



Arizona Catholic Conference

Diocese of Gallup • Diocese of Phoenix • Diocese of Tucson

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Executive Director

ARIZONA'S FUTURE DEPENDS ON THE EDUCATION OF OUR CHILDREN **A Pastoral Statement from the Bishops of the Arizona Catholic Conference** **March 29, 2006**

While Arizonans have much to be proud of in terms of our rich heritage, diversity, and natural beauty, it should be noted that we possess no greater natural resource than our children. The future of our State is dependent on the proper development of this natural resource, and it is out of this concern that Arizona's Catholic Bishops are issuing this joint pastoral statement.

The formation and education of children is a responsibility that begins with and primarily rests with the parents. Parental involvement with their children's education is a fundamental matter of critical importance that is too often undervalued by some in society. Because of this importance, it is the proper role of government to respect the autonomy of parents and not unduly interfere with their unique responsibility.

In addition to the importance of parents and their concerns, society also has an interest in the education and well being of children. It is in all of our best interests that future generations of children receive a good education that prepares them to be contributing members of society.

For the reasons stated above, it is important that all students receive the best education possible whether they attend a public school, a charter school, a private or parochial school, or are home schooled. In this regard, Arizonans are at least fortunate that we are a national leader in terms of educational options that parents may select from in determining the best interests of their children.

Nonetheless, although parents may have many educational options from which to choose, these choices are meaningless if children are unable to attend particular schools because of financial or other concerns.

Problems with Illiteracy and English Language Learners

Sadly, recent statistics indicate that illiteracy is a serious problem facing many Arizona students. In fact, according to the national fourth grade reading exam given by the U.S. Department of Education, a stunning 63 percent of Hispanic children and 67 percent of Black children in Arizona exhibited an inability to satisfactorily read English by scoring "below basic" in this category. In addition, 30 percent of Arizona's Anglo fourth graders also demonstrated such deficiency in reading.

Clearly, Arizona is facing an educational crisis. The illiteracy statistics, however, are only part of the problem, and this is reflected in Arizona's high dropout rate, especially among Hispanic students, 50 percent of whom do not graduate from high school.



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With regard to Hispanic students in particular, there is a tremendous need for quality programs aimed at English language learners (ELL), if educational progress is to be made in Arizona. Without these types of programs, large numbers of Hispanic children will continue to be unable to read their own textbooks and fall further and further behind each year. Many of these children will also continue to drop out during their middle school and high school years because of these difficulties and a realization that attending college is not a likely possibility unless these problems are fixed.

Adequate Resources are Necessary for All Students

In addition to proper funding and accountability for ELL programs, we also have great concern for the entire K-12 public school system. The vast majority of Arizona's children attend public schools, including an estimated 200,000 who are Catholic. It is in all of our best interests that these schools are provided with the resources and support that are needed for them to succeed.

Private and parochial schools also play a very important role in educating Arizona's children that in no way should be seen as a threat to the public school system. Historically, many of these schools, especially Catholic schools, have been located in underserved inner city areas and remote Native American Reservations where public schools did not even exist.

Catholic schools, as part of their mission, make a concerted effort to serve these disadvantaged students and provide them with a quality education that is desired by their parents. They also have an extremely vital role in the Church's evangelizing mission of proclaiming the Good News to all people, as recently noted by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in their statement "Renewing Our Commitment to Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools in the Third Millennium."

In Arizona, Catholic schools account for a current enrollment of approximately 20,000 students who are located in every corner of the State. A very large percentage of this enrollment includes low-income and middle class families with multiple children whose children are only able to attend because of financial support received through Arizona's tuition tax credit programs.

Nonetheless, despite the success of the tuition tax credit, there are still large numbers of families who are unable to afford the tuition costs necessary to send their children to the schools that best fit their needs. Because of this large demand, the Arizona Catholic Conference is grateful that Governor Janet Napolitano has allowed a new corporate tuition tax credit bill (SB 1499) targeted toward disadvantaged students to become law. We are also grateful to Senate President Ken Bennett, House Speaker Jim Weiers, and bill sponsors Senator Dean Martin, Representative Steve Yarbrough, and Representative Mark Anderson for their tireless support in advocating for these children.



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Early Childhood Development

Finally, while a good educational system is important at all grade levels, research shows that many children who fail to master basic reading skills by the fourth grade are set up for failure. Our society needs to take special care that children in the earliest stages of development can succeed.

It is for these reasons, and others, that we also support the First Things First early childhood development initiative that will appear on the ballot this November. This initiative will ensure that quality health care and educational programs are implemented to provide vulnerable children with the proper foundation and skills they will need before entering school. The initiative also recognizes the importance that faith based organizations can have in this regard, along with various government programs, in offering parents different options for their children.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Arizona's future depends on our children and the commitment that we make toward their education and development. Regardless of where parents decide to educate their children, we must ensure that all students receive a quality education and that the necessary resources are made available to achieve this goal.

Our children are the most valuable natural resource we have and must always be cherished. It is our fervent hope that the public policy decisions made in our State are also reflective of this fact so that Arizona will fulfill its unlimited potential.

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