

# Are school vouchers good for PA?

## Parents have the right to choose schools

By Sister Marianne Addy, IHM  
Diocesan Coordinator of the REACH Alliance

In Pennsylvania there is a concerned, active consortium composed of religious and secular proponents of "free enterprise in education." The record of its growth and strength is phenomenal and its name is "The Reach Alliance." (Reach—Road to Educational Achievement through Choice.)

Governor Ridge and many candidates for governmental offices campaigned in the most recent election with parental choice in educating children as one of their major priorities. The record shows that Governor Ridge's victory was helped by his advocating this parental right, as were the victories of others.

Let us understand that parents who opt to send their children to schools other than the public schools pay the same school taxes as their neighbors who send their children to the public schools. In addition, they pay the costly tuition asked of them.

Many countries around the world have embraced this Ameri-

can movement for educational freedom. Great Britain, Sweden, the emerging democracies of Poland, Russia and the Czech Republic are adopting bold new approaches to stimulate innovation and learning in the classrooms, to give teachers and principals more freedom, and to allow parents to choose from a marketplace of educational opportunities for their children. Meanwhile, resistance to change in Pennsylvania and other states is fierce. Why is there such fear of parental choice?

Isn't it time for Americans to realize that school choice will benefit our youthful citizens, that parental choice will not destroy the public schools and that parents, not the state, have the primary educational right to adjudicate whether they shall enroll their children in private, secular or religious schools or in alternate public schools? Choice remains a fundamental right of parents. This right was affirmed as early as 1926 by the Supreme Court Pierce decision which upheld the existence of private schools and found that children are not mere crea-

tures of the state; those who nurture him and direct his destiny have the right, coupled with the high duty, to recognize and prepare him for additional obligations."

The General Assembly of the Commonwealth has placed an obligation of compulsory school attendance on the parents of elementary and secondary school age children. The General Assembly also has enacted numerous and varied statutes and programs which afford these parents and children the means to carry out their compulsory attendance in public and non-public schools, as well as in the parental home environment.

Each moment, our children in Pennsylvania are advancing toward the day they will enter a very competitive, world-wide marketplace. It is not only the obligation of adults to bring about choices in education that will be a bulwark for America's future; otherwise, the cost of illiteracy will be felt in lost industrial productivity, unrealized tax revenues, welfare, crime, prisons, and related social problems.

## School choice doesn't guarantee quality

By DR. JOSEPH ROGAN

In his first budget address, Governor Tom Ridge indicated that he wants to empower Pennsylvania's parents by giving them the right to send their children to the schools of their choice, public, private, or religious. As a first step toward providing "school choice" for all students, he has proposed that the state set aside \$38.5 million this year to allow economically poor students to use vouchers, \$700 for elementary students and \$1,000 for high schoolers.

We all have a right to our opinions about Governor Ridge's proposal for school vouchers. But it is appropriate to expect that the Governor and our state's legislatures form their opinions about vouchers based on facts. What do we know?

### Voucher Programs

Voucher proposals are not unique to Pennsylvania. Illinois' governor has been pushing to have his state become the first to fund religious schools. New Jersey Governor Whitman promised a private school voucher plan but now urges only a very limited "pilot" program in one school district at two grade levels. Puerto Rico's plan was scrapped when it was determined to be unconstitutional.

Wisconsin has the nation's only state-funded private-school program. Researchers note that attrition is high and achievement scores do not indicate that students are doing better; in fact, reading scores declined.

### Public Support

A 1991 Gallup Poll found that 68% of Americans were against using public monies to fund private schools. In 1993, Gallup found that 74% were against the idea. A poll by the Carnegie Foundation indicated that 70% of Americans are against vouchers. Twenty-five percent indicate only "mild" support.

Twenty times in the last few years voucher/choice plans have been placed on ballots. All were rejected, in most cases by wide margins. Proposition 174 in California went down when 70% of the state's voters said no. The proposition was rejected in every one of the state's counties, even those in which citizens espoused otherwise very conservative views. A Colorado choice/voucher plan lost by a two-to-one margin.

