

New Jersey Catholic Conference

149 North Warren Street · Trenton, New Jersey 08608

(609) 989-1120 · Fax (609) 989-1152

E-mail: info@njcathconf.com

Web: www.njcathconf.com

Patrick R. Brannigan
Executive Director

STATEMENT BY GEORGE CORWELL IN SUPPORT OF S1607

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The New Jersey Catholic Conference, representing the Catholic Bishops of New Jersey, asks you to support S1607, which would provide the opportunity for students in designated urban areas to have an opportunity to attend a participating nonpublic school or another public school of their choice. Please note that the program discussed under this legislation is not contemplated in the current budget to be approved for the 2008-2009 school year.

Most educators would agree with the statement that “not every school is right for every child.” In fact, New Jersey currently 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.

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. To suggest that a program such as the pilot program proposed in S1607 would drain the public schools of their best students is insulting to those schools. Certainly students that 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, 33,000 children across Pennsylvania are benefiting from these scholarships. In addition to a program in Arizona, the Louisiana Senate passed a tax scholarship program for the city of New Orleans as a pilot program on June 11 of this year. The program returns to the House for final approval.

Nonpublic schools in general, and Catholic schools in particular, have been 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 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 were able to build only 400, the state would not suggest that those 400 should not be built.

There is the misconception that nonpublic schools do not accept classified students. One need only look at the current OLS estimate for the 2008-2009 school year in the Governor's Budget for FY'09. Thirty-five thousand seven hundred classified nonpublic school students have been identified. Obviously, parents have made a decision to forego the panoply of services available in the public sector in order to receive the larger benefits of a nonpublic school education.

The aforementioned tax credit programs in Pennsylvania and Arizona have passed constitutional muster and have, in no way, caused harm to public education. In other choice programs such as in Milwaukee, Cleveland, and Washington, students have demonstrated improved graduation rates, high degrees of parental satisfaction, and overall success in their academic performance. Overcrowding conditions in public schools have been alleviated with teachers able to spend more time with the same resources and fewer students. I have included a Q and A document with this testimony, in order to permit you to review the answers to some of the most frequently raised objections. I have also included a paper authored by Dr. William Jeynes, Professor of Education at California State University at Long Beach which describes the effect of faith-based schools on test scores of low-socioeconomic youth in nonpublic schools versus the scores of the same profile of students in public schools. The study was recently presented at the White House Summit on Inner City Children in Faith Based Schools.

It is important to remember that no solution to the problems of urban public education exists from those who work in the field 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.

We thank you for the opportunity to discuss this legislation with the members of the committee.