

Leading the FLOCK

BY BISHOP DANIEL E. THOMAS



“Catholic Schools: Supporting the Education of the Whole Person”

The benefits of a Catholic Education are far reaching for students, their families, the workplace, their communities, our Church and nation! Whether you, like me, benefitted from many years of Catholic Education or not, it is important for all of us to advocate that today’s parents have the option to choose where their children will be educated. Parents have the right to form their children in body, mind and spirit, by selecting the best educational opportunity to assist them in that formation.

As Catholic Schools Week approaches, reflecting on the treasure that Catholic Education has been in my own life, I write to share with you some thoughts on it’s value and the increased opportunities for students to attend our Catholic schools.

In 1997 the Congregation for Catholic Education was prophetic in its document *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium*. In it, the Congregation recognizes the difficulties and crises facing education, namely, subjectivism, moral relativism, and nihilism; it also identifies rapid technological changes, migration changes, and marginalized Christian faith in traditionally well-evangelized areas as emerging challenges facing us all and especially Catholic education. Such a

bleak cultural outlook calls us to renew our resolve to support Catholic education and authentically Catholic schools.

Since 1782, the United States has benefitted from Catholic schools by their serving students from every race and economic status, by their saving states and public schools billions of dollars each year (\$24 billion annually), and by integrating Gospel values into the educational experience of each student. Catholic schools have a significant tradition of developing the whole person. To more fully embrace our being created in the image of God, Catholic education seeks to affect not only the mind and body, but also the soul.

Through frequent observance of the sacraments, daily catechetical instruction, and through a commitment to learning and practicing virtues from school leaders and teachers, students in Catholic schools experience formation for their souls that is fundamentally unique, and the results of a Catholic education speak for themselves. For example, Catholic school students are more likely to pray daily, attend church more often, and retain a Catholic identity as an adult. They are more likely to vote, more likely to graduate from high school, especially for minority students, and are more likely to attend college.

Researchers have given a name to the continued documented success of student achievement and outcomes: *the Catholic School Effect*. Recently the Fordham Institute published an article that found students in Catholic schools exhibit more self-control than those in other private or public schools. The virtue of self-control is one of many that our schools reinforce each day; it is also an indicator of how successful one will be with respect to spirituality, health, and financial stability throughout life.

Last October, the Ohio Department of Education released a public school classification listing which dramatically increased the number of students eligible for the EdChoice Scholarship. This list now includes at least one designated public institution from each of the nineteen counties within the Diocese of Toledo. There has also been an increase in both the funding and eligible grade levels for the EdChoice Expansion Scholarship, serving low-income families. Such actions provide greater opportunities for parents to have choices for where their children are educated.

As Catholics, we believe that parents are the primary educators of their children, and therefore parental choice in education is a fundamental right. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* highlights, "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 schools that will best help them in their task as Christian educators. Public authorities have the duty of guaranteeing this parental right and of ensuring the concrete conditions for its exercise" (CCC 2229).

This is not a new practice or belief. In 1965, the Second Vatican Council issued the *Declaration on Christian Education* highlighting this right of parents and the obligation of the state: "The public power, which has the obligation to protect

and defend the rights of citizens, must see to it, in its concern for distributive justice, that public subsidies are paid out in such a way that parents are truly free to choose according to their conscience the schools they want for their children" (6).

In 1986, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith connected school choice to an issue of social justice in that "whenever the State lays claim to an educational monopoly, it oversteps its rights and offends justice...The State cannot without injustice merely tolerate so-called private schools. Such schools render a public service and therefore have a right to financial assistance" (*Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation* 94) and should be supported through our state government.

The Catholic Church supports parents' rights to be the primary educators of their children, as well as the importance of providing parents with educational options. True school choice includes options for public education, non-public education, or homeschooling. Committed to the virtues of charity and justice, as a Diocese we will work to ensure that parents know about these educational choice opportunities, and we will continue to support school choice within the state.

This year *Celebrate Catholic Schools Week* is January 26th through February 1st. Please join me in celebrating the treasure of Catholic education with the theme "Catholic Schools: Learn. Serve. Lead. Succeed." Please pray with me in gratitude for all of our Catholic Schools, our students, teachers and staff, so that in all their efforts God is better known, loved and served.



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