

Bishop McCort hosts school choice town hall

Joshua Byers

October 22, 2020

Gathered in a building on the GapVax property in Johnstown, parents, administrators and school choice advocates participated in a town hall organized by Bishop McCort Catholic High School on Thursday.

“The best way to talk about this is funding the student instead of the institutions,” keynote speaker Corey DeAngelis said.

He’s the director of school choice at the Reason Foundation and an adjunct scholar at the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom.

Throughout the evening, several supporters of school choice spoke about the subject to a socially distanced audience and those tuning in virtually.

The consensus they all agreed upon was that parents and students should be able to take their tax dollars and apply them to whichever institution they chose, whether that be a private school, such as McCort or Johnstown Christian School, homeschooling or a charter school.

DeAngelis compared school choice to shopping at the grocery store, using the example that if a shopper isn’t satisfied with their experience they can take their business elsewhere.

“In any other sector, if you’re not provided service you can walk,” he said.

During his speech, DeAngelis also told the group the argument that school choice defunds public schools is a myth and in actuality this concept strengthens those educational centers.

That’s done by public schools having to be more competitive in order to keep their students.

He added that school choice is needed more than ever due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Schools around the country have been struggling since the novel coronavirus appeared earlier this year.

DeAngelis said the disease put a spotlight on the inadequacies of public schools and referenced parents who’ve voiced their concerns about how their child’s education is being handled, oftentimes in either a completely remote or hybrid model.

He also questioned why some larger school districts get to keep all of the tax dollars paid to the educational centers if the buildings aren’t reopening or are open partially.

Tom Smith, McCort principal, supports school choice and began pushing for it at the end of August after meeting with local legislators to discuss how to start such a movement in Pennsylvania.

“This movement stands for opportunities for parents,” Smith said Thursday.

That's one of the main reasons he supports school choice, to give families in this area more educational choices.

He also supports the concept of funding the student, not the school.

"We just need to get the word out," Smith said.

Other speakers during the event included Director of Education at Pennsylvania Catholic Conference Sean McAleer, executive director of the Christian Family and Children's Center Merle Skinner and Commonwealth Foundation Senior Policy Analyst Colleen Hroncich.

Parents and students from both Johnstown Christian School and McCort also spoke about their support for alternative education institutions and school choice.

One of those parents was Alethia Jones, who sent her children to McCort.

She told the audience about what she had to give up to send her kids to the school, but how worthy that sacrifice was.

Jones said she worked every holiday while putting her children through school and collected a lot of overtime as well, but believes that every parent should be able to make a choice about where they want to send their student.

John Huston, a parent of students at Johnstown Christian, also threw his support behind school choice and shared his story about private education.

Huston said Johnstown Christian has been "an amazing gift" for his family, and he just wants a vehicle to direct his taxes to the school that has benefitted them.

Smith said, after the event, that the next step is talking to local legislators again and building a path forward.