

# VIEWPOINT

Newsletter of the Pennsylvania Catholic Conference

## Q&A: Why should Catholics support school choice?

Just days after the 2011-2012 legislative session began, the Opportunity Scholarship and Educational Improvement Tax Credit Act was introduced as Senate Bill 1.

There has been much debate about the school choice proposal. What is the Catholic perspective on the issue? Why should Catholics take a stand in favor of school choice?

### What does Senate Bill 1 propose?

The legislation increases the successful Educational Improvement Tax Credit (EITC) scholarship program to \$100 million and provides Opportunity Scholarship Grants, or vouchers, to low-income students to pay tuition at any school they choose.

SB 1 phases in the voucher program over three years. It prudently starts small with vouchers for the poorest students in the most chronically underperforming schools in the first year. In the second year, it expands to low-income students who live in the same neighborhood but already attend another school. In the third year the scholarship grants go to low-income families no matter where they live or what school they attend. By year four the vouchers are extended to include middle-income families, too. Many current Catholic school students everywhere will qualify for these vouchers.

### Who qualifies for scholarships?

There are two different kinds of scholarships in SB 1: the expansion of the long-standing EITC program and a new voucher program called Opportunity Scholarship Grants.

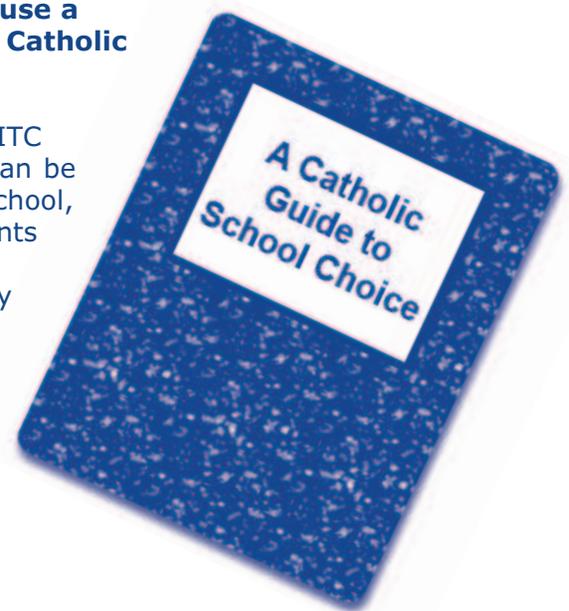
Every family statewide that qualifies for an EITC scholarship is eligible to apply, no matter where their children attend school. The qualifying standard for a family of four under EITC would be increased to \$84,000 in annual income with the passage of SB 1; currently it is \$70,000/year.

The voucher program will be phased in over a four year period. The formula for Opportunity Scholarship Grants in the first three years gives vouchers to families whose income level is at or less than 130% of the federal poverty line. That amounts to a little over \$28,000 per year for a family of four. In the fourth year, the vouchers will be extended to families who earn up to 350% of the poverty level so a family of four earning about \$78,000 per year would qualify.

Currently the average income of EITC scholarship recipients is around \$29,000 for a family of four. If all qualified EITC scholarship students receive a voucher to pay their tuition, it would free up millions of dollars in EITC scholarships for other families.

### Can parents use a voucher at a Catholic school?

Yes. Just as EITC scholarships can be used at any school, qualified parents can use the voucher to pay tuition at any school they choose.





## What is the PCC?

The Pennsylvania Catholic Conference is the public affairs arm of Pennsylvania's Catholic bishops and the Catholic dioceses of Pennsylvania. There are 10 Catholic dioceses in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Eight are Latin Rite dioceses, fully contained within the Commonwealth. Two are Byzantine Rite dioceses with Apostolic Sees in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh.

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### **If Catholic schools accept voucher students, will they be able to maintain their Catholic identity?**

Yes. Nothing in SB 1 limits the authority of Catholic schools to be Catholic. Religious schools can continue to include religious content in their curriculum and do not have to excuse any student from participating in religious instruction or religious exercises. If it is their policy, religious schools can maintain their usual preferences in admissions or hiring on a religious basis.

### **Will vouchers students have different admission standards?**

No. EITC scholarship recipients are enrolled just as all other students. So too will voucher students be treated the same, assuming the Catholic school has a seat available and its educational program can meet the needs of the child.

### **Are vouchers constitutional?**

Yes. Voucher programs in other states have been tried and tested in federal court. In Pennsylvania, case law upholds the transfer of funds to parents for the purposes of choosing a nonpublic school. Parents are the recipients of the scholarship dollars. They are directing where the money goes. The tax dollars are not being given directly to private schools. The Pennsylvania State Constitution states, "No money raised for the support of the public schools of the Commonwealth shall be appropriated to or used for the support of any sectarian school." State General Fund revenue does not meet this definition as it is not raised exclusively for the purposes of funding public education. School district property taxes are raised for this purpose and that is why SB1 involves only state funding for private schools, and not local tax property revenue.

### **How does school choice benefit Catholic schools?**

Not every qualified student will choose a Catholic school, but it is likely that

many will. Catholic educators can already attest how the EITC has helped Catholic schools; SB 1 will allow even more families the opportunity to receive a Catholic education. More students in our classrooms is good news for our schools; more students will help keep Catholic schools vibrant and available to more families.

