

WHY CATHOLIC SCHOOLS ARE WORTH SAVING

Weekly Column by Archbishop Charles J. Chaput, O.F.M. Cap.

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This Sunday, May 20, is “Voucher Sunday.” You won’t find it on the Catholic liturgical calendar, but this year in Pennsylvania, it’s a vital day nonetheless.

Over the past few months, people across the Archdiocese have been working with renewed urgency and zeal to rebuild the health of our Catholic schools. Alumni and alumnae have rallied to financially support their alma maters. Private donors have been generous. But in the long run – as I’ve already cautioned several times – *some of our schools will be forced to close* without the passage of opportunity scholarships (i.e., school-choice vouchers) and increased Educational Improvement Tax Credit (EITC) funding. This isn’t a “maybe.” It’s a certainty driven by economic facts.

Without vouchers, we simply can’t continue to bear the heavy cost of operating schools that are financially unsustainable, despite the great service they provide to the wider community.

The value to society of a good education -- no matter who provides it -- can be illustrated with a simple story.

About a decade ago, I came across a story in The New York Times. The headline read: “*Why the ignorant are blissful: Inept individuals ooze confidence, study shows.*” It turns out that David Dunning, a professor at Cornell, did a study of incompetence. What he discovered is that most incompetent people don’t know they’re incompetent. In fact, he learned that people who do things badly tend to be very confident about their ability. They’re often *more* confident than the people who do things well.

Dunning went on to find that the ignorant overestimate their abilities for a good reason. The skills they lack in order to be competent are usually the *same* skills they need to recognize incompetence. In fact, said one of Dunning’s colleagues, “not only do [incompetent people] reach erroneous conclusions and make unfortunate choices, but their incompetence robs them of the ability to realize it.”

Now that’s a true story, and we can smile at it. A good sense of humor, like a good sense of humility, can keep us healthy and sane. But the lesson I want to draw from it today is a serious one. Education *matters* because it forms the young people who will create the future of our country. Sophisticated technology does not make a person whole. It can’t create an unselfish spirit or a mature human heart. Fools with tools are still fools.

The genius of Catholic schools, when they’re led with passion and adequate resources, is that they create a lifelong love of learning; they teach the academic skills to achieve real excellence, not just in the classroom but in adult life; and they shape the kind of moral character that makes for worthy citizenship and an honorable life. This is the dignity God intends for his people. This

is why Catholic schools succeed where others often fail. This is why they're worth fighting to save.

Catholic and other non-public schools currently save Pennsylvania taxpayers more than \$4 billion every year. School-choice legislation that includes vouchers and increased EITC funding reinforces the fact that *parents* – not the state – are the primary educators of their children.

Legislation currently being drafted in Harrisburg could usher in a new, more just era for education in Pennsylvania; an era in which we focus on the ideal educational environment for each student, not on a mandatory system where students are assigned to a school based solely on geographic location.

The next three weeks are crucial. These coming days will determine the success or failure of school-choice efforts in our Commonwealth. Our Catholic schools and the many students who benefit from them depend on your voice. I ask you – I *urge* you – to please contact your state representative and state senator. Call them. Write them. E-mail them. Visit them. Press your legislators to bring this bill up and support vouchers and increased EITC funding. It's so important. Please speak up now.

Use the Pennsylvania Catholic Advocacy Network to email your state legislators in support of school vouchers and increased EITC funding at www.pacatholic.org.