

CATHOLIC SCHOOLS SERVE THE POOR

As the new school year begins, it is important to acknowledge the yeoman work done by Catholic schools in serving lower-income families; many are non-white and some are non-Catholic.

In New York State, lawmakers have been fighting over competing education bills, and in the course of the debate several myths about Catholic schools have been floated. Father Philip Eichner is the president of Kellenberg Memorial High School in Uniondale, Long Island and a founder of nearby St. Martin de Porres Marianist School; he is also the chairman of the board of directors of the Catholic League.

Father Eichner recently wrote a spirited defense of these schools, directing his attention to Assemblywoman Earlene Hooper. An excerpt of his letter is printed below. Much the same could be said about Catholic schools in other parts of the nation.

Dear Assemblywoman Hooper,

First of all, I would like to congratulate you on your appointment as Deputy Speaker of the New York State Assembly. Such an appointment reflects your own competence and commitment to the welfare of the people of Long Island.

I represent Kellenberg Memorial High School and St. Martin de Porres Marianist School in Uniondale. Both of these institutions were in the township area that you represented when you were on the Town of Hempstead Board. I am sure that you are acquainted with us: Kellenberg Memorial High School is a school from sixth to twelfth grades with 2600 students; and St. Martin de Porres is an elementary school from pre-K to eighth grade with 450 students.

This letter is occasioned by a flyer that you sent concerning your position on two pieces of legislation that were debated by the New York State Assembly and Senate. These two bills concerned education. In fact they were identical in content except one excluded private schools categorically. The other provided benefit only for public schools in the State of New York.

There are two aspects of your decision that I would like to bring to your attention. The first is the language of the flyer that you sent. It states that the bill A2551 covering all students in the State of New York whether in public or private schools is a **"bill for the rich."** Further, the flyer quotes you saying, **"I support our students, our teachers, our tax payers. Say no to the rich and reject A2551."** You further state, **"that A8233" is a "people's bill." It is a "tax credit for the people. A2551 is for the rich and does not provide any assistance or money for the people."** These statements are somewhat strange since another part of the flyer says the following: **"commitment to a good education to all students is my mission."**

Does this mean to say that the tens of thousands of children in non-public schools are not legitimate members of your constituency, that we are not part of **"a good education to all students,"** that we are not part of the **"people"**? It seems that we are not only second class citizens, but that we do not exist at all. We are not classed as legitimate students, worthy of a good education, and that bill A2551 does not provide any assistance or money for the **"people."** Are we not part of the people whom you represent? Why this categoric exclusion? Who is our representative in the New York State Assembly? Do we not come under your benevolence and commitment? Why are these many thousands of students excluded from being people whom you support, since you said, **"I support our students, our teachers, our taxpayers?"** Are we not part of all three of those categories? In an era of fierce and

powerful movements against all forms of discrimination, why are we discriminated against as students, as teachers, and as taxpayers? The discrimination here is categoric and complete. We are the **“non-citizens, nonstudents, non-taxpayers”** of your District. Who has made us so?

My second reason for contacting you is the title by which you intend to justify your unilateral exclusion. It is the use of the word **rich** to categorize all these other disenfranchised voters. You say that they are all **rich**. How do you come to that conclusion? It is somewhat of an insult to these people, not only to exclude them, but to designate them as the rich elite.

If you had said that you are pressured by the Teachers' Unions to deny this benefit to private school students, I could understand your position more easily, since politics skirts around constitutional and moral issues in a very strange way. Are you not committed to the rich also as an Assemblywoman? Why do you invoke “class warfare” to defend your position, particularly when the assertion that all private school families are rich is categorically false. And I am sure that you know that.

To cite a case on this point, you have only to look at St. Martin de Porres Marianist School, a school which was in your District. It is a school that is 99% minority students, both of Hispanic and Haitian origin. Their parents work two jobs to support their families. They are not rich; they are not even middle class; most are lower middle class in income.

A little history on this school. A little over ten years ago, it was a parish school that was on the verge of closing because of lack of adequate financing. Rather than see this school disappear and these minority students dispersed to other educational institutions, the Marianist Community of Kellenberg Memorial High School decided that it would assume responsibility for this minority school and support it in a

way that it would become a viable elementary school in Nassau County. A number of people have sacrificed a great deal in order to have their children at a school which would respect their dignity and prepare them for further education in high school and college. I invite you to visit this school and also to meet with their parents. We would be very happy to set-up a meeting whereby you could discuss with them why you think they are "rich." In order to support this endeavor at St. Martin de Porres, we provide lunch at no-cost and an afternoon program from 3:00p.m. to 6:00p.m. at no-cost, so that the students do not have to go home while their parents are still working. Yes, we invite you to come and talk with them.

I also invite you to come to Kellenberg Memorial High School where during this summer we employ over seventy of our students in work around the school to help defray their tuition costs. These families are not the "rich." They are ordinary citizens of Nassau County who work very hard to provide their children with superior education. These parents sacrifice a great deal to assure a quality education for their children.

There is one more aspect of your vote that creates an irony in this whole question of educational funding. Your claim that these people who send their children to private schools are "rich." And yet the cost per student in public schools in Nassau County is over \$20,000.00 per student. Tuition for private parochial schools in this area is less than \$10,000.00. Who here is rich? The cost per student in public education has risen dramatically over the past ten years and yet there has been very little appreciable result of this increased cost. It is the tax on the parents of our students at Kellenberg Memorial and St. Martin de Porres Marianist School who are subsidizing the "**rich**" public schools. I believe that you have the analogy backwards. In America we have the cart before the horse—the right of education is that of the parents, not of the State. State controlled education

has always been a mark of a dictatorship. How can American parents exercise their right to provide education for their children when they are being double-taxed to do so. Parents are penalized substantially if they want to exercise their Godgiven right to determine the education of their children. I compare this double taxation to the poll tax – you had to pay to vote. Thanks be to God, that we have eliminated that obstacle to true justice. We await the day when the right of educational choice will be restored to our parents without the onerous penalty that they now must endure.

Be assured of our concern for your work on behalf of the citizens of Nassau County.

Sincerely yours,

Father Philip K. Eichner, S.M.

President

KMHS