

Panelists: Tuition tax credits are basic social justice

Jerry Filteau | Dec. 2, 2011



A teacher leads students in prayer before class at Pope John Paul II School in Wilmington, Del. (CNS photo/Don Blake, The Dialog)

WASHINGTON -- Tuition tax credits for U.S. children in nonpublic schools are a matter of social justice for taxpaying parents, panelists said Nov. 30 at a daylong conference at The Catholic University of America.

Such credits also save on public taxes and are a concrete, proven way to help children of poor families lift themselves out of poverty, they said.

"This issue is a fundamental social justice issue," said John Carr, executive director of the U.S. Catholic bishops' Secretariat for Justice, Peace and Human Development.

"The social mission of the church is the same as the educational ministry of the church," he said, citing the passage in Luke's Gospel where Jesus, at the opening of his public ministry, quoted from the prophet Isaiah: "[God] has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, recovery of sight to the blind and release to prisoners."

Catholic education offers not only academic excellence to children regardless of their social status, leading to greater success later in their social and economic lives, Carr said, but it instills values of "human life and dignity" and moral "rights and responsibilities." He said that approach leads students, Catholic or not, to deeper awareness of their responsibilities to promote the common good and to give priority to the poor in America's social policies.

Carr announced at the conference that the national Catholic Campaign for Human Development, which his office oversees, recently gave a grant to an organization that promotes greater black educational opportunity by grassroots work to help African-American parents organize to advocate public funding of educational alternatives -- charter, religiously run and other nonpublic schools -- in inner cities and other areas where public schools are failing to meet the educational needs of their children.

The audience at the conference, organized by the CUA Institute for Public Policy and Catholic Studies and co-sponsored by the Catholic Association of Latino Leaders, was rather small -- it capped at about 50 during Washington Cardinal Donald W. Wuerl's luncheon address -- but apart from a few journalists it consisted

almost entirely of leaders in national Catholic organizations, heads of state Catholic conferences and national, state or diocesan leaders in Catholic education.

Wuerl said while giving an emphasis on academic excellence, the most notable thing that Catholic schools bring to the U.S. society "is precisely their faith perspective."

Catholic schools operate from a perspective that personal discipline, moral values, a clear distinction between right and wrong and a sense of obligation to uphold those principles and values "coming from our own personal dignity and worth" are central to the education of children, he said.

All that Catholic schools seek in voucher or tuition credit programs, he said, is to offer children attending failing public schools "a level playing field" in which they can achieve their potential: "to develop their talents, to develop their capabilities, to determine their future."

Among first-world countries, he said, the United States is the only one in which tax monies for primary and secondary education don't flow to the child.

"We are an anomaly as a nation to not let the [public tax] money flow to the child," said Merylann Schuttloffel, chair of CUA's Education Department. She said every other first-world country around the globe except the United States gives some form of substantial government financial support to children attending its privately sponsored primary and secondary educational institutions.

Schuttloffel also warned, however, that the future of Catholic elementary and secondary education in the United States is endangered by an apparent lack of Catholic commitment to those schools.

"We have not been able to sell adequately the value of Catholic education. ... The Catholic cultural social capital is fragile today," she said.

One of the most personal observations on the impact of a lack of tuition tax credits for children in private schools came from panelist Thomas Burnford, Washington Archdiocesan secretary for education.

"I'm really frustrated that I'm paying twice" to educate three children, now 1, 3 and 5, Burnford said.

He estimated that to enroll them in local Catholic schools just through eighth grade would cost him \$300,000, while he was also paying state and county taxes for public school education that would give his children no benefit if he did not enroll them in public schools.

"This is about kids, not institutions," said Carr, who argued that publicly funded tuition aid to parents of students in nonpublic schools "is not the silver bullet" to reform all the problems in public education, but it is "part of the larger reform efforts" leading to programs that will benefit students.

Marie Powell, executive director of the U.S. bishops' Secretariat for Catholic Education, noted that "when the economy tanked" in recent years, as states cut back on their budgets in many areas, those states with various forms of tuition tax credits for students in nonpublic schools did nothing to reduce or eliminate those credits.

The reason is simple, she said: States with experience in providing partial educational support for children in nonpublic schools know that "it is cheaper to appropriate X number of dollars for going to private schools than to send them to public schools," where the per-pupil cost to the government would be thousands of dollars more each year.

[Jerry Filteau is *NCR's* Washington correspondent.]

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