

WORLD & NATION

Officials voice hope for future of school choice

WASHINGTON (CNS) — Speakers at a four-day educational symposium in Washington likened the school choice movement to a "new arena of civil rights" with a "long march" ahead.

Speakers at the Feb. 4-7 symposium, sponsored by the National Catholic Educational Association, were confident that school choice provides a just solution to those unable to afford private school education, but they did not gloss over the struggle ahead in gaining public and legislative support for their convictions.

"The challenge is great and comes to us on many fronts," said Rev. Floyd Flake in his keynote address Feb. 4 to an audience of 100 school superintendents, diocesan representatives and Catholic education officials.

Rev. Flake, a longtime supporter of school choice, is a former U.S. Democratic representative from New York and pastor of an African Methodist Episcopal church in Queens, N.Y.

He said he's learned from personal experience, as one of 13 children and also as director of his own private school for more than 15 years, that disadvantaged and even troubled children could achieve and become successful in a school environment that challenges them.

His school, The Allen Christian School, has 480 students in kindergarten through eighth grade and a waiting list of 150.

"Two-thirds of our graduates go on to Catholic schools," he said. "Their parents make that choice because they don't want their kids to be in an environment where standards are low or students can't achieve."

Flake urged the participants to work together to find ways for the "choice movement," which he dubbed "the next move in the civil rights movement" to succeed.

"We can do a better job," he told the Catholic educators and administrators. "We believe there is a spirit that guides us."

Meanwhile, Milwaukee Mayor John Norquist, speaking at a separate event in Washington Feb. 5, said he decided he had to "break the monopoly" of public schools educating the children of his city because they were not doing a satisfactory job — and bad schools were a major reason why people were fleeing the city.

First, the city established school vouchers for 1,500 students.

"We had 102,000 students in public schools and many more in the parochial system," said Norquist, but Catholic schools were not at first eligible to participate.

Then the voucher plan was expanded to include parochial and other denominational schools. It withstood a legal challenge when the state Supreme Court last year upheld Milwaukee's use of a tax-funded voucher plan, known as the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, and the U.S. Supreme Court declined to review the ruling.

According to Norquist, who was one of several speakers at a conference at the National Press Club, it has been a resounding success. The ruling allows for vouchers for up to 15,000 low-income children.

The conference, hosted by the Ethics and Public Policy Center, a Washington think tank, dealt with partnerships between government and faith-based schools.

"I predict in five years (the voucher concept) will expand to other cities. In 10 years it won't even be controversial," Norquist said. "This is going to happen because it's a much more natural thing. It pleases the parents. There will be people who will complain, hold up red herrings and try to hold it back."

Trying to sustain the "monopoly" of public schools, he said, "is like trying to sustain communism." He supports vouchers that would give every parent a choice in sending their children to school.

Norquist had an answer for those who argue that tax revenues cannot go to private and faith-based schools without violating the Constitution.

"I don't think our Founding Fathers meant to separate religion from public life," said the mayor, a Presbyterian. "Their intention was not to impose religion on the people like the Church of Sweden — the government cramming religion down your throat."

Given the choice of keeping church and state separate and accepting the current high rates of illiteracy in public schools, he said the greater threat is "illiteracy."

Norquist pointed out that under the government-funded G.I. Bill you have a choice. "You can go to Yeshiva University and become a rabbi. Or you can go to a public university and become a communist."

In Milwaukee, "no politicians want to dismantle" the voucher program, he added. "Even teachers are beginning to realize choice is good. ... The critics are finding it harder to find arguments against it."

John Dilulio, a social science professor at Princeton University and a product of Catholic schools, said, "The truth is very much as Mayor Norquist described it."

He said "faith-based schools constitute one powerful group than can save the system. It follows we ought to support these organizations. All the evidence born out so far shows that the voucher system does make a great difference in the lives of the low-income."

Dilulio said the "public school crisis" is really "an illiteracy crisis."

"Half of the kids in public school can't read at all or not well. These kids come from homes where there are no books," said Dilulio, adding that "voucherizing" America is "not about money but high standards, creating community and human relationships."

Richard Dowling, executive director of the Maryland Catholic Conference, pointed out that when it comes to "soup kitchens, hospitals, public housing" and

many other areas, "government trusts religion."

"But when it comes to educating kids, even those at greatest risk, government does not trust religion," he said.

Holding up his thumb and forefinger to make a big zero, he said the state of Maryland "gives nothing to the state's faith-based parochial schools."

"We would like to involve ourselves in vouchers. But vouchers are the rallying point of school choice opponents," he said. "A grass-roots effort on vouchers doesn't work. Maryland is one of the few states that doesn't supply a single dollar for parochial

schools."

But he believes "it's possible in the next year that Maryland may provide money for textbooks, transportation and technology."

One of Europe's major figures on education law, Jan de Groof, pointed out that state aid to faith-based schools has been acceptable in European schools for a long time now, even though "the French invented separation of church and state."

De Groof believes it is "old-fashioned to perpetuate separation of church and state in education. It can be construed as discrimination against religion. It is better for the two to work as partners."



Reuters/CNS

Antarctic memorial

A wooden cross on a hillside near Capt. Robert Scott's famous Antarctica hut, in background, stands as a memorial to a member of British explorer Ernest Shackleton's Ross Sea Party who died in 1916. Scott's hut is full of supplies and other artifacts left over from the ill-fated 1910-13 expedition in which Scott and four colleagues died in a bid to become the first men to reach the South Pole.



We at Gannon University—Northwestern Pennsylvania's premier Catholic university—invite you to our campus.

We offer doctoral, graduate and undergraduate degrees including over 60 personally designed majors and professional specializations in Humanities, Business, Education, Sciences, Engineering, and Health Sciences. Our Financial Aid Program includes academic and leadership scholarships, grants, loans, local, regional and national co-ops and internships, and federal aid that help make a quality private education affordable.

To learn more, schedule your visit today. Once you see all we have to offer we believe you'll decide that Gannon University is **The Right Place for You**. For more information, call (814) 871-7240 or check out our website at www.gannon.edu.

GANNON
UNIVERSITY

109 University Square, Erie, Pennsylvania, 16541-0001
Phone Toll-Free (800) GANNON-U • Internet: Admissions@Gannon.Edu
Web Site: www.gannon.edu

Thoughts to Consider



EDWIN SULEWSKI
Funeral Director

What are some ways to help a child who has lost a parent?

First, it is important to make sure the child is honestly included in all information and planning. This means being honest about the death and answering the child's questions. It also means allowing but not forcing children to go to the funeral or visitation as they wish. Secondly, a child needs love and security. Let a child know they will be cared for, take an interest in schoolwork and include them in play. Some children resent being pressured to accept burdens beyond their reach. "Taking over for Dad or Mom" may be too much responsibility. Naturally, changes will occur but a child needs time and help in adjusting to them.

SCHAUMAN-SULEWSKI
FUNERAL HOME

NEW LOCATION

1717 Portland Avenue

Just North of Ridge Road

(716) 342-3400