



Andrew J. Vandiver

School Choice – A Win for Everyone

By Andrew J. Vandiver

Public education in Kentucky is often defined in political debates as an allegiance to public school districts. Yet, most Kentuckians recognize that this is not the whole story. This is because their communities benefit from the presence of nonpublic schools as well. These schools are seen by the community as partners with the public school system, ensuring that every child has an opportunity to receive a high quality education tailored to his or her specific

needs.

Unfortunately, the cost of a nonpublic school education has increased over the years. As a result, many working class and middle class families cannot afford the full cost of tuition. Aware of this problem, Kentucky's nonpublic schools implemented tuition assistance programs for families of modest means. These programs are often funded by alumni and other generous donors in the local community. While these programs have done a great deal of good, there are still families who are unable to afford the cost of tuition.

A coalition of Catholic, Protestant, and nondenominational schools decided that it was time for the Kentucky General Assembly to take action by passing legislation that would lower the cost of nonpublic school tuition. While their backgrounds differ, these schools shared the same mission of ensuring that all parents have the means to choose the best educational environment for their children, regardless of their income or ZIP Code.

The process of convincing the General Assembly to pass legislation addressing this issue has not been easy. There are powerful groups who oppose giving parents the means to choose where their children go to school.

The coalition responded to this opposition by pointing legislators to the fact that 28 states have adopted school choice legislation, including our neighbors Tennessee, Indiana and Ohio. In those states, student outcomes have improved, taxpayer dollars have been saved, and the public schools have become better. Despite what others may say, it is clear that school choice legislation has resulted in a win for everyone.

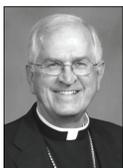
Further, unlike many issues, school choice supporters can be found across the political spectrum. Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo of New York has championed one of the largest school choice proposals in the country. Republican Senator Rand Paul has made school choice a major part of his presidential platform. There are few politicians that are farther apart on the political spectrum than Senator Paul and Governor Cuomo. Yet, both are in agreement that all parents deserve a real choice when it comes to their children's education.

These facts resonated with many of Kentucky's legislators. In particular, Representatives Tommy Thompson (D) and David Floyd (R) responded to the coalition's call for action by filing House Bill 384 during the 2015 session of the General Assembly. If passed, House Bill 384 would have created a tax credit incentivizing donations to tuition assistance organizations. This would have increased the overall amount of tuition assistance available to Kentucky families. The legislation provided a tax incentive for charitable donations to public schools as well. In total, the legislation could have provided \$100 million in new revenue to help Kentucky students; \$70 million would have been allocated to support public schools; and the remaining \$30 million would have gone to tuition assistance for students attending nonpublic schools.

House Bill 384 generated a great deal of excitement across Kentucky. Parents enthusiastically expressed support for the bill and reached out to the coalition in order to get involved as advocates. Elected officials from across the political spectrum took notice as their constituents asked them to support the bill.

With this momentum, the coalition hopes to pass school choice legislation in 2016. It will undoubtedly be a difficult fight. Nevertheless, it is a fight that can be won because the vast majority of Kentucky's legislators have seen firsthand the good that nonpublic schools do in their communities. It is just a matter of time before they recognize that a tuition assistance tax credit is needed to ensure that the good work continues.

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Bringing the Catholic Voice to the Public Square



Jason D. Hall

By Jason D. Hall

As I write this, the new encyclical from Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*, has just been released. Skipping quickly past any effort to

read the document thoughtfully and prayerfully, the media coverage of this important document has fallen into two camps. Those who are hoping to use it as a political weapon to achieve their goals have claimed the pope as an ally, even if they would disagree with the Church, and indeed *Laudato Si* itself, on any number of other issues. At the same time, those who might feel threatened by some of the language included in the document are rushing to assure everyone that we are free to ignore the pope and that he is speaking well beyond his competence as the successor of St. Peter.

By the time you read this, the document will have been published and available to read for some time. However, I'm pretty confident the media coverage will not have changed. I'm also pretty confident that, if you do read it and consider its message, you will have an even harder time understanding the media's commentary.

One of the major temptations we face in contemporary American is to allow our worldview to be shaped primarily by our ever-present media-driven political shouting match. We come to believe that the 24-hour news cycle is all that matters, and that somehow we are media consultants whose tweets or Facebook posts will tip the scale for "our side." The principle danger of this is that we lose

the ability to be critical of the shapers of opinion on our preferred team and, even worse, we start to see the principles of the Gospel as a threat to political goals. In short, partisan politics becomes an idol.

Recently, I was involved in a radio discussion on whether or not a candidate for president could win the nomination of either major party if he or she adopted positions completely consistent with Catholic Social Teaching. In my opinion, it is very unlikely he or she would win, and that would at least partially be because Catholic voters would refuse to support such a candidate. This is perhaps a good exercise for each of us to undertake. Would I be able to support a candidate who was truly Catholic in their positions, or would I see them as "wrong" because they disagree with my political beliefs? If I could not support such a candidate, does my Catholic faith really shape my thinking, or am I actually being formed by secular political voices?

