

Renewing Our Commitment to Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools in the Third Millennium

Introduction

Young people are a valued treasure and the future leaders of our Church. It is the responsibility of the entire Catholic community—bishops, priests, deacons, religious, and laity—to continue to strive towards the goal of making our Catholic elementary and secondary schools available, accessible, and affordable to all Catholic parents and their children, including those who are poor and middle class. All Catholics must join together in efforts to ensure that Catholic schools have administrators and teachers who are prepared to provide an exceptional educational experience for young people—one that is both truly Catholic and of the highest academic quality.

In 1990, the Catholic bishops of the United States issued the statement *In Support of Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools*. In it we affirmed our strong conviction that Catholic elementary and secondary schools are of great value to our Church and our nation; and that, in our role as chief teachers, we are each responsible for the total educational ministry of the local Church. We affirmed that “the entire ecclesial community . . . is called to value ever more deeply the importance of this task and mission, and to continue to give it full and enthusiastic support.” These Catholic schools afford the fullest and best opportunity to realize the fourfold purpose of Christian education, namely to provide an atmosphere in which the Gospel message is proclaimed, community in Christ is experienced, service to our sisters and brothers is the norm, and thanksgiving and worship of our God is cultivated (p. 2).

In that statement we pointed to the great value and the many successes of Catholic schools and the numerous challenges that they face. We unequivocally committed ourselves and the whole Catholic community to the following set of goals:

- Catholic schools will continue to provide a Gospel-based education of the highest quality.
- Catholic schools will be available, accessible, and affordable.
- The bishops will launch initiatives in both the private and public sectors to secure financial assistance for parents, the primary educators of their children, so that they can better exercise their right to choose the best schools for their children.
- Catholic schools will be staffed by highly qualified administrators and teachers who would receive just wages and benefits, as we expressed in our pastoral letter *Economic Justice for All*.

Much has changed in our Church and our nation in the ensuing years. Catholic schools continue to be valued and successful; but they still encounter numerous challenges. The bishops have addressed many of the goals that we set in 1990, but much is still left to be done. Therefore, we believe that the time has come to revisit and reaffirm our commitment to Catholic elementary and secondary schools as invaluable instruments in proclaiming the Good News from one generation to the next. This catechesis is a privileged way of “initiating the hearers into the fullness of Christian life” and is “intimately bound up with the whole of the Church’s life” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 5, 7). We believe that now is the appropriate time to renew our challenge to the entire Catholic community to join in this critical endeavor. We are

convinced that Catholic schools continue to be “the most effective means available to the Church for the education of children and young people” who are the future of the Church (*To Teach as Jesus Did*, no. 118).

Why We Value Our Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools

Young people of the third millennium must be a source of energy and leadership in our Church and our nation. Therefore, we must provide young people with an academically rigorous and doctrinally sound program of education and faith formation designed to strengthen their union with Christ and his Church. Catholic schools collaborate with parents and guardians in raising and forming their children as families struggle with the changing and challenging cultural and moral contexts in which they find themselves. Catholic schools provide young people with sound Church teaching through a broad-based curriculum, where faith and culture are intertwined in all areas of a school’s life. By equipping our young people with a sound education, rooted in the Gospel message, the Person of Jesus Christ, and rich in the cherished traditions and liturgical practices of our faith, we ensure that they have the foundation to live morally and uprightly in our complex modern world. This unique Catholic identity makes our Catholic elementary and secondary schools “schools for the human person” and allows them to fill a critical role in the future life of our Church, our country, and our world (*Catholic Schools on the Threshold*, no. 9).

