

Note – the following talking points were prepared to present at the Taxation and Budget Reform Commission meeting on Oct. 18, 2007 at Okaloosa-Walton College in Niceville. Larry Keough is the associate director in education at the Florida Catholic Conference and the legislative advocate for Florida Catholic Schools.

**TALKING POINTS
LARRY KEOUGH/FLORIDA CATHOLIC CONFERENCE**

I. Introduction

Good afternoon Commission Members. I am Larry Keough, representing the Florida Catholic Conference and the Catholic school community. It is my great hope that my comments over the next few minutes relating to the possibility of a proposed ballot initiative in respect to school choice will plant some seeds as to our perspective. As the Commission continues to discuss this subject, I certainly would welcome the opportunity to expound upon our insights and perspective at a later date.

We believe that our experiences in school choice would be helpful. It may not be common knowledge that the Florida Catholic Conference actually advocated for school choice well before the first choice bill received favorable passage in a Florida legislative committee in the mid 1990s. We have advocated for each of the statewide scholarship programs. And, 182 of the 224 Florida Catholic Schools are participating in the programs, enrolling more than 2,200 scholarship students during the 2006-2007 school year.

II. Support is contingent upon details

It has been our experience that stakeholders can conceptually support a proposed policy in great numbers. For example, private school associations by and large support the notion that they are autonomous and independent from governmental intrusion. However, when an issue such as scholarship accountability was pending before the Legislature, there was considerable disagreement as to the type of private-school requirements that should be codified in state statute.

We conceptually support parental rights and school-choice options. But that does not mean that we support every parent initiative or every school choice bill. About 10 years ago the United State Conference of Catholic Bishops did not support proposed federal legislation for a school-choice program because there was concern that the program would preclude a cadre of at-risk students from participating.

The Florida Catholic Conference did not support proposed state legislation a few years ago that would have allowed public school students who twice failed the F-CAT to be eligible for a state-sponsored scholarship. Our educational experts advised that early intervention strategies and possible school-choice options should be available well before a child fails the F-CAT while approaching middle school.

I mention these examples in an attempt to illustrate that our support for a proposed ballot initiative relating to school choice is contingent upon how the language is drafted.

Concept is a beginning point, but the so-called devil is in the details.

III. The Public School System is our Partner

The Florida Catholic Bishops are on record that the Catholic School community is a partner with the public school system. There is an implicit understanding that the public educational system, serving approximately 2.5 million children in the state, is the educational bedrock for Florida's children. Eighty percent of Florida Catholic children are educated in public schools. Florida Catholic schools, educating about 95,000 students, as well as other religious schools, independent schools, home education programs and online programs, are educational options or alternatives, but not the bedrock of education in the state of Florida.

We would not be supportive of a proposal that is drafted so broadly in which the Legislature is provided with carte blanche authority and constitutional safe guards to create school-choice programs for virtually any reason. If that were to occur, there would be concern that an exodus of students potentially would transition from public schools in hope of a better educational opportunity. This not only would impact funding in public schools and possibly jeopardize how public schools serve their remaining students, but may likely lead to the proliferation of start-up private schools to accommodate new scholarship students.

IV. Parents

At the cornerstone of the school choice movement is the precept that parents are in the best situation to select schools for their children. We certainly embrace the mantra of parents as the first and foremost educators of their children.

But an equally import precept is children who did not fare well in a public school for one reason or another, should have the opportunity through their parents to select a better educational opportunity when eligible for a state sponsored scholarship or corporate tax scholarship. Parents, however, by themselves can't ensure that the educational opportunities are necessarily a better situation for their children. The state of Florida can assist in this dynamic by asserting its vested interest to ensure that quality of programs supersedes quantity or reaching a critical-mass approach.

To that end, this Commission, if it moves forward with proposed language for a ballot initiative, can perform a valuable role by narrowly constructing the language to limit any possible unintended consequences.

V. Politics/Public Relations

As each of you may know, school choice is an intricate issue involving educational considerations, entrepreneurial facets, public relations and media scrutiny, as well as the politics of it.

If a ballot initiative were to go forward, there is much to consider, including but not limited to how many proposed constitutional amendments would be placed on the ballot, which ones would be sacrificed in the process and the public relations battles that would ensue.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we would support a proposed constitutional amendment that fairly and responsibly allows for school choice implementation while safeguarding the programs by amending the Blaine language in the Florida Constitution. Extricating Blaine language, which originated in anti-Catholic sentiment in the 19th century, is long overdue.

But as much as would like for the Blaine language to be effectively addressed, we would not want to do so at the expense of adversely impacting the public school system as the foundation of education in Florida.

Moreover, it is our great hope that one day scholarship eligibility will be based on need, regardless of whether a child is enrolled in a public or

private school. Possibly these subjects can be discussed in the months ahead. As I stated in my opening, we hope to have the opportunity to continue the dialogue at a later date.

Thank you.

###