



## Catholic Schools: A Partner in NJ's Educational Efforts

BY ARCHBISHOP JOHN J. MYERS

This column about Catholic Schools Week is going to be a little different. As you all know, Catholic schools in New Jersey-indeed, throughout the country-are facing a number of challenges, the largest among them how to ensure their continued viability in the face of lower enrollments and higher costs.

Those of us who sponsor schools, administer and teach in them, and work to ensure their future know that this largest challenge is a classic "Catch-22." The cost of everything rises and so the cost of educating children increases. When you spread that cost among a group of students, it is higher than some parents can afford. As a result, students leave the school, and that means that the cost per student has to increase again. More students then leave because of cost, and so on.

Even while this is happening, every diocese, and especially this great archdiocese, has much to be proud of and to celebrate during Catholic Schools Week: superior, credentialed teaching staffs-an ever-growing number with advanced degrees-that are committed to the mission of Catholic schools and to the children they serve; curricula that is based on the NJ core curriculum, but that the schools augment and expand upon through innovative approaches and enhancements; an education program centered on the Catholic faith that doesn't stop at one period of "religion" every day, but imbues values and morals throughout the day, in every subject, at every opportunity; a majority of schools that have achieved Middle States certification for excellence; students from all walks of life, from all economic, racial, ethnic and religious backgrounds who enter high school, college and adulthood better prepared, better educated and more motivated to achieve standardized test scores; that demonstrate clearly that parents who choose to send their children to Catholic schools have made the right investment in their children's future.

To sum it up: Catholic school students are not taught to pass a test. They are taught to succeed in life intellectually, physically and spiritually. The parents of some 140,000 children in this state are well satisfied with the gift of a Catholic education.

Remember, Catholic schools view their role as that of a partner in education with parents. We do not take the place of parents; we work with them to form the whole child academically and morally. This is a major difference between our schools and public schools.

I mention these simple and yet compelling facts because, at this moment in our state's history, the people of New Jersey are again grappling with the same issue: the challenge of maintaining schools of excellence at a time of rising costs.

And, as with Catholic schools, the problem appears to be one of money. The size of the problem is massive. By some estimates, the average cost to educate a child in a New Jersey public school is in the area of \$15,000 per year. In some of the special, or "Abbott" districts, the cost seems to run even higher, approaching \$20,000 or more.

All citizens in the state are suffering from the burdens of the increases in property taxes that seem never to end, even as Trenton promises relief. For parents who send children to Catholic or other nonpublic schools, the financial burden is even higher, because they pay twice-once through taxes to the state, and again to the school of their choice.

Some people have no sympathy for those of you who pay for Catholic schools. "It's your decision," they say. But as the newspapers tell us almost every day, many of the public schools in our state are not providing our students with the quality education and moral background that they need. And so, here I come to the point of my column: I firmly believe that school choice is the best solution for education, in general, in New Jersey. There are solid financial and ethical reasons for my belief.

First, the financial reason. The average cost of education in a Catholic elementary school in New Jersey falls somewhere around \$5,000 per child—one-third the cost of the average public school. When the state acknowledges that it can save in the area of \$10,000 for every child whose parents elect to take advantage of a Catholic education, then it will be saving taxpayers real dollars, every year, by taking advantage of the open seats that exist in Catholic schools throughout the state.

Here, the savings can be enormous. If we were to double the number of children attending Catholic schools today, the additional 140,000 students who enter Catholic schools could produce a savings to New

Jersey taxpayers of almost \$1 billion per year. The savings do not end there, either. The need for additional classroom space would be lessened, because without those students, new construction wouldn't be as necessary. And, with fewer students attending public schools, the state can accomplish its goals of providing smaller classes without the need for new buildings and new staff.

Think of it: the 140,000 Catholic school students in New Jersey alone save New Jersey's taxpayers \$2.1 billion annually. Without Catholic schools, that's how much more the state would need to spend to provide the education that our schools already provide. That's not considering any new construction, nor does it take into account the other religious and private schools in the state.

But there is an equally compelling reason why New Jersey finally needs to recognize that it cannot achieve real savings or progress in school funding without incorporating parental choice. It is a justice issue. Parents have a right to determine where a child should be educated, so long as the education meets the state's curriculum guidelines. Catholic schools do that and more.

I continue to support parental choice in schools on many fronts. Direct support for all students is one area, and I know that many in Trenton and elsewhere in the state do not like this idea. They have their reasons, but those reasons are prejudicial to Catholic and non-Catholic parents who struggle to meet tuition, household expenses, and property taxes. I continually hear the mantra that "choice" is something everyone should have. If so, then the right to choose where a child can learn his or her ABCs should be equally regarded.

One area where we can demonstrate that school choice can lead to better lives is through the legislation called the Urban Schools Scholarship Act (see *The Catholic Advocate*, Oct. 10, 2007). This is a bill I and the other NJ Catholic bishops have been supporting vigorously and vocally. However the bill still languishes in Trenton because some believe it threatens the status quo.

On a pilot basis, this bill calls for the creation of corporate tax credits to provide funding to parents in seven districts in the state so that they can send their children to a school of their choice. Rev. Reginald Jackson of the Black Ministers Council and I, along with clergy of other faith groups, and numerous grassroots parents' groups have called for this bill to be posted and enacted, because it will prove to the people of this state that a state's obligation must be to provide the means for parents to select the right educational choice, rather than make the choice for them. This bill is limited in scope-only in seven of the poorest and most educationally deprived communities in the state. But it is a start and it should be passed. A similar program has been operating successfully for a number of years in every school district in Pennsylvania; the states teachers union supplies it financially.

This week, we celebrate the best of Catholic education (see the special news section in this edition, beginning on page 19). Among the best elements of Catholic schools is the commitment to justice. In order to ensure that Catholic education and Catholic schools can continue to give our children solid and exceptional academic and moral values, I urge all of us to work toward true school choice, in whatever way we can.

Catholic schools are partners-not only with our parents and students, but with the state as well. With school choice, we will ensure that New Jersey is successful in its goals of educating in the best way possible.