

New Jersey Catholic Conference

**149 North Warren Street
Trenton, New Jersey 08608**

Statement of the Catholic Bishops of New Jersey in Support of S-1872

Through no fault of their own, some of the poorest children in New Jersey are trapped in schools that are failing to meet their needs. Like all children, these students are deserving of a quality education that will provide them with the skills to succeed in life. We, the Catholic Bishops of New Jersey, are strongly committed to providing a quality education for all New Jersey's children as a matter of basic justice and as a means of promoting their God-given dignity and well-being.

As such, we continue to support initiatives which enhance the educational experiences of our public school students. We believe that strong public schools are vitally important and contribute greatly to the common good of our society. However, we also emphasize the critical role played by nonpublic schools in general, and Catholic schools in particular.

In our own state, we are working to keep Catholic schools available, accessible, and affordable. Catholic schools apply rigorous educational standards which fulfill and exceed the Core Curriculum Content Standards of the New Jersey Department of Education. Our schools are also accredited through national accrediting organizations, including the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools. Furthermore, they educate students at approximately 50% of the cost incurred for public school students. Most importantly, these schools generate positive outcomes for students, as seen through test scores and graduation rates, particularly for low-income students.

Unfortunately, many urban parents are unable to afford a Catholic education, in spite of our best efforts to maintain a modest tuition rate and provide extensive financial aid. Their hope for a quality education for their children cannot be fulfilled without additional financial assistance from other sources.

A new bi-partisan bill, S-1872 (Opportunity Scholarship Act) recently has been introduced in the New Jersey Senate. We applaud the co-sponsors of the legislation—Senators Raymond Lesniak, Thomas Kean, and Joseph Kyrillos—for their courage and leadership in offering the opportunity for children in the State to secure an education that will help them achieve and that will lead to a more promising future.

The pilot program will permit students who are not succeeding in their current public school to have an alternative choice. Eligible children currently attending chronically failing schools and whose family income does not exceed 2.5 times the poverty rate will receive scholarships to attend participating nonpublic schools, as well as other public schools, that best meet their needs.

The bill, based on programs that have achieved tangible results in other states, does not take money out of the existing education budget; therefore it is not a voucher bill. It is not an added burden to taxpayers; rather, it is funded through the corporate tax revenues that would be used for purposes other than education. Notably, the legislation also does not undermine ongoing reforms of public education in these districts. In fact, the legislation provides for an Educational Innovation Fund (EIF) to help public school districts strengthen failing schools. Improved public schools will benefit our children and also contribute greatly to the common good of all New Jerseyans.

Finally, the continued viability of all nonpublic schools in New Jersey is a serious issue that needs immediate attention. Nonpublic schools save New Jersey taxpayers over \$2 billion a year. It is too late to lament the value of such successful educational options when the doors of these schools are closed forever. We therefore strongly encourage all legislators and public policy makers in New Jersey to recognize that now is the time for action on S-1872.

The Opportunity Scholarship Act will help ensure the continued viability of nonpublic schools in New Jersey. It will help strengthen public schools. It will empower parents and, for students who might otherwise face futures of economic despair, diminished expectations and unrealized dreams, it offers real hope.

With these things in mind, we call on all citizens of New Jersey to join with us in promoting educational opportunities for our children and ask you, our elected leaders, to ensure the passage of S-1872.

Most Reverend John J. Myers
Archbishop of Newark

Most Reverend William C. Skurla
Bishop of Byzantine Catholic Eparchy of Passaic

Most Reverend Joseph A. Galante
Bishop of Camden

Most Reverend Paul G. Bootkoski
Bishop of Metuchen

Most Reverend Arthur J. Serratelli
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Most Reverend Edgar M. da Cunha
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Most Reverend Yousif Habash
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