

# Choice in Education May Come to Jersey City

By William A. Donohue

On March 25th, at a meeting called by Mayor Bret Schundler of Jersey City, New Jersey, local activists interested in education reform gathered at City Hall to learn first-hand about an exciting plan to restructure elementary and secondary education. Entitled the "Children First" Education Act, the driving concept behind this piece of legislation is more competition among schools and more choices for parents. If it succeeds, the repercussions will be felt all the way to the West coast.

Mayor Schundler is no ordinary mayor. He is young, honest, Republican and energetic, four qualities not normally associated with urban politics these days. His staff is equally talented and committed. What Mayor Schundler proposes is nothing less than an overhaul of the educational system. "Children First" is novel and exciting and deserves a fair hearing.

"Children First" would give parents three options: they could elect to send their children to any public school in the city, including the creation of alternative public schools; they could decide to enroll their children in a charter public school; or they could opt for a grant school.

Alternative schools would be public schools that would allow administrators and teachers considerable autonomy, places where truly innovative learning can take place. Freed from bureaucratic control, these schools could design programs that meet the needs of local students.

Charter schools represent the second option. These schools differ from magnet schools in that they are schools that can

be created by businesses, colleges and universities, museums or even by a group of parents. They are different, then, in both their establishment and oversight. Applications for a charter school would be made to the normal administrative state agencies. The grant schools would be any non-governmental school that charges tuition or fees for its services. The base grant would be \$500 for students in the elementary grades and \$1,000 for high school students.

As with the other options, grant schools would be held to conventional state requirements. Special needs grants would also be available to students who qualify.

"Children First," then, is not just a catchy phrase: it accurately states the priorities of Mayor Schundler. What we have at the moment is an educational system that subordinates the interests of students to the interests of the educational funding monopoly. Under "Children First," this hierarchy would be reversed, granting more authority and autonomy to parents and community leaders, the ultimate beneficiaries of which would be students. This hardly sounds revolutionary, but given the preponderance of authority vested in the bureaucracy, it is. Think of it: a school system that allows money to be spent where parents think it should be spent.

The implications for parochial schools are obvious. Many parents who are presently forced through economic necessity to send their children to public schools could elect to send their children to the local Catholic school. Public schools would benefit as well because competition within the public school system would bring about needed reform. Teachers would benefit because they would be empowered in a way they presently are not. With parents, students and teachers winning, the only losers would be those school officials who are obstinate enough to buck change.

This country's economic success is due to healthy competition, and not to statist monopolistic entities. One area that still

penalizes competition is education. Under "ChildrenFirst" students in Jersey City would reap the rewards of competition that the rest of the economy has benefitted from all along. And when the folks outside of Jersey City see the results, it'll be just a matter of time before "Children First" is cloned throughout the nation.