

WORLD & NATION

Advocates anticipate ruling on voucher plan

By Carol Zimmermann
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON - People on both sides of the voucher fence will be taking a close look at how the U.S. Supreme Court plans to weigh in on this often-contentious issue early this year.

The nine judges plan to answer the big question of whether the Constitution allows government-financed vouchers to be used at religious schools.

The case before them will be a six-year-old Cleveland voucher program that provides state aid to enable 4,000 students from low-income families to attend private, and primarily religious, schools.

Last year, the 6th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled against the voucher program, saying it "involves the grant of state aid directly and predominantly to the coffers of the private, religious schools."

The court also said it was "unquestioned that these institutions incorporate religious concepts, motives and themes into all facets of their educational planning."

The Ohio Supreme Court disagreed and upheld the voucher program, which is why both supporters and opponents are looking to the U.S. Supreme Court to make the final call after hearing oral arguments on the case.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has filed an "amicus" brief in the Cleveland case. The brief states that the voucher program in question is not about advancing religion, but instead, "aids disadvantaged families to educate

their children in a program in which religious schools, among others, extend themselves to those most in need."

The brief also said the state's lower court was wrong in presuming that religious schools were participating in the program solely for financial incentive, stating that using the voucher program in fact is a "net financial loss" for these schools.

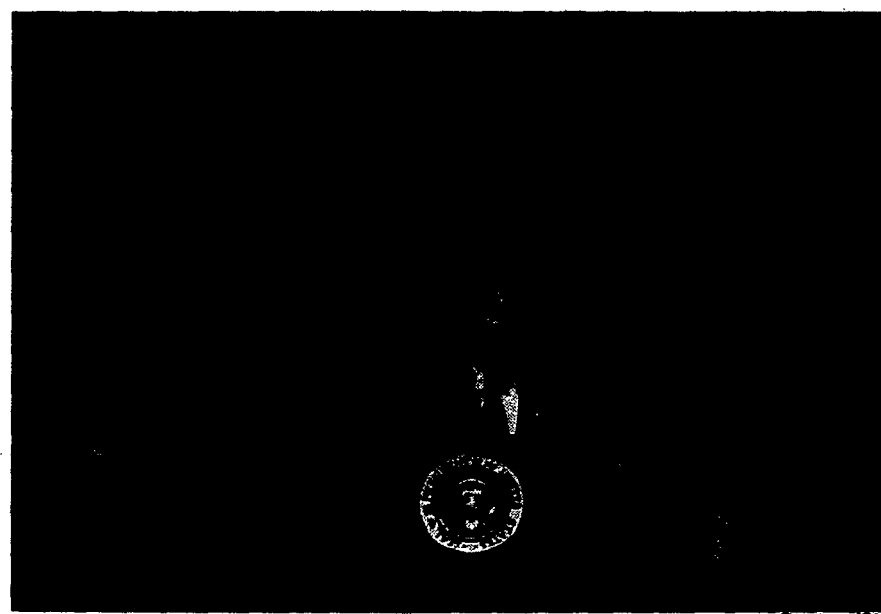
No one needs to tell that to Sister Judith Wulk, principal of St. Rocco School in Cleveland.

Sister Judith, a Sister of the Most Holy Trinity, supervises a school in which 96 students out of 200 use vouchers. She said the parish pays more than half of the educational costs for every voucher student because tuition represents just \$1,435 of the \$2,600 cost to educate each student.

It's not about the money, or adding to student enrollment, she said, because most of the voucher students already were attending the school, but their parents were working two to three jobs just to send them there.

"This is about keeping families together as a unit," she said, emphasizing that, through the voucher program, parents can more easily afford the remainder of the tuition and not have to work extra jobs that keep them away from their families. They also can send siblings to the same school and not have to separate them because of tuition costs.

Responding to the accusation that Catholic schools are pushing their own religion, Sister Wulk said parents have chosen the school and children can make



Reuters/CNS

President touts new act

At a Jan. 9 event in Washington's Constitution Hall, President George W. Bush discusses the "No Child Left Behind Act," which he recently signed into law. Said to be the most sweeping education reform bill since 1965, the president's education package could have a few benefits for children in parochial education systems.

choices about the views they are presented.

Johnnie Mae Boone, a single mother whose two children attend Catholic schools in Cleveland through the voucher program, agreed.

The notion that Catholic schools are imposing their religion on her children, who are not Catholic, is just not true, she said.

"We all serve one God in our different ways," she told Catholic News Service in a telephone interview.

What she likes best about St. Stanislaus and Holy Name schools, which her children attend, has less to do with the religious subjects taught than with the safe environment that enables students to "go to school to learn."

"It's been a long, uphill battle," she added, of the voucher issue in Cleveland, but she is confident that it will pass muster in the nation's highest court.

"I think it will keep going. I really do with all my heart," she said.

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