

SCHOOL CHOICE PROMOTES SOCIAL JUSTICE

Catholic League president Bill Donohue comments on promoting social justice through school choice:

As Catholics, we are called to support a preferential option for the poor. While some may debate what is the best way to achieve this, evidence suggests providing children with quality education remains one of the greatest determinants in socioeconomic status. Particularly, offering low-and middle-income students opportunities to access high-quality Catholic and charter schools has not only improved their educational attainment but greatly enhances their social mobility.

Therefore, policymakers who wish to offer a preferential option for the poor should mirror recent legislation passed in Florida and Indiana, two states that have demonstrated the effectiveness of school vouchers.

Recently, the state legislature in Florida has voted to expand its existing school choice vouchers making them available for more families. Already one of the most ambitious voucher programs in the country, last academic year, the state offered more than 36,000 students an average of \$7,000. Next year, Florida intends to make eligible even more children by raising the household income cap to 375 percent above poverty. This means a family of four with about \$100,000 in income for the year could participate in the voucher program. Further, the Sunshine State would annually increase the caps by approximately 28,000 new students.

Additionally, Florida will create special-needs scholarships for about 20,000 students. These scholarships are similar to education savings accounts that families can use for tutoring and related purposes. But perhaps one of the best elements of

this legislation is that it would offer Florida students already enrolled in Catholic or charter schools eligibility for these vouchers.

Indiana, too, has recently expanded its decade-old voucher program. Indiana will now offer vouchers to 48,000 students a year. Families making \$145,000 a year would be eligible for vouchers amounting to 90 percent of tuition support levels. Like Florida, the Hoosier State would establish education savings accounts for children with special needs. Further, Indiana's budget increases per student grants for charter schools.

In a recent interview with Today's Catholic, former Indiana Gov. Mitch Daniels, who signed Indiana's first school voucher bill into law, reflected on the success of the program. "Providing poor and minority families the same choice of schools that their wealthier neighbors enjoy is the purest example of 'social justice' in our society today."

Unfortunately, there are many policymakers who want to deny this social justice to the poor. Chief among them is New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio. For years, he has waged war on the city's charter schools. His animosity for these learning options for children who would be condemned to failing public schools was so apparent that during his first year in office the state legislature passed a law preventing him from evicting charter schools from city property.

Undeterred by this law and with little regard for actually bringing about social justice, de Blasio's Department of Education recently failed to provide a new location for Success Academy, a charter school in Queens that primarily services minority students. As the school year comes to a close, these students will need to find a new school for the fall.

But even as his term is set to expire at the end of the year,

New York students will have no reprieve. Of all the Democrats running for mayor, only Ray McGuire has said he would support putting no caps on the number of charter schools in the city. The rest basically support the status quo, keeping children prisoners in failing schools.

Unfortunately, even with the proven success of Florida and Indiana, too many policymakers decline to pursue a preferential option for the poor and provide them with the purest form of social justice.