

ANTI-VOUCHER ACTIVISTS TURN ANTI-CATHOLIC

It never fails to happen. Whenever school voucher programs are under serious consideration, up pops dishonesty and anti-Catholicism. What recently happened in Pennsylvania is a perfect example.

In May, Governor Tom Ridge of Pennsylvania put forth two new proposals to reform education. The "Academic Recovery Act" would allow for parents who have their children in school districts that are suffering academically to opt for school choice immediately; parochial schools were listed as an option. Educational Opportunity Grants, the second part, would give considerable help to poor families and some help to middle-class families in selecting the school of their choice.

Governor Ridge's program, which was endorsed by the Catholic League, withdrew his proposal in June when it was clear that he did not have the votes to win. He pledged, however, to continue the fight for school choice. What bothered the league most was not the outcome but the way the fight was fought by the anti-choice crowd.

During the third week in May, 14 school superintendents from Bucks County signed a letter that compared the effects of school choice to the genocidal war in Kosovo. "The current war in Kosovo is a graphic example of what happens in a society that separates its people and fosters elitism," the statement said. "The democratic principles that our society must preserve if it is to flourish," the letter continued, "are weakened by voucher plans that undermine the public good, and in time, if adopted, may lead to the Balkanization of our society."

In other words, if poor parents are given the same rights as

rich parents, and some send their kids to Catholic schools, it is only a matter of time before ethnic cleansing hits Pennsylvania. And remember, those who believe this are school superintendents. Is it any wonder that their schools are in such a mess?

The anti-choice insanity hit another level on June 7 when the head of the state's largest teachers union, David J. Gondak, abused his authority by telling his members to indoctrinate their students with anti-choice propaganda. He told the Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA) to teach students that the Gov. Ridge proposal was "stealth voucher legislation" and that a "voucher scheme."

The PSEA showed how really desperate it was by posting a photograph of Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet on its home page. In other words, if vouchers are accepted, Pennsylvania will turn fascist.

But no one stooped lower than Representative Joseph Preston, Jr. of Pittsburgh. His blatant anti-Catholicism triggered a move by the Catholic League to seek his censure by the state legislature.

On June 9, Rep. Preston said that school vouchers would enable certain religious schools to pay for the cost of lawsuits involving pedophilia. He specifically referred to "certain religions hit hard by a lot of lawsuits," saying that "millions of dollars of certain faiths" were used to pay for court settlements.

"I don't want to see our money to be able to go for those different lawsuits for certain people who do not act appropriately," said Preston. When questioned about which religion he was referring to, he got angry and said he was referring to different "systems" which have made court settlements. However, it was widely understood by those at the press conference that the lawmaker was targeting the Catholic

Church. And these remarks were preceded by several caustic, and inaccurate, comments about Catholicism.

The morning after Preston made these anti-Catholic statements, William Donohue called him for an explanation. He then issued the following comments to the press:

"I spoke to Rep. Preston today and found him to be rude and dishonest. When I asked him to explain himself, he accused me of being defensive about my group, thus acknowledging what everyone knows—his bigoted remarks were aimed at Catholics. He then contended that he was referring to certain 'systems,' not religions. When I asked him to identify those systems, he could not do so.

"I am writing to every member of the Pennsylvania legislature requesting that Rep. Preston be censured for his remarks. In addition, we will do everything we can to inform the voters in his Pittsburgh district that they are represented by an anti-Catholic bigot."

Rep. Preston has since "apologized" but refuses to say to whom he is apologizing. This is why we are continuing with our effort to censure him.

Meanwhile, in neighboring New York, Senator Charles Schumer drew the league's anger over his remarks before the Spring Education Conference of the United Federation of Teachers. On May 15, Schumer told the crowd that "Those who argue that we ought to have vouchers and those who argue that the money ought to be sent to the private system—look who they are. They're not interested in educating—they're interested in proselytizing."

The Catholic League issued a news release saying that Schumer's remarks "smack of demagoguery, pure and simple." The next day he called Donohue to explain that his previous comments spoke to his fear that the Nation of Islam and the Christian Coalition would abuse a voucher program. He said he

never meant to imply that Catholics would do so. Donohue accepted his interpretation but only after he expressed his own understanding.