It is made abundantly clear in an unbroken list of statements, from the documents of the Second Vatican Council to Pope John Paul II’s 1999 exhortation *The Church in America (Ecclesia in America)*, that Catholic schools play a vital role in the evangelizing mission of the Church. They are

the privileged environment in which Christian education is carried out . . . Catholic schools are at once places of evangelization, of complete formation, of inculturation, of apprenticeship in a lively dialogue between young people of different religions and social backgrounds. (*Catholic Schools on the Threshold of the Third Millennium*, no. 11)

Catholic schools are often the Church's most effective contribution to those families who are poor and disadvantaged, especially in poor inner city neighborhoods and rural areas. Catholic schools cultivate healthy interaction among the increasingly diverse populations of our society. In cities and rural areas, Catholic schools are often the only opportunity for economically disadvantaged young people to receive an education of quality that speaks to the development of the whole person. As we continue to address the many and varied needs of our nation's new immigrant population, the Church and its schools are often among the few institutions providing immigrants and newcomers with a sense of welcome, dignity, community, and connection with their spiritual roots.

As important as a sound Catholic school education is for the new immigrant and the poor, it continues to be of prime importance to those children and grandchildren of the generations who earlier came to our shores. Our Catholic schools have produced countless numbers of well-educated and moral citizens who are leaders in our civic and ecclesial communities. We must work with all parents so they have the choice of an education that no other school can supply—excellent academics imparted in the context of Catholic teaching and practice.

Catholic Schools Today

Overview Since 1990

The National Catholic Educational Association's annual statistical report shows that there are currently 7,799 Catholic elementary and secondary schools in the United States, which enroll over 2.4 million students. These schools currently account for almost 30 percent of all private and religious schools in the United States and enroll over 48 percent of the students in these schools. Since 1990, the Church in the United States has opened more than 400 new schools. Regrettably, there has been a net decline of more than 850 Catholic schools in the country during the same period of time. Almost all of this loss has been in urban, inner-city, and rural areas of our nation. In the last decade of the twentieth century, Catholic schools experienced a period of growth in enrollments. Since the year 2000, however, that trend slowed, then reversed, and now shows a net loss of over 170,000 students.

Currently, there are more than 2,500 Catholic schools in the country with waiting lists. Almost all of these schools are located in suburban areas. Twenty-six percent of current students in Catholic schools are members of minority groups—a figure that is steadily growing. The enrollment of students who are not Catholic has grown to 13.6 percent. Staffing trends in Catholic elementary and secondary schools show a steady increase in the number of lay people who are administrators and teachers (currently 95 percent). Since 1990, the average tuition in both elementary and secondary Catholic schools has more than doubled; in that same time, the portion of the total cost of educating a student which parents pay in tuition has risen by almost 13 percent.

The Good News

We, the Catholic bishops of the United States, wish to offer our deep gratitude to those individuals who staff our Catholic elementary and secondary schools, the dedicated lay and religious administrators and teachers. We applaud their professionalism, personal sacrifices, daily witness to faith, and efforts to integrate learning and faith in the lives of their students in order to “accomplish the very purpose of evangelization: the incarnation of the Christian message in the lives of men and women” (*Lay Catholics in Schools: Witnesses to Faith*, no. 31). We take this opportunity to encourage all who are devoted to working in Catholic schools to “persevere in their most important mission” (*Ecclesia in America*, no. 71).

Research conducted by the United States Department of Education, the National Catholic Educational Association, and other independent agencies shows that Catholic schools make a major impact in closing the achievement gap for poor and minority students in inner-city environments. Catholic schools have a lower dropout rate (3.4 percent) than both public (14.4 percent) and other private schools (11.9 percent). Ninety-nine percent of Catholic high school students graduate, and 97 percent go on to some form of post-secondary education. Catholic school students continue to score well on standardized tests (such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress) in subjects such as reading, mathematics, social studies, and science, often surpassing standards established by federal and/or state agencies. A Harvard University study issued in 2000 reported that Catholic school students performed better than other students on the three basic objectives of civic education—the capacity for civic engagement (e.g., voluntary community service), political knowledge (e.g., learning and using civic skills), and political tolerance (e.g., respect for opinions different from their own).¹

We are encouraged by the laity's increased involvement with school boards, commissions, and councils. We commend the efforts that are being made to develop programs for the spiritual growth of staff, students, and parents; to create safe environment programs for children and young people; to open development and endowment offices in dioceses and schools; to market schools; and to establish parent organizations that advocate for the rights of Catholic school students and teachers to be treated equitably in government-sponsored programs and services.

