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gious-education programs; an endeavor unmatched in the rest of the world," Bishop Gregory said.

And the benefits of this effort extend well beyond the nation's Catholic population, he added.

"Based on the current national average of per-pupil cost of educating a child in our public elementary and secondary schools, I do not believe it is overstating the case to say that our Catholic elementary and secondary schools, save government and the tax-payers of this nation upward to \$20 billion a year," Bishop Gregory said.

A CENTURY'S STORY

According to its own history — which is outlined on the Web at www.ncea.org — the NCEA was formed 300 years after the first Catholic school in North America was established in St. Augustine, Fla. By 1900, U.S. Catholic elementary schools alone enrolled more than 1.7 million students, reaching a peak enrollment of almost 6 million in 1965.

As Catholic schools spread across the United States during the 19th century, Catholic-school leaders felt a need for an organization that would serve as a clearinghouse for educational methods and ideas, according to Timothy Walch, a Catholic educator and historian. In a paper commissioned for the NCEA's centennial celebration, Walch noted that the NCEA — then called the Catholic Educational Association — was formed to fill that need.

Today, through its various professional programs, seminars and meetings, the NCEA continues to unite thousands of Catholic educators in a vast support network, according to Sister Elizabeth Meegan, OP, the Diocese of Rochester's superintendent of Catholic schools. Sister Meegan, a former member of the NCEA's executive board of chief administrators of Catholic education, added that the group continually publishes valuable research on such subjects as how state and federal laws affect Catholic schools and how the church's clergy view Catholic schools.

Sister Elaine Englert, SSJ, diocesan director of Catholic school personnel and recruitment, added that the diocese has tapped into NCEA resources for such programs as one that pairs veteran teachers as mentors to new teachers in Catholic schools. The NCEA booklet "The Road to Success: An Orientation Process for Catholic School Teachers," is a key component of the mentoring program, she said.



Seven-year-old Toni Morrison, a student at Rochester's Holy Rosary School, tells librarian Lisa Smith about her favorite picture as Smith reads to a group of first-graders Jan. 22.

"I think the mentoring materials are clear, they're concise, they're focused and they give some good suggestions," Sister Englert said. "I see the NCEA as a really strong resource."

CHOICE AND CHALLENGE

NCEA delegates at a Jan. 8-11 symposium in Washington, D.C., were concerned about a number of issues, including how to better finance Catholic education, Sister Meegan said. That's a concern that occupies the minds of Catholic-school leaders throughout the country, according to Michael J. Guerra, NCEA president.

He said Catholic schools, in particular, cannot survive on their own without the wider support of the church's membership. He highlighted the \$25 million gift given to a group of inner-city Rochester Catholic schools by supermarket chain founder Robert Wegman and his wife Peggy in the mid-1990s as an example of how Catholic schools have been supported by generous Catholics. Yet Guerra, like many leaders in Catholic education, also urges Catholic-school parents — as well as parents who have children in other non-public schools — to continue lobbying government for public financial support.

That argument got a boost on Jan. 9 when President George W. Bush hosted more than 250 NCEA symposium delegates at the White House and praised their efforts.

"Catholic schools carry out a great mission, to serve God by building knowledge and character of our young people," Bush told his audience. "It's a noble calling. It's an important part of the fabric of America."

Bush took the opportunity to push for support of an issue that is a cur-

rent priority for the NCEA and its supporters — school choice. He called on delegates to support a bill — which the House approved Jan. 22 — that would create a voucher program in the District of Columbia. Under the program, the federal government would give parents up to \$7,500 per child in tuition grants. The grants would enable parents to send their children to private schools — including Catholic ones — the president noted.

Sister Meegan was among those who attended the White House event. She agreed that Catholics who favor the church's schools should support the D.C. tuition-grant bill.

"It would certainly set a precedent for federal dollars to be used for school choice for parents, especially in those places where public schools are seen to be failing parents," she said.

On the state level, Guerra said that Catholic-school leaders need to forge grassroots alliances with other non-public-school parents and private-school leaders as well as sympathetic public-school officials who see school choice as a win-win issue for society.

"We have to make the case that it's not just about educating my child, it's about educating all children, because these children are the future of our church and the future of our country," he said. "Catholic education has produced good citizens, and ... Catholic schools focus on the common good."

The NCEA must also highlight the fact that Catholic schools carry out a ministry that benefits many non-Catholics as well, particularly the poor and disadvantaged, Guerra said.

"Someone said, 'If you're going to poor parts of big cities, you rarely find supermarkets ... but you always find Catholic schools,'" he said.

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