

Every Parent, Every Child
A Pastoral Statement on Educational Choice
By the Catholic Bishops of Minnesota

As the spiritual leaders of Minnesota's 1.25 million Catholics, and as concerned citizens, we are compelled to speak out on public policy issues that affect human lives. We offer these comments and recommendations in a spirit of cooperation and good will.

The principles of Catholic Social Teaching guide us to seek public policies that build the common good. We advocate for policies that protect life, promote justice, support community and provide compassionate care for the most vulnerable among us. When considering the needs of children and families we have consistently called for policies that ensure access to basic needs, including access to a quality education.

Today, our comments focus specifically on the value and importance of educational choice to children, families and society. Children are our most precious gift and represent our greatest hope. By ensuring access to adequate and appropriate educational opportunities, we invest in our children and our society.

The primary responsibility for children rests with parents. However, government, faith communities and schools all play significant roles in their development, protection and education as well. In Minnesota we have seen a longstanding commitment to providing high quality education for our children. Our government has consistently reflected this commitment by investing in programs that have provided a range of beneficial educational options. Minnesota has led the nation in the expansion of innovative educational choice through open enrollment, the development of charter schools and other programs. Augmenting our system of government schools, Minnesota is also rich in Catholic and other parochial and private schools that round out and enhance the range of available educational options.

Thankfully, we have a wealth of options. These options have enabled families to find the right schools for their children and consequently enhanced the possibility of success in school and in life.

However, despite innovative educational initiatives, the dedication of educators across the state and the commitment of parents, choice remains out of reach for countless families throughout Minnesota. The problem is not a lack of options but a lack of access.

For families that cannot afford to live in an area with successful public schools or afford private school tuition, choice is illusive. That is why we are calling on policymakers to continue our state's legacy of commitment to education by increasing access to the rich range of options that exist in our state. We do not view this as a quantum leap, but rather, the next logical step in the development of options that empower families to find the best possible educational setting for their children.

Critics of increasing access to educational options like parochial or private schools have cited fear of negative impacts on government schools. Some have characterized increased access through vouchers or other means as an attack on funding for government schools or view increased access as a criticism of the status quo. However, in areas where school choice programs have been implemented, many public schools have shown improvement without a loss in revenue. In many cases previously failing public schools have been motivated to improve due to increased competition. Families, society and especially children have benefited from increased access to educational options.

Other critics have cited First Amendment protection against the establishment of religion as an argument against providing public funds for access to religious schools. However, the recent decision by the United States Supreme Court affirms the legitimacy of expanded choice programs. Ultimately, we feel that what is best for the child should be the foremost concern of all education advocates. A funding model that allows parents to freely choose where their children attend school will shift this debate and place the focus on the student rather than the system.

Increasing access to parochial and private schools would likely benefit both students and society. In the case of Catholic schools, studies have shown consistently high achievement — particularly among minority students. The positive effects of Catholic schools have been attributed in part to solid core curricula and strong school communities — characteristics shared by many other parochial and private schools. At the same time, Catholic schools generally spend less per pupil than public schools.

We do not call on government to provide all things for all people but we do assert that government should establish conditions that provide equity and equal access to opportunity. By empowering families with true educational choice, government can help provide this access. Through real educational choice, families are strengthened to make choices that benefit the both the individual and society.

In the interest of enhancing access, we call on our elected leaders to assist parents in the important task of directing the education of their children. Through the establishment of tax credits, vouchers or scholarships, government can help ensure that all parents have the means to select the appropriate schools for their children. Furthermore, we call for the creation of strategic alliances with members of all religious faiths, communities, businesses and families to speak with one voice to bring about changes in our educational system that prioritize the needs of our children.

By uniting to increase educational choice for Minnesota's families, we are making an important investment in the future of our children and our state.

Portions of this statement were adopted from, Every Parent, Every Child, New York State Catholic Conference, 2002.