

Working locally for parental choice programs

THE RIGHT FOR PARENTS TO CHOOSE THE EDUCATION they think is best for their children has been a tradition in this nation, affirmed by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1925. What the Court did not do at that time was declare that the right to exercise that choice should be financed with tax dollars, regardless of what option a parent selects.

Recent legislative actions in 29 states have created 61 publicly-financed voucher, education savings accounts and tax credit programs that provide financial aid to more than 1.5 million families so they may send their children to a school they, not the local government, chooses. The only federal choice program is the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program that provides families in the nation's capital with scholarship vouchers to attend private and religious schools located in the District.

Lack of minimal federal involvement is about to change with the implementation of President Trump's \$20 billion school choice plan. While there are no specific details at this time as to how his plan will be implemented, the president did promise to "go big" on school choice and has nominated a Secretary of Education who has a long and successful history of advocating for and supporting choice programs.

Since the president's campaign speeches placed a great deal of emphasis on minimizing the role of the federal government, it is quite likely that states will be tasked with creating and implementing plans with the support of federal dollars. Some speculate that state plans already in existence would receive grants to expand their programs. That would work for those states already supporting choice but nearly half of the states don't have programs.

What can parents do locally to make sure that whatever options the new federal initiative offers will be available for them? These are some suggestions that have worked where choice advocates have been able to get their state governments to enact programs.

Work with your school, parish and diocesan leaders to:

1) Organize grassroots community groups. Join with



other faith-based schools, churches, state non-public school associations and community organizations in your local area to voice support for a specific choice program. Work with the diocesan schools and the state Catholic Conference to obtain the support of the bishops in the state.

- 2) Decide upon a specific program that will provide enough financial support to make it possible for most families to participate and for schools to accept students without over-regulation by the state.
- 3) Identify leaders to champion the cause. People in public life and those with political connections need to be brought into the discussion and asked to help shape the program and use their influence to move it through a legislative process in the state capital.
- 4) Speak with one voice. A strong coalition with a single message is most effective in advancing legislative action. Once a clear message is agreed upon, community groups should organize social media campaigns to shape public opinion and influence key legislators, hold public rallies and invite families to share their personal stories of what choice will mean for them.

As groups mobilize for action, other ideas and opportunities may energize additional support. The important thing is to prepare now for what the coming months may bring. Locally, parents, educators and public officials who unite in efforts to advocate for parental choice programs can be a powerful force for changing the education landscape in the country. ✦