



New Jersey Catholic Conference
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February 3, 2011

To: Members Assembly Commerce and Economic Development Committee

From: George V. Corwell, Ed.D.
Director: Office of Education

Re: A-2810

STATEMENT IN SUPPORT OF A-2810

The New Jersey Catholic Conference, representing the Catholic Bishops of New Jersey, asks you to support A-2810, which would provide for low-income students in certain districts which have chronically failing public schools to have an opportunity to attend a participating nonpublic school or another public school of their choice.

Most educators would agree with the statement that “not every school is right for every child.” In fact, New Jersey does offer minimum forms of school choice to students who are not succeeding in their current public school setting. However, the vast majority of that choice is limited by income because many parents are unable to move to a better public school system located in another geographic region. Although the creation of charter schools in New Jersey has resulted in some enhanced school choice opportunities, charter schools alone are not the solution because many have been forced to close for a variety of economic and educational reasons. The opportunity for children to attend another public school is dictated by the availability of seats and the willingness of the school district to accept these students. Parents need to move in order to place their children in more appropriate schools.

Additionally, nonpublic schools in urban areas are besieged by students who are not achieving in their current educational setting. I emphasize that these are not the brightest and the best of students, but those who are experiencing a variety of difficulties in their current educational setting. Public policy makers normally expend resources on the most achieving students and the least achieving students, but those in the middle slip between the cracks. To suggest that a program such as the pilot program proposed in A-2810 would drain the public schools of their best students is insulting to those schools. Certainly students who are happy in their current educational setting would be absolutely reluctant to leave that school where they are achieving.

To determine the value of a program of corporate tax credit scholarships, one need look no farther than our neighboring state of Pennsylvania. As a result of legislation passed in 2001, 44,000 children across Pennsylvania have benefitted, and are benefitting, from these scholarships. If we are truly attempting to improve the success of children who are doing poorly in certain public school districts, we need to look at studies that have been conducted examining the relationship between faith-based schools and the academic and behavioral outcomes among students of low socio-economic background. A statistical procedure called meta-analysis helps to answer the question about the overall body of research on this topic. The procedure was conducted by Dr. William Jeynes, Professor of Education at California State University at Long Beach.

The meta-analysis indicates that, even when the results are controlled for various factors, low socio-economic youth score over 5% better than their counterparts in public schools on both standardized and nonstandardized measures combined. The advantage was greatest at the high school level which may reflect the fact that most students attending faith-based schools have done so for, on average, a longer period of time than youth in elementary and middle schools. That study is attached for your review.

Nonpublic schools in general, and Catholic schools in particular, wish to continue to be part of the solution for helping those children and parents who knock on our doors asking for assistance. We continue to find ways to provide scholarship assistance, but both their needs and the ongoing pressures from other ministries in the Catholic Church have caused a widening gap between those that can be helped and those requesting the help. Catholic schools wish to continue the mission of doing the state's work and doing it as well or better at a lower cost. However, we are also doing the state's work in other areas, such as running homeless shelters, hospitals, drug addiction centers, and food pantries. Thus, education is not our only outreach.

Critics of this legislation will also argue that it only affects a small percentage of students at risk. However, the actual number of students affected is determined by the legislators in crafting the final version of this bill. The argument of the opponents suggests that unless the remedy can help all students, then none should be given assistance. Such a position would not be tolerated in any other models of urban aid. For example, if a developer committed to building 1,000 units of state-subsidized, low-income housing, but was able to build only 400, the state would not suggest that those 400 should not be built.

An extremely inaccurate argument is provided by opponents regarding the participation of handicapped students in this legislation. Proposed amendments provide an explanation to parents of the services provided for nonpublic students that are classified. Currently, there are over 33,000 classified students in the nonpublic schools in New Jersey. The services provided are limited by the fact that the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) distinguishes between an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) for public school students and an Individualized Services Plan (ISP) for nonpublic school students. Thus the nonpublic school child receives only services which are made available as a result of state or federal (NOT LOCAL) funding and at the pleasure of the service provider. When a corporate tax scholarship program in Florida was contemplated, the Mac Kay Scholarship Program was enacted as a separate piece of legislation to indicate that nonpublic schools are willing to accept varying degrees of classified students, given the fact that additional funding is required to meet their needs. The same would be true in New Jersey: a separate bill could be drafted to address needs of classified students beyond those already serviced with state and federal funds.

The criteria for families to qualify for this program should be unassailable: poverty and residence in a district with a chronically failing school. I have included two documents of Questions and Answers with this testimony in order to permit you to review the answers to some of the most frequently raised objections. However, it is important to remember that no solution to the problems of urban public education exists from those who object to this bill other than "give us more time and/or more money." We cannot afford to lose any additional students in this generation, and the local taxpayers are upset with the cost. In other words, the taxpayers are out of money and the students are out of time.

In summary, regarding the work of Catholic schools with children of all religious affiliations: We don't educate students because they are Catholic; we educate students because we are Catholic.

Thus we ask you to release A-2810 from the committee with a favorable vote.

GVC:ac