

VOUCHER SEE-SAW

We've been on a voucher see-saw for what seems like an eternity. As usual, the same two topics dominate the discussion: the undeniable success of private, especially parochial, education and the undeniable opposition that school choice still provokes.

At about the same time that the U.S. Senate was voting down another school choice provision, the Catholic Archdiocese of Chicago was unveiling the latest data. Students in Catholic schools in Chicago, the report showed, scored as much as 25 points higher than national norms on standardized tests.

If evidence mattered, the debate would be over and our side would have won. But evidence speaks to rationality and when jobs and religion are involved, rationality often gives way to lesser impulses. Like fear. Fear that the public school industry will lose its near-monopoly status and fear that parental rights will benefit Catholic schools. The former fear is easy to understand as it speaks to the economic self-interest of the teachers' union; the latter is harder to understand as it speaks to bigotry.

One of the old canards about vouchers is that they would "drain money away from the public schools." A recent editorial in the Jesuit-published magazine, *America*, offered a much needed reality check to those who utter such nonsense. "Public schools are not the beneficiaries of the funds that governments allot for education," said the editorial. "Children are the beneficiaries of those monies," it continued, "and through these children the wider community also benefits by having its rising generations educated."

Thanks to Caroline Hoxby, a Harvard researcher, we now have empirical data that strengthens the *America* position. She released a study over the winter that details how a voucher

program in Milwaukee actually had the effect of strengthening the public schools there. Competition, she found, works as well in education as it does in other sectors of the economy.

But no matter, we still have to fight this fight on the playing field of intolerance. For example, the Washington State Constitution still reflects the animus against Catholicism that motivated its wording in the first place. And the usual trio of teachers' unions, civil rights organizations and separation of church and state activists are well financed and totally opposed to choice in education.

Nonetheless, at the end of the day it is hard to keep ignoring the evidence. And it is only a matter of time before non-whites push their highly politicized leaders aside and insist on moving the voucher issue to the front burner.

One piece of good news: Toward Tradition, a Jewish organization led by Rabbi Daniel Lapin (he is a good friend of the Catholic League), has issued a excellent pamphlet on the subject, "Diligently To Thy Children: The Case of School Choice." Those interested in obtaining a free copy should write to David Klinghoffer, Toward Tradition, P.O. Box 58, Mercer Island, WA 98040 or e-mail him at towardtradition@towardtradition.org. Tell him you read about this in the Catholic League journal, *Catalyst*.