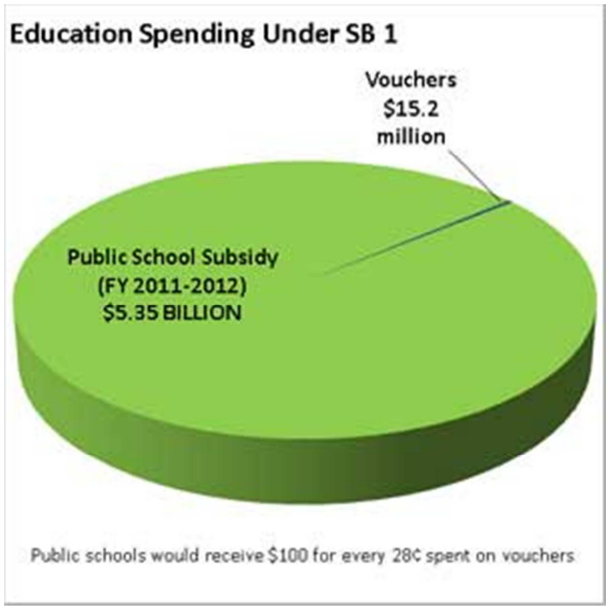
Will School Choice Drain Resources from Public Schools?

Thousands of Catholic students attend public schools all over Pennsylvania. Supporting families in educating their children no matter where they go to school is part of our obligation to promote the common good. School choice should not be viewed as an "us v. them" debate between public and non-public schools. Pennsylvania's public schools and their fine teachers and administrators are our collaborators, not our adversaries, in fulfilling the obligation to educate every child.

Claims that school choice will negatively impact public schools are misleading. Real world experience and evidence show that states and cities with school choice programs have not seen a decrease in their public school budgets. In the scheme of the state education budget, the voucher program proposed in Senate Bill 1 is very small. Vouchers are limited to the neediest students in the lowest achieving schools first. If every student who qualifies takes a voucher in the first year, their scholarships will cost the state 0.28% of the overall education budget. That is only 28¢ for every $100 that will still be allocated to public schools. And the state subsidy for schools that are not on the list of failing schools will not be affected.

When students leave public schools using voucher programs, only the state subsidy will follow the child. Taking a student out of public school removes the cost of educating that student, and yet the local tax dollars remain. Additionally, nonpublic schools are already saving tax dollars. If every one of Pennsylvania's 287,092 nonpublic school students returned to public school, the costs would be significant – 287,092 x $13,907 = $3.9 billion annually (not counting the costs of new construction).

We must not lose sight of what this debate is truly about – children and the future of Pennsylvania. School choice is a public program that supports and empowers parents with options to determine the best school for their own child. Public school may be the right choice for one student, but it may not meet the needs of another. Our mandatory system in which students are assigned to a school based solely on geographic location is not working well for every student, particularly children from low-income families. To operate in status quo is unjust and inequitable. We need a better and smarter way to educate all of Pennsylvania's children.