Michigan Catholic Conference

FOCUS

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BALLOT PROPOSAL 1
Putting Kids First

As those first responsible for the education of their children, parents have the right to choose a school for them which corresponds to their own convictions. This right is fundamental. As far as possible parents have the duty of choosing a school that will best help them in their task as Christian educators. Public authorities have the duty of guaranteeing this parental right and ensuring the concrete conditions for its exercise.

- Catechism of the Catholic Church Paragraph 2229.

This central tenet of Catholic teaching on education guides the Church's public policy position on issues addressing educational reform. The principle that parents are the primary decision makers for their children's education setting demands that just citizens will remove the barriers and discriminatory language that prevent the exercise of a basic civil right … the right to a quality education.

In November, Michigan voters will be asked to vote on Proposal 1 – a proposal to amend the state Constitution in order to allow parents in failing school districts to receive opportunity scholarships, or vouchers, that can be used to pay for their children's tuition in a non-public school. The proposal also provides for teacher testing of all public school teachers and teachers in non-public schools where vouchers are redeemed. Finally, Proposal 1 guarantees that the per child funding for public school students can never fall below what it is in the 2000-01 school year.

Since 1970, when the people of the State of Michigan adopted Constitutional language that prohibited the use of public funds either directly or *indirectly* for nonpublic schools, education reform efforts have tinkered around the edges of providing complete parental choice in education. Now, at the precipice of the new century, the Kids First! Yes! education reform proposal offers real hope and opportunity to the children who reside in failing school districts.

What is Proposal 1?

Proposal 1 accomplishes three things:

1. Proposal 1 guarantees funding for every child in public schools. It ensures that per child funding at any time in the future can never fall below the amount guaranteed by the state as of the 2000-2001 fiscal year. The guaranteed minimum level of funding will increase an average of 20% for public schools.
2. Proposal 1 guarantees teacher testing in academic subject areas for all public school teachers and nonpublic school teachers from schools that accept students with an Opportunity Scholarship. The initiative defers to the legislature to determine the details of the testing program.

3. Finally, Proposal 1 guarantees equal opportunity in education, expanding choice where it's needed most or where local voters approve it. Parents that live in one of the worst-performing school districts – districts that fail to graduate at least two out of three of their students - will receive an Opportunity Scholarship worth one-half the per pupil expenditure in public schools. The current state per pupil expenditure is roughly $6,300, so the Opportunity Scholarship would be worth $3,150. The Opportunity Scholarship would empower parents to choose whichever nonpublic school they believe is best for their child. About 30 out of 555 school districts would qualify. In districts where the schools are functioning better, local voters and school boards can decide for themselves if they want to expand choice in their area.

The ballot wording for Proposal 1 reads as follows:

PROPOSAL 00-1

A PROPOSAL TO AMEND THE CONSTITUTION TO PERMIT STATE TO PROVIDE INDIRECT SUPPORT TO STUDENTS ATTENDING NONPUBLIC PRE-ELEMENTARY, ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS; ALLOW THE USE OF TUITION VOUCHERS IN CERTAIN SCHOOL DISTRICTS; AND REQUIRE ENACTMENT OF TEACHER TESTING LAWS.

The proposed constitutional amendment would:

1) Eliminate ban on indirect support of students attending nonpublic schools through tuition vouchers, credits, tax benefits, exemptions or deductions, subsidies, grants or loans of public monies or property.
2) Allow students to use tuition vouchers to attend nonpublic schools in districts with a graduation rate under 2/3 in 1998-1999 and districts approving tuition vouchers through school board action or a public vote. Each voucher would be limited to 1/2 of state average per-pupil public school revenue.
3) Require teacher testing on academic subjects in public schools and in nonpublic schools redeeming tuition vouchers.
4) Adjust minimum per-pupil funding from 1994-1995 to 2000-2001 level.

Should this proposal be adopted? [X] YES [ ] NO

A majority "YES" vote approves the Kids First! Yes! proposal.
A majority "no" vote would defeat the proposal.

Michigan has some great schools and many dedicated teachers. Proposal 1 will make them even better, while giving a helping hand to those children in school districts that are not performing.

These three components balance the need for more choice and accountability together with the desire of public educators for revenue stability. The ballot initiative lays out the broad foundation for reform, while prudently assigning the Michigan legislature to address specific implementation issues as they arise in the future.

First and foremost, public policy must always respect human dignity. As formal education is so central to our ability to function in society, policy affecting education must have at its core, respect for the high level of dignity one

achieves through a quality education. The state, as policy maker, has a duty to make available education opportunities that respond to the needs of all of its citizens. Proposal 1 is an education reform measure that incorporates the six principles outlined by the U.S. Bishops. Its breadth and weight will have far-reaching, positive effects for all the citizens of Michigan and in particular, the children.

The Vatican II document Gravissimum Educationis echoes the Church's catechism:

"Since parents have given children their life, they are bound by the most serious obligation to educate their offspring and therefore must be recognized as the primary and principal educators... The family, which has the primary duty of imparting education, needs help of the whole community. In addition, therefore, to the rights of parents and others to whom the parents entrust a share in the work of education, certain rights and duties belong indeed to civil society, whose role is to direct what is required for the common temporal good." (No. 3)

In addition it is the task of the state to see to it that all citizens are able to come to a suitable share in culture and are properly prepared to exercise their civic duties and rights. Therefore the state must protect the right of children to an adequate school education, check on the ability of teachers to and excellence in their training, look after the health of the pupils and in general, promote the whole school project." (No.6)

Principles of Reform

The Bishops of the United States Catholic Conference have identified and elaborated on six basic principles offered to guide education reform efforts while keeping faithful to the Church's mission to bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the people. These principles are as follows:

1) all persons have the right to a quality education;

2) parental rights and responsibilities are primary in education;

3) students are the central focus of all education;

4) quality teaching is essential to the learning process;

5) true quality education must address the moral and spiritual needs of students; and

6) government has a responsibility to provide adequate resources for the attainment of quality education for all children, and these education policy decisions are best made at the level closest to the actual teaching and learning situation.

The leading premise behind current education reform efforts is embodied in the parental rights movement. Seventy five years ago the United States Supreme Court struck down an Oregon compulsory public school attendance law because it interfered with the, "liberty of parents and guardians to direct the upbringing and education of children under their control." The Supreme Court went on to say in Pierce v. Society of Sisters that "the child is not the mere creature of the state." The primacy of parental rights in education must influence all that we do in advocating for justice in education.

Proposal 1 focuses solely on the children of this state. It guarantees per child funding for every school district. It requires teachers to be tested in the academic subject area they teach and it gives parents a quality guarantee - if a student lives in a school district that cannot graduate 2/3 of its students, he/she will get a voucher, called an opportunity scholarship, to take to a non-public school of his/her choice. The proposal moves Michigan's electorate outside the box of traditional education reform by having the interests of children as its focal point and not the maintenance of an "educational system", which in too many instances is failing the young people of this state.

Throughout its 36-year history the Michigan Catholic Conference has been a strong advocate for educational justice in this state. The passage of Proposal 1 is a priority for the Church in this election year. Its urgency is buttressed not only by the crisis in failing school districts, but also the call of Vatican II and our Catholic social teaching, which extol the primacy of parents in the education decision making process and call upon the state to fulfill its obligation to all of the citizens under its jurisdiction.

Proposal 1 will bring hope to kids, and guarantee teacher quality and public school funding. Passage of this proposal is the surest way of promoting the Catholic social justice tradition in Michigan's education system. VOTE YES ON PROPOSAL 1.

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