### Cost

The Governor's 1995 proposal is a first step. He hopes to expand the program. If only the families of the students already enrolled in private schools accessed vouchers, it would cost the state's taxpayers at least \$250 million. If one percent of the students now in public schools choose to claim vouchers, it would cost \$14.3 million more. Two percent would cost \$28.6 million, etc. Additionally, school districts would have to cover additional costs for trans-

portation and other matters.

Nearly two thirds of the funds would flow to eight counties in and around Philadelphia, Pittsburgh and Erie. Sixty percent of the counties, where choice is not possible because there are so few private schools, would collectively get only one half of one percent of the allocation.

### Regulation

Public schools are highly regulated. The bills pending in Pennsylvania do not propose to regulate private schools. They could accept or reject students as they see fit, could choose curriculum which is not approved by the state, could choose not to participate in the state's assessment program, could use uncertified teachers, and otherwise could ignore state education regulations and standards.

It would seem that just about any group could establish a private school. After the landmark Brown vs. Board of Education decision, many groups in the South established private, white-only schools. Such lack of regulation was a major concern in California when taxpayers turned down their voucher proposal. They learned that in Concord, California, a group of avowed witches supported vouchers because they "would give us (witches) the opportunity to not be exposed to things we feel are detrimental, like Christian values..."

### Discrimination

Public schools must educate all students, including those who require extra and very expensive services. For example, public schools provide students with disabilities with free appropriate public education which often cost three and four times as much as it costs to educate average kids. Some guess that the students most likely to choose vouchers could be the more average, easier-to-teach, "educationally cheaper" kids. This would almost be guaranteed by the Governor's plan. It would be possible for private schools to discriminate based on gender, religion, academic status, financial status, psychological, social and physical disabilities. The easy-to-teach students would be admitted while those who need more expensive and intensive services could be rejected. Students and parents would not have choices; private schools would.

### Constitutionality

Education is the responsibility of the states. The Pennsylvania Constitution requires that our General Assembly "provide for the maintenance and support of a thorough and efficient system of the public education to serve the needs of the Commonwealth." If the public schools are not doing a good job educating the state's students, as is claimed by some voucher advocates, the state is functioning unconstitutionally. The solution is school improvement, not vouchers.

The Pennsylvania constitution

specifically disallows the spending of public monies on religious schools. Article III (29) states that "no appropriation shall be made for educational...purposes to any person...nor to any denominational or sectarian institution." The Governor is a talented lawyer and is surrounded by lawyers. He has to know that his proposal will eventually be voted down by the legislature or found to be unconstitutional. In 1991, a voucher proposal was rejected in committee by a bipartisan vote.

### Private vs. Public Schools

There are 5,664 schools in the state, public and private. There are excellent and poor schools in both camps. The classic comparison of private vs. public schools was done in the Alum Rock School District by the Rand Corporation in the early 70s. There a choice program (public only) lasted for five years before being dissolved. Researchers who studied the program found no achievement difference. They looked at other factors and discovered that the families chose "choice" not because the "choice" schools had better teachers or better curricula, but because (1) the "choice" schools were more convenient, (2) parents wanted to keep siblings and their children's friends together, and, most interestingly, parents wanted to move their children toward or away from certain ethnic and/or racial groups. Vouchers lead to segregation.

### The Bottom Line

For many reasons, functioning voucher programs are rare. The idea lacks public support, partially because voucher programs cost so much. Private school voucher programs are unregulated, tend to discriminate, and have been judged to be unconstitutional. Even if all of the above were not true, private schools are not automatically academically superior to public schools.

In presenting his budget which included funding for vouchers, the Governor noted that "Government cannot be all things...We must choose." He's right. Based on the facts, the Governor should drop his voucher proposal. If others want to establish private schools, that's their choice. Their freedom to choose should be respected, but their choice should not be paid for with public money.

