

Testimony on Jersey City Voucher Program

October 12, 1995

The Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, the nation's largest Catholic civil rights organization, is grateful for the opportunity to testify on the proposed voucher program for Jersey City. For the record, it should be known that the Catholic League is politically non-partisan, having no interest whatsoever in furthering the political objectives of any political party. Our sole interest is in defending the right of Catholics to participate in American society without defamation or discrimination.

From the time Mayor Bret Schundler announced his innovative program for choice in education, the Catholic League has had strong interest in supporting this effort. Unlike some other educational choice programs, this one offers parents maximum freedom in determining what school they prefer their children to attend. And unlike other models, this one allows educators the liberty to establish academic standards and assessment techniques that best suit their professional interests.

By promoting public schools, alternative public schools, charter public schools and grant schools, the "Children First" Education Act not only puts children first, it puts parents and teachers first as well. For that reason alone, we recommend passage of the bill.

No one seriously doubts that there are plenty of public schools that are currently doing an outstanding job of educating our young people. But, on balance, it is also true to say that the present system has not met acceptable standards of academic achievement. We do not need to recount

all the studies that have been released on this subject. Suffice it to say that if any other sector of our society had a performance level equal to that of our educational system, it would be targeted for drastic overhaul. Why we are still debating the merits of competition, after all that we know about the consequences of near-monopolistic practices, is itself mind-boggling.

By way of analogy, take our economic system. Despite some obvious flaws, our economy is still the world's envy. It is envied because it works and it works because it is based on market principles. Sadly, our educational system rejects the very model that has worked so well in other areas of our society. Instead, we have adopted a model-it is called statism-that has failed miserably all over the world. It is not logic that dictates this outcome, rather it is special interests.

Change is always painful but it makes little sense to resist it purely on that basis. Change that abets progress is worthwhile and that is why "Children First" needs to be supported: it allows the specter of progress in the midst of despair. Those who maintain that the proposed changes might actually make things worse carry a burden so heavy as to be untenable.

When large portions-including even a majority-of public school teachers in urban school districts send their own children to private schools, it speaks volumes about the current system and makes indefensible calls to maintain business as usual. Yet that is exactly the condition we face. If most business persons, or butchers or bakers for that matter, patronized their competitors but not their own enterprise, it would be a national scandal. That is why it is outrageous that those who themselves have lost confidence in the very system they work in continue to recommend it as acceptable for someone else's child.

It is no secret that Catholic schools-to name one option available under this plan-have done a remarkable job of educating our children. And nowhere is this less denied than in considering the performance of parochial schools in the inner cities. To deny these children, and their parents, the right to choose the kind of school that offers the best hope of upward mobility is to condemn them to suffer the inequities of the current system. That is not only immoral, it is sickening to hear those who claim to champion the best interests of minorities now stand stubbornly in their way.

"Children First" is a pilot program. If it fails, no school district will want to mimic it. But if it succeeds, as we believe it will, no school district will want to avoid adopting it. That is the choice that is before us today. To resist change, at this late hour, is to brand acceptable a school system that every reasonable person knows no longer works. The Catholic League recommends that we give school choice a chance and that is why we vigorously support Mayor Schundler in this cause.

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