

School choice

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"vouchers may or may not be a good idea," but said they should at least be given a chance.

"Certainly an experiment in several school districts in Texas would give us some of the answers to the questions everyone has about school choice and vouchers," the conference said.

Other states which may vote on school choice initiatives in the upcoming year include New York (see accompanying article), Connecticut, South Carolina, Illinois, Idaho, Arizona, Wisconsin and New Jersey, according to the Washington-based Center for Education Reform.

On the national level, Republican National Committee Chairman Haley Barbour pledged in November that school choice would be strongly pushed by the committee.

In Wisconsin, Republicans named Democratic state Rep. Polly Williams, who helped create the nation's first school voucher pilot program in that state, to chair the Assembly's Urban Education Committee.

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Contributing to this story was Bob Zyskowski in St. Paul.

Pataki seen as a potential supporter

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

If anyone knows exactly where New York Gov. George Pataki stands on nonpublic school choice, please call Joe McTighe.

In a phone interview from his Albany office, McTighe, the assistant director of the New York State Catholic Conference, noted that the state's bishops were hoping that New York's new governor would mention school choice in his inaugural address, but heard nothing that could be construed as a stance on the issue.

On the other hand, Pataki has not publicly closed the door on such measures as tuition-tax credits for private school parents, McTighe explained, adding that it is one of those situations where no news can be good news.

"I can tell you that school choice is the number one educational issue on the bishops' legislative agenda," McTighe said.

New York's bishops and lobbying groups from each of the state's dioceses will meet with state government officials in February to press the church's position on various legislative matters, including school choice.

The Catholic conference wants the state to enact such measures as tax credits which would allow private-school par-

ents to exempt a portion of their income from taxation; and state-funded vouchers which would be given to parents to be used toward paying private school tuition.

At the local level, members of the Diocese of Rochester's chapter of the New York State Federation of Catholic School Parents met at Irondequoit's Bishop Kearney High School Jan. 12 to discuss such school choice measures as

projected their hopes onto Pataki, who has indicated his support in other areas for a private-sector approach to problems currently addressed by government.

Yet, Eileen Long, a press spokesman for the governor, refused to make any verbal commitment on the nonpublic school choice issue.

"The governor has been evaluating and considering all programs and options at this time," Long said in a phone interview. "No decision has been made."

She stated, however, that Pataki may bring up the topic of school choice in his Feb. 1 address to the state legislature.

Whatever Pataki finally decides to do, school choice supporters have received key endorsements in recent years from important sources.

A state-commissioned panel headed by former New York Gov. Hugh Carey concluded in 1993 that Catholic schools were a financial and educational asset to New York and endorsed the idea of tuition tax credits.

And the state's education department may echo that endorsement and ask the state Board of Regents to consider the idea at its February meeting.

Meanwhile, a Dec. 5, 1994, report commissioned by former Monroe County Executive Robert L. King, a Republican, and Rochester's Mayor William A. Johnson Jr., a Democrat, also advocated school choice in both the public and private educational systems.

Titled "For All Our Children ... No More Excuses," the report was written by an eight-member panel, including R. Carlos Carballada, chancellor of the Board of Regents. Along with its scathing indictment of Rochester's public schools, this report called for the implementation of both public school choice and limited private school choice.

"This will allow the parents of the most seriously disadvantaged children to use vouchers for private, parochial or alternative schools," the report said of private school choice.

"We emphasize that this option be explored for the poorest and most seriously under-served students who the public school has little chance of reaching, or for schools that produce consistently low levels of student performance," the report concluded.

tuition tax credits.

Linda Zaleski, chapter president, and Laurie Enos, the federation's political action coordinator, noted that diocesan Catholic school parents will soon receive a form letter supporting tuition tax credit legislation. The letter will be sent to Gov. Pataki. Parents will be also urged to write their own letters to the governor and to their state legislators, Zaleski and Enos said.

They added that the parents' federation plans to meet with leaders of area private and non-Catholic religious schools in a few weeks to discuss coordinating lobbying efforts on behalf of school choice initiatives.

Both Zaleski and Enos expressed confidence that Pataki will be open to nonpublic school choice measures.

And, indeed, some Catholic and private school parents have assumed Pataki supports nonpublic school choice, McTighe said.

However, Pataki has indicated support only for parental choice among public schools, McTighe emphasized. The governor has actually taken no public stand on parental choice for private schools, McTighe cautioned.

"He was the stealth candidate," McTighe said of Pataki. "People projected a lot of things onto him."

After 12 years of ex-Gov. Mario Cuomo's opposition to nonpublic school choice, many private school parents have



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