

SERVING THE CATHOLIC COMMUNITY IN CENTRAL KENTUCKY



THE RECORD

Archbishop's perspective on education

July 8, 2020

The Supreme Court issued an opinion last week in *Espinoza v. Montana Department of Revenue* that effectively put an end to state bans on students using educational choice programs to attend religious schools.

This was a major victory for families and the schools that want to serve them. Unfortunately, our celebration is tempered by an unprecedented crisis that is threatening to cut off access to Catholic schools for thousands of families across the United States.

Over 100 Catholic schools have announced that they are closing next year, and COVID-19 has contributed to the closing of many of these schools. Many more are experiencing a decline in enrollment due to the uncertainty about what the fall will bring. Some schools are facing reported enrollments down as much as 80%. These closures mean thousands of children will be displaced from their schools.

Catholic school tuition almost never covers the full cost of the education provided. Many of our schools serve the poor and an already struggling middle class, and so making up shortfalls through tuition increases is not an option. The loss of jobs and income means many families will simply not have the resources to afford even the modest tuition most Catholic schools charge.

The time at which COVID-19 hit also could not have been worse, as the spring and summer is a time when most parishes and schools hold fundraisers. In addition, with parishes temporarily closed due to the virus, parish support will be limited, and parishes and dioceses are unable to make up shortfalls in school budgets.

Those disproportionately affected by these closures will be the children of the working poor, including thousands of black and Hispanic students whose parents have chosen Catholic schools because of the education they provide and the opportunities that create a better life. According to the Cato Institute, about 40% of the students affected by nongovernment school closures are nonwhite. The vast majority of closures are Catholic schools.

Every person should have sufficient access to the goods and resources of society so that they can completely and easily live fulfilling lives, and this includes a good education. The common good is only realized when we work together to improve the well-being of all people in our society.

The mission of Catholic education has always been about the education of the whole person, and that includes the formation of good citizens who will recognize the good of the other and work toward that goal.

Ultimately, the reality of Catholic school closures is not about bricks and mortar. It is always about the wider loss at the human level and preserving the option for those families who seek it.

This is especially true for those families living in our poorest communities who already lack options in so many other areas of life.

In addition to the massive fallout for students and teachers due to nonpublic school closures, public schools and all taxpayers who support them will be harmed by the added cost to accommodate potentially hundreds of thousands of unexpected new students enrolling this fall. According to estimates by the nonprofit group EdChoice, if even 10% of current private school students enroll in the public system, the additional cost to the taxpayers would exceed \$6.5 billion.

Thankfully, this potential perfect storm can be prevented with modest but crucial actions by the federal government.

In March, by passing the federal CARES Act into law, President Trump and Congress mitigated the economic harm affecting millions of people during the public health emergency. But the emergency remains, and there is more to do.

The administration and Congress are working on new coronavirus relief legislation to sustain people as they gradually return to work and rebuild their economic lives. Public schools are rightly provided for in this legislation. So, too, should families with children in Catholic and other religious and independent schools, which comprise 10% of total K-12 enrollment. Indeed, Catholic and other nonpublic schools are vital to the education of our nation's young people.

In my home state of Kentucky, nearly 75,000 students in Catholic and other schools were equally affected by the coronavirus, as were the commonwealth's public district school students. No child should be left behind because of the rightful choice his or her parent made regarding their education.

I and many others strongly believe that parents have the primary right and duty to educate their children as they see best and must, therefore, be able to exercise true liberty in their choice of school. Consequently, the state, which has the obligation to protect and defend the rights of citizens, must address its concern for distributive justice and ensure that public subsidies are allocated in such a way that parents are truly free to choose, according to their conscience, the schools they want for their children.

Therefore, in the longer term, we need the president, Congress, and state officials to enact school choice legislation to enable struggling families to choose Catholic and other schools that will allow them to provide the best education for their children and sustain schools over time. Several states have such policies, but many more do not, which makes the case for federal and state-level policies to reach students in all states.

Time is running out for Catholic school families and the Catholic schools that serve them writ large. Support of parental choice policies will not only proclaim that we are truly all in this together but will serve the common good for years to come.