



PARENTAL CHOICE IN EDUCATION

A Statement by the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA)

The fundamental theory of liberty upon which all governments in this Union repose excludes any general power of the State to standardize its children by forcing them to accept instruction from public school teachers only. The child is not the mere creature of the State; those who nurture him and direct his destiny have the right, coupled with high duty, to recognize and prepare him for additional obligations. – 1925 Pierce decision, the U.S. Supreme Court

In sum, the Ohio program is entirely neutral with respect to religion. It provides benefits directly to a wide spectrum of individuals, defined only by financial need and residence in a particular school district. It permits such individuals to exercise genuine choice among options public and private, secular and religious. The program is therefore a program of true private choice. In keeping with an unbroken line of decisions rejecting challenges to similar programs, we hold that the program does not offend the Establishment Clause. – 2002 Zelman decision, the U.S. Supreme Court

In its 1992 statement endorsing parental choice in education, the National Catholic Educational Association affirmed its strong conviction that the First Amendment of the United States Constitution does not prohibit aid to parents who select religiously affiliated schools. Now that the Supreme Court has established as the law of the land that there is no U.S. constitutional prohibition that prevents government support for parental choice, NCEA reaffirms its commitment to school choice.

While millions of Americans exercise their right to choose the school they believe is best for their children, their freedom depends on their ability to pay tuition to private schools or to establish residence in communities with excellent public schools. But virtually all low-income and many middle-income families cannot exercise their right to choose the schools they want to educate their children.

NCEA endorses full and fair parental choice for all Americans. We support programs such as tax credits, vouchers and scholarships to ensure that all parents have the financial means to select the appropriate school for their children. The association has a special concern for the children of families of modest means. These children are our children, too. NCEA believes that public policies should give priority to providing assistance for low and middle-income families, enabling them to increase educational options for their children. Catholic education has a long and proud history of helping low-income and immigrant populations enter the mainstream of American society. Our commitment continues. Today almost 50% of Catholic schools are located in urban, inner city and rural areas serving children from low-income families; students of color represent more than 25% of Catholic school enrollments.

NCEA's strong support of parental choice in education does not mean that Catholic educators are opposed to public education. We recognize that a majority of America's children are educated in public schools, and we respect the professional competence and commitment of our public school colleagues. But we believe that full and fair parental choice will strengthen both families and schools, and improve educational opportunities for all.

NCEA further believes:

- that any campaign to improve American schools must include a commitment to educational choice; educational reform efforts must be linked to support for school choice in order to provide access to educational excellence for all, and to insure that no child is left behind;
- any publicly funded educational choice program must include all private and religiously affiliated schools and must be designed to provide substantial support and primary attention to the needs of families of modest means;
- all school choice programs must respect civil rights laws; private schools participating in school choice programs should develop and accept reasonable measures of accountability that do not in any way diminish their religious identity and mission;
- educational choice can promote academic excellence in all schools by fostering basic reforms and creating a competitive climate, responsive to parental concerns and leading to improved student performance; parental choice will exact more accountability from educators and increase their local autonomy and flexibility.

The Supreme Court has spoken. Children are not the mere creatures of the State, and government support for parents who choose religious schools is not an unconstitutional endorsement of religion. With the elimination of the constitutional argument, the public policy debate continues largely at the state level. NCEA encourages Catholic educators to join the debate in collaboration with Catholic and other religious leaders, with civic and business leaders, and with all those who support full and fair educational choice in a partnership for justice.