As Catholics, we must always be open to what our pastors, especially the Supreme Pontiff, have to say to us. Of course, it does not mean that Pope Francis is infallible on matters of science, and he could, acting prudentially, make a mistake. But, it does mean that what he says about the Church's teaching on care for creation and an integral understanding of ecology, in union with Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI and his other predecessors, is to be received with an open mind and a prayerful heart.

The 2015 session of the General Assembly certainly produced its share of frustrations as well as productive activity. A number of CCK-supported bills fell victim to now-familiar political realities, but there

were also glimmers of hope and some positive steps were taken.

For at least ten sessions, CCK and other pro-life groups have attempted to enact a fix for Kentucky's Informed Consent statute. Those who have followed the legislature the past few years will be familiar with the issue, but in short, the bill would ensure that information is provided to a woman considering an abortion in a private, face-to-face meeting with a professional before the abortion occurs. As has been the case for many years, the bill, SB 4, passed the Senate on an overwhelming bipartisan vote of 30-5. Once it arrived in the House, it was assigned to the Health and Welfare Committee, where the membership is such that pro-life bills simply cannot be moved. Were the bill to reach the House floor, it would easily pass, but House leadership continues to send this bill to a committee where it will never see the light of day.

On another issue supported by CCK for several years, the automatic restoration of voting rights for felons who have completed their sentences, the same thing happened in reverse. HB 70 passed the House by a huge bipartisan majority, 86-12, but became bottled up in a Senate committee and never received a vote. Again, this is a decision made by leadership. Were the bill to receive a vote on the floor, it would almost certainly pass.

A slightly different process, with the same result, prevailed on the question of payday lending. SB 32, which would combat usury by capping interest rates on payday loans at 36%, was introduced for the first time in the Senate by Sen. Alice Forgy Kerr of Lexington. A great deal of credit goes to BUILD (Building a United Inter-Faith Lexington Through Direct Action) and CLOUT (Citizens of Louisville Organized and United Together), both ecumenical coalitions of local congregations, for building more legislative support for this measure than ever before. In the end, Senate leadership refused to allow the bill to receive a vote.

It would be easy to get frustrated by the process, but there are bright spots as well. Rep. David Floyd of Bardstown and Sen. Gerald Neal of Louisville again introduced bi-partisan companion bills to abolish the death penalty. With each passing session, it becomes clear that the support for the death penalty is waning and that more and more legislators are open to considering its abolition.

With other states, most recently Nebraska, realizing that the death penalty constitutes a wasteful, unjust policy, it is only a matter of time until Kentucky leaves it behind.

The CCK was one of a number of groups urging caution regarding the "LIFT" proposal, or the local option sales tax, which was HB 1. As a stand-alone proposal, a sales tax is regressive and disproportionately affects those at the lower end of the socio-economic scale. To their credit, HB 1's supporters have excluded a number of basic necessities from taxation, which does make the proposal less onerous. But, the fundamental problem remains. The Conference continues to urge the General Assembly to pass a broader tax reform package, balancing any tax increases on the most vulnerable with other measures such as a state-level Earned Income Tax Credit. HB 1 failed to pass.

The bill that received perhaps the greatest amount of attention from the public and the media during the 2015 session was the "heroin bill." Ultimately passed as SB 192, the bill contained numerous provisions dealing with criminal penalties as well as treatment for those suffering from addiction. Though CCK did not take a position on the bill as a whole, there were two provisions we successfully argued should be included in the final bill. One of those provisions was to make the drug naloxone more readily available. This drug can reverse the effects of heroin overdose. Also, the Conference strongly supported a no-charge Good Samaritan provision. This provision would protect someone from criminal charges if they call for medical help while in the presence of someone who appears to be overdosing on heroin. Both of these provisions have the potential to save lives, and CCK's support was cited publicly by legislators as part of the negotiations over the final version of the bill.

As this newsletter goes to press, I am completing my first year as Executive Director of CCK. It has been a wonderful year, and I want to thank the bishops for this opportunity to serve the Church, and I am very humbled by the confidence they have placed in me. Also, I can't let this opportunity pass without once more thanking Fr. Pat Delahanty for his service to the Church and to CCK for so many years, and particularly for his support of me and his ever-present help as I have adapted to the role of Executive Director.



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Andrew J. Vandiver

Welcome Andrew!

This is our first newsletter since Andrew Vandiver has joined the CCK staff. Andrew has been the Conference’s Associate Director since September. His responsibilities include leading CCK’s efforts in support of school choice, and you can read about that in his contribution to this newsletter. Andrew is from McClean County and currently lives in Northern Kentucky with his wife and two children. An attorney, Andrew was in private practice before joining the Conference. He is a convert to the Catholic Church and was received into full communion in 2012.

Andrew brings to CCK a great deal of passion for Church teaching on a variety of issues, especially regarding the proper role of parents in directing the education of their children. He is an eloquent spokesman for the Conference and we have truly enjoyed working with him and getting to know him these past few months. Welcome aboard, Andrew!

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