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Introduction

Thomas J. McDade

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FOCUS SECTION

INTRODUCTION

THOMAS J. MCDADE

United States Catholic Conference

The school cannot be considered separately from other educational institutions and administered as an entity apart, but must be related to the world of politics, economy, culture, and society as a whole.... In this way the Catholic school's public role is clearly perceived. It has not come into being as a private initiative, but as an expression of the reality of the Church, having by its very nature a public character. It fulfills a service of public usefulness and, although clearly and decidedly configured in the perspective of the Catholic faith, is not reserved to Catholics only, but is open to all those who appreciate and share its qualified educational project.... Catholic schools, moreover, like state schools, fulfill a public role, for their presence guarantees cultural and educational pluralism and, above all, the freedom and right of families to see that their children receive the sort of education they wish for them. (*The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium*, 1998, #16)

As The Congregation for Catholic Education affirmed in *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium*, the Catholic school is "at the service of society." It is this experience that guides the interaction between Catholic schools and the various levels of government in the United States.

At the state and local levels, Catholic schools are often subject to a variety of regulations, certification standards, student testing, and the like. This fact surprises many who are not involved with Catholic education. Catholic schools participate in certain government standards, taking care to maintain their religious mission, as one way of affirming their place in the broader educational community.

At the federal level, Catholic schools seek to have their place in the educational community recognized in two major areas: participation in federal government education programs on an equitable basis with public schools;

and the possibility of publicly funded assistance, such as vouchers or tax credits, to parents so that they can choose the type of education that they wish for their children. The former goal has been a reality since the landmark Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, while the latter goal is still under heavy contention and controversy in Washington and throughout the nation.

In this issue of *Catholic Education*, we explore a number of current federal policy initiatives from the perspectives of five prominent Catholic school advocates from inside Washington's Beltway. In "The Political Climate in the Current U.S. Congress for the Public Policy Agenda of the Catholic School Community," Frank Monahan interprets current political trends to predict the fate of federal financial assistance for Catholic elementary and secondary education, including current education programs and the possibility of school choice programs, in this year's Congress. In "Collaboration for the Common Good: An Overture to Cooperation in K-12 Education," Joe McTighe argues for increased collaboration in advocacy efforts among private school communities by pointing out a number of widely held myths and misconceptions about private schooling which demand a stronger, more unified response. In "A Favorable Legal Environment for Voucher Programs," Mark Chopko challenges the assertion of voucher opponents that any such program would be found by the courts to be unconstitutional. He brings to light many of the decisions facing policymakers, as well as the Catholic school community itself, about voucher programs. Finally, we present two articles which address current programs in which Catholic school students and staff participate. Fr. William F. Davis, O.S.F.S., outlines a history of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and examines how Congress might treat this important legislation as it comes up for reauthorization this year. Sr. Dale McDonald, PVBVM, assesses the impact of the E-rate, which is a part of the Telecommunications Act of 1996 and which serves as a valuable case study for the political and administrative complexities that abound in any federal program.

We hope that these articles, through their presentation of Catholic school involvement in these issues, will initiate thought and discussion about the role of Catholic schools in public life and public policy. We also hope that a greater understanding of these issues might stimulate those involved in Catholic education to look for opportunities for political involvement at the local level. Though what is presented here is an "inside-the-Beltway" perspective, many of the most important and valuable initiatives, from voucher programs to community partnerships, are moving forward in state and local governments around the country.

It is my hope that the continued debate among educators, policymakers, and parents will result not in the drawing of lines of animosity and distrust between private schools and public schools, but instead in an honest and

fruitful conversation about the future of education in this country. I also hope that this conversation will affirm the value of educating our nation's children through a pluralistic system, of which Catholic schools have been historic and noble leaders.

Perhaps our colleagues in Catholic education in other countries, especially in places such as Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom, where Catholic schools thrive, will also benefit from this discussion of American situation.

Monsignor Thomas J. McDade is former secretary for education of the United States Catholic Conference.

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