



## **Statement of the Catholic Bishops of Florida Catholic Schools, School Choice and Parental Rights**

In the nation-wide celebration of Catholic Schools Week from Jan. 26 to Feb. 1, we salute school administrators, teachers, students and their parents for their dedication and commitment to Florida Catholic school education.

The theme for Catholic Schools Week, "Making a World of Difference," is especially welcome in Florida where Catholic schools have reached out to more than 2,128 at-risk students who are participating in one of three state-wide school choice programs. It is a testament to the Catholic school community that each of the seven dioceses is participating in one or more of the three programs: the Opportunity Scholarship Program, the McKay Scholarship Program for Students with Disabilities and the Corporate Tax Scholarship Program. We are especially proud of our schools which have made monumental sacrifices necessary for scholarship students to assimilate and make academic progress.

We wish to offer special thanks to the parents of non-scholarship Catholic school students for their support of school choice even though they continue to be unable to participate in these programs. Thousands of students whose families have made sacrifices in order for their children to attend Catholic schools would meet the income threshold criteria to participate in the Corporate Tax Scholarship Program. While supporting public schools through their hard earned tax dollars, they have exercised their choice to attend a school which best meets the needs of their family. We support a legislative change in this program so that all who meet the income criteria can participate in a par basis.

Families who meet the poverty threshold of the Corporate Tax Scholarship Program are taxed at the local, state and federal levels and their children deserve to participate in these programs if they meet income eligibility requirements. Including nonpublic school children as beneficiaries of school-choice programs is not only fair and just, but also good fiscal policy. The 95,949 children in the 233 Florida Catholic schools minimally save the state an estimated \$1.3 billion in nonrecurring capital costs and \$546 million annually in recurring operating costs.

For every child educated in a Catholic school, the state realizes a minimal savings of \$6,000 annually. This is especially significant following the adoption of the constitutional amendment for class size mandates.

Because school choice is essential for parents to select the educational programs and schools they deem best suited for their children, we are optimistic this fundamental right will be extended by the adoption of the constitutional amendment for the voluntary Universal Pre-K for four year old children. Universal Pre-K recognizes parents as the first and foremost educators of their children and allows them to determine whether pre-kindergarten instruction in a public or private-sector program is in the best interest of their family.

We urge those in the public policy arena to frame Universal Pre-K legislation by providing as many educational options as possible, including a faith-based education for those parents who desire it.

We pledge our support for Universal Pre-K in our state and urge a public-private partnership that respects the rich diversity of all participating programs and seeks policies to protect the best interest of all children. It is in this spirit of collaboration that we encourage a broad-based advisory group be established in which all stakeholders have a say in developing, implementing, ensuring accountability in this program.

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