

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

December 29, 2011 at 10:50am

Catholic school affordability: Progress made but still a long way to go

by Carol Zimmermann by Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON -- When educational leaders look at ways to make Catholic schools more affordable, they are happy about some of the positive steps that have been made but fully aware that there is still a lot to do.

During a recent conference at The Catholic University of America, a group of panelists focused particularly on the status of tuition tax credits and how they have enabled students who would normally not be able to afford Catholic schools to attend them.

Currently, there are 11 school voucher programs in the United States and nine scholarship tax-credit programs. Some states have more than one program.

The school voucher programs in Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Ohio, Oklahoma, Wisconsin, Utah and the District of Columbia offer private school vouchers to low-income students, students with special needs or children in failing schools.

The scholarship tax-credit programs in Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Iowa, Pennsylvania and Rhode Island also are primarily for students from low-income families or those with special needs.

Tuition vouchers are funds awarded by a government agency to a low-income family to spend at any school of their choice. Tuition tax credits generate scholarships for Catholic schools by allowing individuals and businesses to deduct a portion of their income taxes to donate to education. These donations can go to public or private schools. Donations to public schools typically help pay for after-school programs, school trips or supplies.

Last April, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the practice of allowing Arizona residents to take a tax credit for their donations to school tuition organizations. During the 2008 fiscal year more than \$54 million in scholarship money was awarded to students through the tax credit program.

"We have made a good deal of progress in the past 15 years," said John Schilling, chief operating officer of the American Federation for Children, a school choice advocacy group. In fact, he noted that "it's as good as it's ever been" as far as choice initiatives.

But panel members were not about to rest on these laurels and almost all of them at the conference pointed out that the successes were not easy and certainly did not guarantee similar actions in other states.

To keep these programs going and see similar legislation passed, they said, Catholic leaders need to garner a lot more support for tuition tax credits from leaders of both parties, the general public and even the wider Catholic community.

In a question-and-answer session, Michael Guerra, former National Catholic Educational Association president, asked: "Why do we want tax credits? Is it just to keep Catholic schools alive?"

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In response to his own question, he said that approach "won't fly" and the real reason to make Catholic schools an option for more students is "because they're good for families and kids."

Similarly, Frank Butler, president of Foundations and Donors Interested in Catholic Activities, or FADICA, said: "We have to do a better job of making our case that we contribute to the common good through our schools."

Butler asked what's holding Catholics back from "a more robust and unified effort to enlist the public's support for more choice in education" and speculated that Catholics tend to think locally and look to their parish and diocese for initiative on schools. He also said there has not been a lot of national leadership on this topic and "in many ways we have ceded the issue of tax credits to libertarian and conservative think tanks."

He also said there has been a "hospice mentality" when it comes to Catholic schools as a result of recent closings and wondered if people lacked "confidence in the long-term survival of schools" coupled with a "passive disposition among Catholic laity when it comes to taking responsibility for the church's mission."

The Nov. 30 conference, organized by Catholic University's Institute for Policy Research & Catholic Studies and co-sponsored by the Catholic Association of Latino Leaders in San Antonio, urged educational and state Catholic conference leaders to essentially get back to basics: recognizing the good that Catholic schools do and promoting that.

In luncheon remarks, Washington Cardinal Donald W. Wuerl said he was not just preaching to the choir but to the choir directors by pointing out the positive aspects of Catholic schools, which he said not only provide students with academic excellence but a moral foundation and hope for the future.

They are a "gift for the whole community," he added.

Mimi Schuttloffel, who chairs the education department at Catholic University, also spoke of the benefits

of Catholic education and said Catholic schools still have an important role in today's society in their tradition of providing quality education to marginal groups and training future church leaders.

She lamented that this country, unlike many others, does not support religious schools and said Catholics as a whole do not support Catholic education if their children do not attend a Catholic school or their parish doesn't sponsor a school.

"We have not been able to adequately sell Catholic education," she said, emphasizing that this needs to be done more aggressively.

To keep Catholic schools alive and a viable option for the poor, she said, "We need leaders who get it, ... who understand our story matters."

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