

PAROCHIAL AID?

YES!

THERE is ample evidence that some measure of federal or state support will be needed if any significant number of people are going to be able to continue to patronize nonpublic schools or if children of any but very affluent families will be able to afford to attend them.

Educators are well aware of the sharply increased costs of all education. There is great concern over the fact that states, counties, and cities find it increasingly difficult even with taxing power to raise the funds needed for public schools. Just so, agencies such as churches which traditionally have subsidized the great majority of nonpublic schools are unable to increase voluntary contributions at a rate sufficient to match growing school costs and deficits. As tuition costs increase, the number of parents who are able to meet them declines. With fewer students, there is already a decrease in the number of nonpublic schools. Clearly aid is needed if nonpublic education is to have anything more than a token existence. The more fundamental issue of the question is, "Do we need nonpublic schools?"

Recently the Supreme Court declared unconstitutional a particular method of aid to nonpublic schools. A major point in the decision was the conclusion that the method of aid being reviewed involved an "excessive entanglement" between government and re-

ligion. Yet in previous decisions on matters relating to the First Amendment and education, the Court's response has been that if pluralism dies in education, its ultimate survival in the cultural and intellectual areas of American life is threatened. In a recent statement published by the Catholic school superintendents of the United States, pluralism on the cultural and deeper personal-value levels is described as a fundamental good; that from diversity on these levels come strength, creative option, and more important, the strongest practical foundation for personal freedom.

Freedom of Choice

Few educators quarrel with the proposition that freedom of choice in education should be allowed. Yet, as President Nixon's Panel on Nonpublic Education reported in May:

Parental choice in their children's education will erode as nonpublic schools vanish in large numbers. Choice is a right; its exercise depends on the availability of diverse educational systems.¹

Plurality of educational choice is not

¹ *Interim Report of the President's Panel on Nonpublic Education of the President's Commission on School Finance, February 12, 1971.*



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available to all the citizens of this country. As the previously mentioned statement by the Catholic school superintendents points out:

For the wealthy family, America has offered variety and quality in education. Such families enjoy a mobility that permits them to live in a public school district and a school attendance area suiting their tastes and needs. If religious education is desired, such parents may purchase it at private schools. . . . For the poor, America has provided no such choice. They can neither reside in the attendance area of their preferred public school nor employ a private school to replace it.

Simply put, *Pierce v. Society of Sisters* (268 U.S. 510) has been the guarantee of true choice only for the middle and upper class. One of the dicta of that document should give us pause in these times: "The fundamental theory of liberty under 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 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 the high duty, to recognize and prepare him for additional obligations."²

² "Freedom, Equality, and Plurality in American Education." Statement adopted and issued by the Superintendents Department of the National Catholic Educational Association, April 1971.

Even if one does not choose to exercise freedom of choice in education he cannot even possess that freedom if no alternative is available to him. This freedom is worthy of the efforts and ingenuity of Americans to find a way to preserve it without doing violence to the provisions of the Constitution. According to James L. J. Pié, national president of Citizens for Educational Freedom, in a statement made following the recent Supreme Court decision:

Up to now, the spotlight has been on aid to schools. Now the whole country must turn its attention to the real question—aid to parents and aid to children. The Court struck down government aid to and control of schools because it was concerned about separation of church and state. . . . Now we must focus on aid to persons and on a concern for religious freedom.³

Among forms of support that would give aid to the parent and child rather than the school are tax credits, tuition grants, vouchers, auxiliary services, and categorical

³ As quoted in: Emile Comar, editor. *Freedom in Education* 13 (2): 1-4; April-May-June 1971. Washington, D.C.: Citizens for Educational Freedom.

* Reverend Msgr. Thomas W. Lyons, Director of Education, Catholic Office of Education, Archdiocese of Washington, D.C.

aid. Each should be evaluated in terms of constitutionality and effectiveness in providing a true choice for all social classes.

Unity in Diversity

A fear is often voiced that nonpublic schools would be divisive. Yet nonpublic schools existed in this country before public schools and they have coexisted with public schools for decades. There is no evidence to support the fear of divisiveness. At the same time, there is much evidence that nonpublic schools have effectively taught respect for the opinions of others and have supported the concept of unity in diversity.

Would public schools stand to gain or lose if parents were given government assistance to enable them to choose a nonpublic school or, as is proposed by some plans, to choose even another public school? If public schools are fulfilling their purpose effectively, there is no doubt they would continue to serve the bulk of the school age population. Even in years past when many church affiliated schools charged no fees, not all the members of the churches chose to use them.

Some concern has been expressed that aid would leave the public schools with only the poor and the deprived. Yet, as a matter of fact, it is because of a desire to continue and even increase its service to the poor that proponents of aid want to make it possible for the less affluent to have a choice of schools too. Instead of appearing to be competing for scarce educational dollars, all education would benefit from a cooperative effort to gain the kind of increased community support that is needed. It should not be difficult to devise legislation that would provide aid to parents choosing to use nonpublic schools without diminishing or diverting funds needed by public schools.

Since per pupil cost of education is substantially lower in most church affiliated

schools than in public schools, the impact on public school financing would be far greater if large numbers of nonpublic school children had to transfer to public schools than if their parents were aided in keeping them where they are. Moreover, as President Nixon pointed out, in their nonpublic school a major part of the cost will be covered by funds not available to public institutions.

Aside from the effects on enrollment and costs, it has often been said that public schools would profit from the competition that freedom of choice would provide. Just the process of questioning why a parent would consider choosing another school, evaluating whether that school has something that mine does not and weighing whether that something would be of benefit to my students, is a way in which healthy competition could aid growth in quality. Any enterprise that is alive and strong, that has its objectives clearly established and is open to well ordered change to meet the needs of its patrons, has nothing to fear from competition. The enterprise can only be strengthened by such competition. We have carefully sought to avoid monopolies in this country lest the seller grow inattentive to the needs of the buyer. Should we be any less careful in an enterprise so vitally important as the education of our children?

In an address given in 1968, Richard M. Nixon, then a candidate for the Presidency, said that because of the contribution that private schools and colleges have made to one of America's great strengths, its diversity, he would consider it a tragedy of the first magnitude if nonpublic schools were driven out of existence.

In short, nonpublic schools should be more than simply tolerated. Every legitimate step should be taken to assure their continuation because of the valuable contribution they can make to this country and the education of its youth. □

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