We are grateful to the individuals who have joined us on the federal and state levels and from the private sector to assist parents in financing their children's education. The passage of programs that provide for government-funded parental choice scholarships, tax credits, deductions, and individual and corporate donations for privately funded scholarships makes it possible for children of the poor and lower middle class to attend Catholic schools.

A 2002 study of Catholic school students with disabilities conducted by an independent agency, the Center for Educational Partnerships, found that 7 percent of children enrolled in Catholic schools had disabilities identified in the *Individuals With Disabilities Education Act*. We applaud the increasing number of our school administrators and teachers who have taken steps to welcome these children and others with special needs into our Catholic schools.

We recognize the positive contributions of those Catholic colleges and universities that are providing specialized programs to train administrators and teachers in the unique mission of the Catholic school, particularly those that work in our inner-city and rural Catholic schools.

The Challenges of the Future

While we look with pride to the many successes and achievements of our Catholic elementary and secondary schools, the entire Catholic community must now focus on the future and the many challenges we face. We, the Catholic bishops of the United States, with the cooperation of diocesan, school, and community leadership, should pursue effective responses to the challenges we face. We must then move forward with faith, courage, and enthusiasm because Catholic schools are so important to our future.

The Face of Our Church

We must face the reality of our Church as it exists today and as it will be in the future. We must be prepared to address the changing diversity of the Church's membership. The Catholic Church in the United States is larger than ever. Many of our people are more financially successful, and they have moved into areas of our nation where, in the past, Catholics were a rarity. Catholic parishes and schools face the challenge of addressing the spiritual, educational, social, and cultural needs of a new wave of immigrants. In responding to the needs of these individuals, we must continue our evangelizing efforts by maintaining our schools' Catholic identity and mission. It is critical that we work with our people to erase any lines of prejudice and bias that may exist and create welcoming communities for these immigrants. People involved in this effort often suffer from meager human and financial resources. We need to seek support from the larger Church and civic communities to assist them in this work.

Our young people are the Church of today and tomorrow. It is imperative that we provide them with schools ready to address their spiritual, moral, and academic needs. Our challenge today is to provide schools close to where our Catholic people live. In areas where there currently are no

Catholic schools, we should open schools that have a mission to evangelize. We also need to consider providing new or expanded facilities where we currently have schools with waiting lists. Wherever possible, Catholic schools should remain available and accessible in all areas of a diocese for children who are from poor and middle-class families who face major economic challenges. In addition, Catholic schools should be available to students who are not Catholic and who wish to attend them. This has been a proud part of the history of Catholic schools in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. We must continue this outreach in the new millennium. We must also serve the increasing Hispanic/Latino population, which makes up 39 percent of our current Catholic community. Hispanics/Latinos make up 41 percent of Catholics under the age of thirty, and 44 percent of Catholics under the age of ten. It is currently estimated that by the second decade of this century, the Hispanic/Latino population will compose 50 percent of all Catholics in the United States.² Catholic parishes and schools must reflect this reality and reach out and welcome Hispanics and Latinos into the Catholic faith communities in the United States.

A positive contribution that we enthusiastically support is the opening, by so many of our dioceses and religious communities, of schools that offer reduced or no tuition for at-risk students. These schools utilize comprehensive and innovative educational approaches to improve the academic progress of some of the most disadvantaged young people.

Catholic schools must also continue to look for ways to include and serve better the needs of young people in our Church who have special educational and physical needs. Recognizing that educating students with disabilities often requires more intensive instructional support, we call

on government to allow special education monies to follow and support students with disabilities no matter where they attend school.

Personnel

Ninety-five percent of our current school administrators and teachers are members of the laity.³ The preparation and ongoing formation of new administrators and teachers is vital if our schools are to remain truly Catholic in all aspects of school life. Catholic school personnel should be grounded in a faith-based Catholic culture, have strong bonds to Christ and the Church, and be witnesses to the faith in both their words and actions. The formation of personnel will allow the Gospel message and the living presence of Jesus to permeate the entire life of the school community and thus be faithful to the school's evangelizing mission. We gratefully acknowledge the contributions of school personnel who are not Catholic, but who support and cooperate in accomplishing the mission of the Catholic school.