### **I don't have school-aged children or grandchildren; why should I support school choice?**

Providing a quality education for our children is the most critical investment we can make for our future. Supporting families in educating their children is part of our obligation to promote the common good. Parents have the duty and responsibility to provide the best education possible for their children. They have a fundamental right to determine which school best suits their child. For many parents, the best school for their child is a values-centered, academically excellent Catholic school. The state has the duty and responsibility to support parents in this effort.

People who place their children in nonpublic schools willingly make an enormous financial sacrifice to pay tuition in addition to paying their state and local taxes. They do it because they believe strongly that the nonpublic school is best for their child. In doing so, they save the state and local district the cost of educating their children in the public schools. In Pennsylvania, they save taxpayers \$4 billion annually in education costs.

### **What can I do to help pass school choice?**

Add your voice to the chorus of school choice supporters. Visit, call, write or e-mail your state legislators and ask them to support the Opportunity Scholarship Act – SB 1. Join the Advocates for Catholic Education in PA (ACE+PA) to receive the latest news and action alerts on Catholic education issues. Learn more at [www.pacatholic.org/schoolchoice](http://www.pacatholic.org/schoolchoice).

# Promoting and defending school choice

Everywhere that people gather, there is bound to be talk about school choice. As a supporter, are you prepared to explain why? Here are a few straightforward arguments to help you make your case, whether you are calling your state legislator or discussing the issue over coffee with friends.

## **School choice is good for parents.**

All parents should be able to choose a school that best suits their children. Financial realities often preclude parents from having that choice. Parents who pay their school taxes deserve some benefit from those taxes, in the form of some assistance in the exercise of their right to choose a nonpublic school, if that is best for their children. Senate Bill 1 will expand those opportunities to more parents. School choice is not about public vs. private schools; its about empowering parents.

## **School choice is good for Catholic schools.**

Not every qualified student will choose a Catholic school, but it is likely that many will. We already know how the EITC has helped our schools; SB 1 will help many current Catholic school families and will allow even more children a chance to get a Catholic education. Having more students in our classrooms is good news for our schools; more students will help us keep our schools vibrant and available to parents.

## **School choice is good for all of us.**

Providing a quality education for our children is the most critical investment we can make for our future. Pennsylvania needs a more effective and less costly way to educate our children. School choice saves tax dollars because non-public schools often provide an excellent education for a fraction of the cost of public schools. School choice works; programs in Wisconsin, Ohio, and other states have had successful voucher programs for years. Pennsylvania will be successful, too. The time is right to pass school choice now. Parents want it and the public supports it.

A good education helps children grow up to be good citizens. Growing as many good citizens as we can will help ensure a better and brighter future for all of us. The Opportunity Scholarship Grants and the expansion of Educational Improvement Tax Credits (EITC) in SB 1 are the right choice for Pennsylvania.

## **If we care about the future, we have to make a strong show of support for school choice.**

Involvement by parents, educators, Catholic school alumni, parishioners, and all citizens and taxpayers will be critical to the success of school choice. State legislators need to hear that their constituents care about school choice and believe it will make a positive impact on our communities. Everyone should take the time to visit, call write or e-mail our state lawmakers and ask them to vote yes on SB 1. Look up your legislator's contact information in the phone book or go to [www.pacatholic.org/schoolchoice](http://www.pacatholic.org/schoolchoice) for more information.

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## Legislative Review

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The Administrative Board of the Pennsylvania Catholic Conference affirms the policy positions on specific legislation. Although the Board has not met since the 2011-2012 Legislative Session, in addition to Senate Bill 1 PCC's departments recommend a support position on these bills:

Senate Bill 3      **Health care reform abortion coverage opt-out** - This proposal prohibits the taxpayer supported insurance plans in the new health care exchanges from covering abortion.

House Bill 574      **Abortion clinics in the Healthcare Facilities Act** - This bill would implement regulations that would subject freestanding abortion clinics to the same health standards as other ambulatory surgical facilities.

*To receive action alerts on these and other active issues, join the Pennsylvania Catholic Advocacy Network at [www.pacatholic.org/advocacy](http://www.pacatholic.org/advocacy).*



The energy, enthusiasm and Catholic school spirit of sincerely concerned parents, educators and taxpayers is the key to advancing Catholic education for our children now and in the future. The PCC is seeking volunteers to get involved with the **Advocates for Catholic Education Network**, or **ACE+PA**. Anyone can help regardless of time constraints; a computer is all that is needed.

To sign up, go to [www.pacatholic.org/ace-pa](http://www.pacatholic.org/ace-pa). Follow the links to the sign up page of the Pennsylvania Catholic Advocacy Network to enter your name, address and most importantly, e-mail address. Then select "Catholic Education (ACE-PA)."

ACE-PA members will be updated on important news about Catholic education and on occasion will be invited to contact their state legislators about a number of education issues. Together, we will help preserve and protect Catholic education in Pennsylvania.

**Join us. Be heard. Make a difference for Catholic education in Pennsylvania.**



*Viewpoint* is published by the Pennsylvania Catholic Conference, the public affairs agency of Pennsylvania's Catholic bishops. For more information, contact Amy B. Hill, APR, editor, at (717) 238-9613 or e-mail at [abhill@pacatholic.org](mailto:abhill@pacatholic.org). Visit our website at [www.pacatholic.org](http://www.pacatholic.org).

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**VIEWPOINT**



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