

Statement on Education Reform

Michigan Catholic Conference Board of Directors

The Michigan Catholic Conference believes:

- Education reform must reflect justice and equity for all children, including a basis for strong parental involvement, economic justice, and public and private school choice;
- Financing education becomes relevant only after quality education reform has begun; and
- Society benefits from a well-educated populace; therefore, the principle of the common good in society must be pre-eminent in education financing.

The Catholic Church has been providing the young people of this state with an education which combines Gospel-based values with the most advanced teaching methods even longer than Michigan has been a state. This value-based education not only teaches young people what is expected of them by society, it helps provide them with the moral compass that will help them make the important decisions in their lives. By the time they graduate, Catholic school students are prepared to contribute to the betterment of our world.

Catholic schools are based on the Church's 2,000-year history of social action and work for equality and justice for all people. We believe that education is at the very heart of the Church's mission. The Catholic Church has always known what the world has sometimes forgotten – that knowledge alone, scientific or humanistic, does not educate. Instead, education consists of developing the character of the soul which alone is capable of appropriating knowledge to the noblest aspirations of the human spirit. All the educational activities of the Church are directed at showing people how to draw on their rich religious heritage to discover, in themselves and in the world, the goodness, the truth, and the beauty which emanate from the Trinity.

Sister Irene Waldmann, S.S.J., writes in her monograph, *Education for Transformation*, “As value-oriented people we are vitally concerned for the education of our children, and invest considerable time, effort, and resources in providing quality formal education in our schools.” It is this understanding of the vital role of education which compels us to address the unique challenge of our world.

For decades, society has been talking about reform in education. Critics have pointed to declining test scores, delinquency, and moral turpitude and blamed the schools. Others bemoan high tax rates and wonder just what they are getting for their money. In Michigan, for better or for worse, we have taken the all-important first step toward a new education milieu that is more just and meets the challenges of the next century.

Choice

The Michigan Catholic Conference strongly believes that parental involvement should include the ability to choose what school is best for each child without penalty. For too long, parents who want their children to have a religious-based education have been subject to double taxation because they choose to exercise their rights to religion and education. Any meaningful reform proposal must address this injustice.

The Michigan Catholic Conference believes education is a fundamental right of all people, and children have the right to an education that will best develop their potential, talents, and ability. To exclude those children who can be best educated in a non-public school is only to repackage the public school monopoly. Recognizing that all students learn differently is essential to both education reform and financing. Changing the way that schools are funded without assuring that each child is treated equally, regardless of where he or she lives or whether the school is public or private, will not improve education.

The Catholic Church has long held that parents are the primary educators of their children and should have a greater role in what and how their children learn. For too long, important decisions regarding education have been made unilaterally, or at best bilaterally, by teachers and administrators. Much of the frustration people have with the education system is the feeling that parents are considered the least important part of a very fragile equation. Many of today’s parents are well educated; therefore, it is arrogant to assume that, since they are not “professional” educators, they should be limited in their roles to playground supervision and fund raising.

Reform

Funding inequalities and overly high property taxes may have been the impetus for the Legislature's actions, but a legitimate funding system cannot be put in place until the issue of quality is included in the current debate.

It is important to understand that although education is a fundamental part of the Catholic Church's mission, as citizens we recognize the need for a strong public school system. The relationship between Catholics and the public school system in America was plainly laid out by the bishops in their 1986 pastoral letter, Economic Justice for All: "We wish to affirm our strong support for the public school system of the United States. There can be no substitute for quality education in the public schools, because that is where the large majority of all students, including Catholic students, are educated."

Education reform must address the current problems involved with financing mechanisms, collection and distribution of revenue, accountability and local control, and the constitutional requirements necessary to guarantee that school reform is just. In addition school districts, curriculum, choice, transportation, administration, teacher bargaining rights, privatization, certification, and special education must be examined to promote equality and justice.

There can be no substitute for quality public education, for that is where most students are educated.

Finance

Because all of society benefits from education, the principle of the common good in our society must be pre-eminent in education reform. In the pastoral letter, Economic Justice for All, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops wrote that the tax system should be evaluated in terms of its impact on the poor. Financing, too, must reflect fairness and equality. We have a special responsibility to ensure that any financing system is not burdensome to the poor. Because of society's obligation to its more vulnerable members, we must avoid financing mechanisms which are regressive. Having everyone in society pay a fair share is the most progressive finance reform available.

A foundation grant for all students helps ensure that everyone has access to the same basic educational opportunities. A just financing system is ensured when the grant is combined with a measure of local control and accountability so citizens have a voice in how their schools operate.

The tax system should be sufficient to meet the public needs of society, especially the basic needs of the poor. This includes access to a quality education, the best hope of overcoming poverty. Taxes should be levied based on progressivity so those with greater financial resources pay a higher rate of tax. Businesses which reap the benefits of a well-educated work force should also pay for that benefit.

In order to secure an educational milieu which recognizes the individuality of all students, promotes the rights of parents to choose what is best for their children, and protects the poor, the Michigan Catholic Conference will lend its support and resources to any individual, group, or coalition that also seeks meaningful reform.

The people of Michigan have been presented with a great opportunity to match words with deeds on school reform. Undoubtedly, this is an opportunity which will not present itself again in the near future. We owe it to our children and to their children to take advantage of this historic moment.

*Michigan Catholic Conference
Board of Directors
Archbishop Adam J. Maida, Chairman
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