We must provide a sufficient number of programs of the highest quality to recruit and prepare our future diocesan and local school administrators and teachers so that they are knowledgeable in matters of our faith, are professionally prepared, and are committed to the Church. These programs will require even more active involvement and cooperation by our Catholic colleges and universities in collaboration with the diocesan educational leadership.

Ongoing faith formation and professional development programs must also be available so that administrators and teachers in Catholic schools can continue to grow in their ministry of education. These programs will introduce new and effective initiatives, educational models, and approaches, while always maintaining a sound Catholic identity in our schools. This is especially

important when new Catholic school administrators and teachers come from private and state colleges and universities or from careers in the public school system.

Finances

We call on the entire Catholic community—clergy, religious, and laity—to assist in addressing the critical financial questions that continue to face our Catholic schools. This will require the Catholic community to make both personal and financial sacrifices to overcome these financial challenges. The burden of supporting our Catholic schools can no longer be placed exclusively on the individual parishes that have schools and on parents who pay tuition. This will require all Catholics, including those in parishes without schools, to focus on the spirituality of stewardship. The future of Catholic school education depends on the entire Catholic community embracing wholeheartedly the concept of stewardship of time, talent, and treasure, and translating stewardship into concrete action.

While we have made progress in opening offices for development, endowments, marketing, and institutional advancement, we must expand those efforts on both the diocesan and local levels. If we are to respond to the need for more Catholic schools we must seek innovative ways, including the use of tax free bonds, to finance them and to maintain those that currently exist. These programs will allow our Catholic schools to maintain quality programs, hire quality staff, and attract more students. We will need to utilize the collective wisdom of the members of our Church and the society in which we live if we are to be successful in this effort. We need to remind the business and civic communities of the contributions made by the graduates of Catholic schools who help to build the success of these enterprises. Diocesan and school leaders should continue actively to pursue financial support from the business and civic communities.

Our total Catholic community must increase efforts to address the financial needs of our Catholic school administrators, teachers, and staff. Many of our employees make great sacrifices to work in Catholic schools. The Catholic community must not ignore the reality of inadequate salaries, which often require these individuals to seek supplemental employment (*Lay Catholics*, no. 27) to meet living expenses and expenses due to limited or non-existent health care and retirement benefits. These benefits are very often lost if a school employee moves from one diocese to another. The Catholic community needs to study the success of the Michigan Catholic Conference's portable employee benefit program as a possible model for others to replicate. Catholic social teaching on the provision of just wages and benefits is both strong and clear. It is our community's responsibility to take action to address these issues now.

Advocacy

Finally, we need to intensify our efforts in advocating just and equitable treatment of our students and teachers in federal and state-funded educational programs. While we are pleased with the progress made in developing parent advocacy groups since 1990, the Catholic community must work to increase the number and effectiveness of these groups. Advocacy is not just the responsibility of parents and teachers, but of all members of the Catholic community. As the primary educators of their children, parents have the right to choose the school best suited for them. The entire Catholic community should be encouraged to advocate for parental school choice and personal and corporate tax credits, which will help parents to fulfill their responsibility in educating their children.

As we said in our 1995 statement *Principles for Educational Reform in the United States*, we believe that “government at all levels, acting in partnership with parents, has a responsibility to provide adequate professional and material resources to assist all children to attain a quality education” (p. 7).

We also stated in that same document,

When services that are aimed at improving the educational environment—especially for those most at risk—are available to students and teachers in public schools, these services should also be available to students and teachers in private and religious schools. These individuals should not be penalized for choosing to enroll or work in these schools since they also serve the common good of our nation. (p. 8)

Parents have the constitutional right to direct the upbringing and education of their children (*Pierce v. Society of Sisters*), and we call on the entire Catholic community to join in advocating for the opportunities and resources to implement this right through constitutionally permissible programs and legislation (e.g., *Zobrest v. Catalina Foothills School District*, *Mitchell v. Helms*, and *Zelman v. Simons-Harris*).

