher issue during the upcoming legislative session. He also said the advocates of school choice need to take up "an awareness effort" to combat "myths" perpetuated by those opposed to school choice, particularly claims it will ruin America's public schools.

"With the movement in the Legislature to reform education financing, we've got to be organized by January or we're not going to be players in the discussion," he told the *Catholic Bulletin*, the archdiocesan newspaper of Minneapolis and St. Paul.

In Pennsylvania, school choice supporters attended a recent strategy-building conference to prepare for the upcoming legislative session.

During the meeting, sponsored by the Pennsylvania Catholic Conference and a statewide educational reform organization, a number of speakers argued that establishing school choice programs in both public and nonpublic schools would be an important part of reforming education in Pennsylvania.

Participants were told that parents must take back the responsibility of educating their children, and that school choice offers the best means to do this.

In many states, the school choice issue is not just waiting to be discussed in legislative sessions, but was already raised in pre-election debates.

In Texas, for example, the question of introducing

a voucher experiment was debated by the gubernatorial candidates. Republican Gov.-elect George W. Bush, a son of former President George Bush, is in favor of using vouchers.

The bill to enact the proposed experiment will probably be introduced in the upcoming session to set up a voucher experiment in 50 to 60 public school districts throughout the state. The children involved in the program would be low-income students eligible for the federally financed lunch program.

The state's public school associations, teachers, school boards and administrators, have come out in opposition to the experiment.

The Texas Catholic Conference, the public policy arm of the state's Catholic bishops, said that

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