The Governor should focus his energies and our taxpayer's monies on improving public education. By law, that's what he is supposed to do. The state must have a thorough and efficient public educational system which meets the needs of the Commonwealth. The Governor has no choice.

Dr. Joseph Rogan, professor of education at College Misericordia, Dallas, is a ranking member of the Governor's Special Education Advisory Panel and has served on the Panel since 1984.

## Reporter's notebook



Grace R. Dove

Since most of my work as a reporter is serious, I try to cultivate a sense of humor to keep me reasonably sane. One of my favorite pastimes is collecting anecdotes of things which don't seem to make any sense at all.

### • Bureaucracy's finest.

Among the plethora of possible fines awaiting the hard-core trucker, one of the most ridiculous is the one imposed on them for hauling overweight loads.

According to federal regulations, a tractor-trailer's legal maximum weight is 80,000 lbs. Since the average rig with full fuel tanks runs about 30,000 lbs., the maximum allowable load shouldn't exceed 50,000 lb. Sounds simple, right?

The Feds, in all their wisdom, have decided to complicate the weight limit by adding something called "the bridge law," which has nothing to do with the maximum weight a truck may legally carry when it runs into a bridge.

Under the bridge law, a truck can still max out at 80,000 lbs., but may carry only a certain specific weight on each axle. Sometimes, but not always, the trucker can circumvent the law by moving the axles farther back on the trailer or separating them by about nine feet.

Besides bringing in lots of bucks, bridge laws cause many headaches

## Strange stuff in the news

for shippers, dispatchers and drivers, who have been reduced to adding up weight on their fingers to avoid bridge law fines.

Consider what recently happened to my husband, Matt, on what should have been a routine run to Chicago, hauling a lot of Big Metal Things on a flatbed.

His rig weighed a total of 80,000 lbs. No problem - until he hit the scale and found out that he was 600 lbs. over the bridge limit for one axle, which had already been moved nine feet from its mate.

The fine was \$1 per hundred-weight, or about a penny a pound.

That's a whopping six bucks. Plus \$46 in court costs.

• The smell of baking bread is bad for you.

Our friendly local Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has decided that baking bread is unhealthy because it contains ethanol, a natural alcohol produced when yeast, sugar and flour do their thing together and make dough rise.

Ethanol produces oxygen and some other things guaranteed not to give you a buzz when broken down by sunlight.

The EPA has decided that ethanol's components help to form smog, so it has decreed that all bread bakeries install nine-ton pollution caps (\$5 million apiece) on their chimneys.

With all of the Superfund sites and undocumented toxic waste dumps scattered across the American landscape, why is the EPA worrying about baking bread?

• How to avoid paying your property taxes.

I overheard this gem at a local township supervisors' meeting.

If you don't pay your property taxes for three years, the Luzerne County Tax Office sends you a festive seasonal invitation to a

sheriff's sale, hand-delivered by your friendly neighborhood constable.

Your home is one of the guests of honor.

If you move, change your legal address to a post office box and allow it to lapse six months later, you have officially disappeared and the friendly constable can't find you to deliver any more sheriff's sale invites.

The courthouse will continue to faithfully send you more overdue tax notices every year, have them returned and add your place to the tax sale list - but it will be pulled from the sale at the last minute because the title isn't free and clear. And it's all perfectly legal.

• No more pencils, no more books...

School director Garrett Redmond of the Cabrillo Unified School District in California recently tried to get homework abolished in his district.

He said that homework causes "an unbearable strain" on family life, it's unjust to students whose families can't afford home computers and Internet hookups, it's waste of time, it destroys home life, it favors students whose parents are smart enough to do it for them and it's a "financial burden" on taxpayers because textbooks wear out faster when kids carry them home.

Back in the Dark Ages when I was in school, I remember catching heck if I didn't do my homework. Somehow skipping homework managed to eventually show up in my grades - and my schools had six marking periods, not four.