In some states, so-called “Blaine” amendments, which ban or severely limit assistance to private and/or religious schools, make the attainment of this goal very difficult, if not impossible. These amendments are part of an anti-religious and, more specifically, anti-Catholic legacy in our nation’s history. We need to advocate for the repeal of these relics of unfortunate bigotry.

Future Action

In addition to recommendations we have already made, and to ensure that our Catholic elementary and secondary schools not only continue to exist, but will grow and prosper, we call on bishops and those in educational leadership to

- Convene gatherings of educational, business, and community leaders, in either the fourteen episcopal regions or in each state, to address the critical issues of Catholic identity, cultural diversity, finances, just wages and benefits, academic quality—especially in the area of religious education—alternative governance models, and the marketing of our Catholic schools.
- Develop programs to assist pastors, clergy, seminarians, and laity to understand, appreciate, support, and promote the critical value of our Catholic schools in fulfilling the teaching ministry of the Church.
- Develop strategies to increase the effective advocacy for the equitable treatment of Catholic school students and teachers in government programs. This would include support for existing and creation of new parent advocacy groups in each state and diocese.
- Work with the leaders of Catholic colleges and universities to address the critical staffing needs of our Catholic elementary and secondary schools. This would include steps to ensure that sound and effective programs of teacher education and administration are available and affordable to those interested in working in our Catholic schools.

We call on the Committee on Education of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, and its staff, to collaborate with all appropriate groups and individuals in the development of procedures to implement the goals that are outlined in this statement.

We also call on the Committee on Education to collaborate with the National Catholic Educational Association in the development of a strategic plan produced from the proceedings of its Centennial Symposium on the *Vision for the Future of Catholic Education in the United States*.

Finally, we call on the Committee on Education to review the status of Catholic elementary and secondary schools and to report back to the body of bishops and the Catholic community on a regular basis, beginning no later than our annual November General Assembly in the year 2007.

Conclusion

As we, the Catholic bishops of the United States, and the entire Catholic community continue our journey through the twenty-first century, it remains our duty to model the Person of Jesus Christ, to teach the Gospel, and to evangelize our culture. We are convinced that Catholic elementary and secondary schools play a critical role in this endeavor. “Thus it follows that the work of the school is irreplaceable and the investment of human and material resources in the school becomes a prophetic choice . . . it is still of vital importance even in our time” (*Catholic Schools on the Threshold*, no. 21).

According to *Ecclesia in America*,

It is essential that every possible effort be made to ensure that Catholic schools, despite financial difficulties, continue to provide a Catholic education to the poor and marginalized in society. It will never be possible to free the needy from their poverty unless they are first freed from the impoverishment arising from the lack of adequate education. (no. 71)

The Catholic community is encouraged at every level to support the work of our Catholic elementary and secondary schools, keeping them available and accessible to as many parents as possible. Therefore, we the Catholic bishops of the United States strongly encourage our clergy and laity to market and support Catholic elementary and secondary schools as one of our church's primary missions.

Our vision is clear: our Catholic schools are a vital part of the teaching mission of the Church.

The challenges ahead are many, but our spirit and will to succeed are strong. We, the Catholic bishops of the United States, in cooperation with the total Catholic community, are committed to overcoming these challenges. Adversity often brings out the best in men and women. We must respond to challenging times with faith, vision, and the will to succeed because the Catholic school's mission is vital to the future of our young people, our nation, and most especially our Church.

Resources

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Endnotes

¹ David Campbell, "Making Democratic Education Work: Schools, Social Capital, and Civic Education" (paper presented at the Conference on Charter Schools, Vouchers, and Public Education, March 2000), 25ff.

² USCCB Department of Communications, *Catholic Information Project: The Catholic Church in America—Meeting Real Needs in Your Neighborhood* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2003), 3-4.

³ See *United States Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools 2004-2005* (Washington, DC: National Catholic Educational Association, 2005).

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