

Diocesan teens lobby in Albany

Jennifer Burke/Catholic Courier

Katie Kremer and Danielle Schenone, eighth-graders at Elmira's Holy Family Junior High School, traveled 200 miles to Albany March 9 to tell their state legislators about the potholes in the floor of their school's gymnasium.

As part of the New York State Catholic Conference's annual Public Policy Forum, the two 13-year-olds — along with their religion teacher, Theresa McNamara — met with their state representatives to lobby for more funding for Catholic education, among other issues.

Parental choice in education is an objective on this year's NYSCC agenda, so Katie, Danielle and McNamara rehearsed their arguments in support of the measure as they waited to go through metal detectors before entering the capitol building. Once they and seven other lobbyists made it into the office of Assemblyman Gary Finch, who represents portions of Tioga and Cayuga counties, McNamara introduced the stu-

dents and let them have their say.

"If we have the voucher system, then everyone can have a choice and parents can decide where to send their kids," said Danielle, referring to the NYSCC's suggestion to enact a program of vouchers, scholarships and tax credits to make it possible for all parents, regardless of financial status, to select the most appropriate schools for their children. The objective also would provide sufficient instructional materials, equipment and support to all students and teachers at public, private and religious schools.

Since it costs more than \$12,000 a year to send a child to public school, the 500,000 children enrolled in religious and private schools save taxpayers approximately \$6 billion each year, Katie said, citing a statistic from the NYSCC's fact sheet.

"What we're asking is that some of that money be directed to private



Photo courtesy of William Lamb

State Sen. Michael Nozzolio (center) poses in his Albany office with students from Geneva's DeSales High School after the students finished lobbying him on a number of issues related to Catholic education.

schools. We have a gym floor with potholes in it," Katie said.

Although Finch couldn't promise anything, Katie and Danielle said they were impressed with the sincerity with which he seemed to listen to and consider their position.

"He's not completely opinion-based; he's willing to listen to other people. He knows he can't just base it on religion; he needs a political objective," Katie said.

"He seemed pretty well-versed. It's great to be able to express what you think as someone's listening," Danielle added.

Both girls said they were surprised by how informal the lobbying session was, and that other lobbyists called him by his first name.

Melanie Mancuso, 17, went to Albany with two other teens from Holy Name of Jesus Parish in Greece. She lobbied in front of Assemblywoman Susan John, who represents part of Monroe County, about the need to ensure adequate funding and equity for behavioral health services. Melanie said she was nervous before meeting with the assemblywoman, but calmed down once she saw that John seemed to be genuinely listening and concerned.

"I was so blown away. It was a phe-

nomenal learning experience. I really got to know how the government worked and how things were done," said Melanie, who said she would like to lobby again if she gets the chance.

Samantha Hess, 15, was one of eight students from Geneva's DeSales High School who made the trip to Albany. It was her first time lobbying, and it was an eye-opening experience for her.

"I didn't even know some of these things were going on. You learn a lot about the government and the way things are (done). It gives you a better picture of things," Samantha said.

All eight of the DeSales students and 10 adults from the region met with Sen. Michael Nozzolio to talk about a variety of issues, including Catholic-school education. The senator, who represents parts of Monroe, Wayne, Seneca, Tompkins, Ontario and Cayuga counties, gave students the opportunity to each tell him their favorite part of attending a Catholic school.

"I think he was really sincere in his answers and he actually gave answers to the specific questions," said Charlie Beall, 17. "You really have to experience (lobbying) for yourself."

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