I also remember getting out of washing the supper dishes a few times because I had a sudden, very pressing assignment.

Which planet did Mr. Redmond say he's from?

## Library news

### Library is now accepting auction donations

By NANCY KOZEMCHAK

The Back Mountain Memorial Library has some registration forms for voter applicants who need to fill out forms in order to vote in the 1995 election on May 16. The deadline for voter registrations is April 17 to qualify for the May 16 election.

These may be picked up at the information desk in the library, and mailed to the Luzerne County Courthouse in Wilkes-Barre in time for the April 17 deadline.

The Odds and Ends booth at the annual library auction will be chaired again by the Dallas Women of Kiwanis with Sybil Pelton, Mary George and Jean Grimes in charge. All items will be accepted for this booth at the library during regular library hours.

Books for the book tent will be accepted during library hours. Special magazines are requested for the book booth; Yankee, Country Living, Crafts, Arts, National Wildlife and others of this nature.

## Letters

### Volunteers made Daffodil Days a success

Editor:

A most humble and heartfelt thank-you to the people of Luzerne County for their overwhelming support to volunteerism during this year's Daffodil Campaign, sponsored by the American Cancer Society.

This year's drive was a huge success, due to the efforts of many adults and children.

They served wholeheartedly as

committee members, contact people, school distributors, wrappers, drivers, business contacts, and sponsors.

Daffodils, designated years ago as the flower of hope, were purchased and displayed everywhere by consumers.

Money raised from the drive will not only benefit cancer research, but will also be allocated to help needy cancer victims in

Luzerne County.

Thank you, everyone, for supporting this worthy cause. Every effort we take as a community will help eradicate this odious disease.

Any questions can be directed toward the American Cancer Society at 825-7763.

Marilyn Glogowski  
Daffodil chairperson

### Photo of LaGrange village store identified

Editor:

In the March 22nd edition of the Dallas Post, I saw a photo of the Village Store in the Hamlet of La Grange in the early 1900's asking about information. I have the book 'A Look Back: The Wyoming County Sesquicentennial

1842-1992' and La Grange was in Tunkhannock Township, in and around the area, which is now Shadowbrook Restaurant, Golf Club/Resort Area located on Route 6. I found this information on page 112, written by Paul Miller.

More information can be obtained at the Wyoming County Historical Society, Harrison Street in Tunkhannock. Phone 836-5303.

Dolores Swelgin  
Shavertown

### Mozart Club to meet April 10 in Kingston

The Mozart Club will meet at the Church of Christ Uniting, Kingston, April 10 at 7:30 p.m., with the program following at 8 p.m.

Featured will be the music of J.S. Bach, Chopin, Czerny, Debussy, Faure, Lecuona, Mendelssohn and Schumann.

The public is invited. George Powell is president of the organization, and Ruth Martin is chairman of the April program.

### Boy Scouts bowl in fundraiser

Boy Scout Troop 232 of Gate of Heaven, Dallas, participated in the 1995 Bowl-a-Thon Fundraiser on March 23 at the New Back Mt. Bowl. The participating scouts were Matt Motyka, Sam Brown, Joey Latosek, and E.M. Hinchey. Scoutmaster is Bob Neher.

**EASTER GOLF TOURNAMENT**

at Four Seasons Golf Club  
Exeter • Sunday, April 9th  
Tee Times Starting At 7:30 A.M.  
"Captain & Crew" Format **\$25.00** Per Person  
Includes: 18 Holes, Meal, Beverages & Prizes  
Call 655-8869 For Tee Times

Editor's Note: The Dallas Post encourages anyone with expertise and an opinion about topics of current interest to submit them for publication. Submissions should be about issues that affect people who live or work in the Back Mountain. Send items to: The Dallas Post, 45 Main Road, Dallas PA 18612. Call 675-5211 if you have any questions.