

WORLD & NATION

Voucher supporters fear for the future

By Wayne Tryhuk
Catholic News Service

MILWAUKEE — Rebecca Ybanez, a disabled single mother, said she'd be forced to pull her daughter and granddaughter from St. Anthony School in Milwaukee if the state cuts funding for the school voucher program.

"I don't know what I would do," said Ybanez, a Catholic.

Both children, now in second and sixth grades, have attended the school since kindergarten. Her daughter was on the school's honor roll all last year, she said.

Annie Rashad, whose daughter will be a junior this fall at St. Joan Antida High School, was a lot clearer on how she viewed her child's options.

"I do not want her to go back to a public school," Rashad said.

"I don't think they put forth a good enough effort to get the children to succeed academically," she told the *Catholic Herald*, newspaper of the Milwaukee Archdiocese.

The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program began in 1989 and serves more than 9,500 students. About 3,800 students attend 38 Catholic schools through the choice program. Income limits for eligible families are \$29,000 for a family of four.

About 78 percent of the program's participants come from minority communities; many participants are not Catholic. Students receive a voucher from the state that is used to meet expenses of attending

a school of the parents' choice.

The future of the parental choice program remains in limbo, with the Democrat-controlled Senate looking to drastically cut the program and the Republican-controlled Assembly looking to maintain its status quo.

The Senate voted to reduce per-pupil funding to \$2,776 from up to \$5,300. The Senate also limited the number of participating students to 10,580, about 1,000 fewer than would otherwise participate in the 2002-03 school year.

The Assembly version would deny the funding cut, increase the allowable family income limit for participation, and remove the limit on participating students. It also would expand the program to include all of Milwaukee County, not just the city.

St. Joan Antida's president, Sister Monica Fumo, a Sister of Charity, said parents and students wept when it was announced in 1998 that the high school would participate in the voucher program. About 40 percent of the school's students participate in school choice, she said.

"If this program isn't important, I don't know what is," she said.

St. Anthony principal Richard Mason said his school could lose half of its 400 students if the school-choice program falters.

Richard Fons, whose three children attend Blessed Sacrament Elementary School but not through the choice program, believes choice is no blessing if it dilutes Catholicism. "When people genuinely cannot afford tuition and would have

attended Catholic school anyway, then choice is wonderful," he said.

"But if they're using choice just to escape public schools, then I'm not really crazy about it. We could lose the identity of the Catholic school. It should be to nurture in the faith and provide education," he said.

Adekola Adedapo, a non-Catholic whose daughter attends St. Joan Antida, selected that facility largely for its "strict discipline, focus on education" and girls-only environment. She considers Catholic schools superior to their public counterparts in "emphasizing human, spiritual and social values."

For Ybanez, St. Anthony's religious emphasis is important. She said her daughter "talks to me a lot about the Bible and has told me she wants to be a nun because she loves the Catholic Church."

Adedapo, who teaches fifth-grade reading at Lloyd Street Global Elementary in Milwaukee, said school choice channeled money away from public education, which she said was comparable to "sacrificing the majority of low-income children for the talented minority."

Choice proponents, however, said the program's demise would burden public schools inordinately by returning choice students to them.

Sister Fumo said she remains optimistic about the program's future despite the gloomy predictions. She said that she's been around enough to know that "when something is right and good, it will prevail."

Beatification stage closes

VATICAN CITY (CNS) — The diocesan stage of Mother Teresa's investigation for beatification has finished and now moves to the Vatican, the Congregation for Saints Causes announced.

The congregation said the Archdiocese of Calcutta, India, would formally close its two-year inquiry Aug. 15, the feast of the Assumption of Mary.

The inquiry's documentation and results from six other dioceses in which Mother Teresa was active, were expected to "soon arrive in Rome," the congregation said Aug. 13.

The congregation said it would appoint a "relator," an official charged with preparing a position paper on Mother Teresa's holiness, as soon as the diocesan documentation receives formal Vatican recognition.

The Archdiocese of Calcutta also has submitted the results of its inquiry into a "supposedly miraculous cure" the Vatican said.

In May, Archbishop Henry D'Souza of Calcutta said one of the purported miracles he examined was the case of a woman in Raiganj, India, who was cured of cancer.

The archdiocese began its investigation July 26, 1999, less than two years after Mother Teresa's death.

Pope John Paul II waived the normal five-year waiting period before the opening of sainthood causes because of "the widespread reputation of holiness and intercessory power enjoyed by (Mother Teresa) throughout the world," the congregation said.

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