

## Paul A. Long: Michigan needs more school choice

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### SCHOOL CHOICE

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This week, Catholic schools in the state of Michigan are celebrating Catholic Schools Week, with the theme Communities of Faith, Knowledge, and Service. The theme not only recognizes the commitment Catholic schools uphold to foster academic achievement, but also to develop in students a sense of responsibility to promote the common good.

The Catholic Church's emphasis on a child's education begins even before their birth. During a Catholic marriage ceremony the couple is asked if they are open to children and willing to raise them in the faith. The Church calls for all parents to assume responsibility for educating their children and to choose a school which fits with their own beliefs (Catechism, 2229). As the primary educators of their children, parents have the opportunity to teach values and provide context to what is learned at school.

Regardless of the type of school one attends, every child deserves access to a quality education. The learning that takes place during this formative time helps shape the person the child will become and the contributions he or she will later make to society. Still, greater steps are needed in Michigan to ensure a variety of quality educational opportunities are provided for parents.

While policies in twenty-three other states and the District of Columbia offer parents choices for their child's education, Michigan regrettably is among the most repressive states in the nation in terms of full school choice. Language added to the Michigan Constitution in 1970 specifically forbids the passage of tuition tax credits or deductions, opportunity programs, or scholarship programs for children to attend a non-public school. Every neighboring state, however, allows for such policies that have encouraged student achievement, especially for low-income and minority families. Michigan has fallen behind.

As the state's restrictive language continues to leave parents with fewer choices, the constitution calls for education to be a priority. According to Article 8, Section 1: "Religion, morality and knowledge being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged." Michigan Catholic Conference believes this important statement applies to all schools in the state.

States that are providing educational choice have seen benefits for students of all faiths, family income levels, and backgrounds. For example, the Louisiana Scholarship Program provides scholarships to low-income families earning less than 250 percent of the federal poverty level (FPL) with children in "failing" school districts. The program is one of the few chances some low-income children have to escape the cycle of poverty and to receive the quality education every child deserves.

Providing roughly 54,382 students with a safe, academically challenging, faith-filled environment, Catholic schools in Michigan teach values that remain with their students. These schools continually demonstrate elevated achievement, posting top graduation rates and routinely posting higher than average test scores.

For the past several years, the Michigan Legislature has recognized Catholic Schools Week for their hard work, academic performance and service. The contribution Catholic schools make to education and the common good should not only be recognized during Catholic Schools Week, but year-round as a viable school choice option. Children and families of Michigan deserve no less. The discriminatory language in the state constitution should be repealed.

As Michigan Catholic Conference advocates on behalf of policies that benefit non-public schools, the organization is dedicated to enacting good public policy for students in all schools. All children deserve access to a quality education. Michigan is best served with an array of strong public and non-public schools.

*Paul A. Long is president and CEO of the Michigan Catholic Conference.*

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