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Advocating For Catholic Schools For 50-Plus Years

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By Peter Finney Jr., Clarion Herald

In November 1967, Archbishop Philip Hannan's initiative to convince the Louisiana Legislature of the importance of supporting Catholic and non-public schools with "a fair share" of taxpayer dollars took shape through the formation of the Louisiana Federation, Citizens for Educational Freedom (CEF).

Over the last 50 years, CEF and its successor organization, Citizens for Educational Choice (CEC), have educated lawmakers on a fundamental financial reality: If Catholic schools did not exist, the state would have to assume the full economic burden of educating all of its students, a fiscal impossibility.

The Catholic Church in Louisiana had not moved aggressively to lobby lawmakers until Archbishop Hannan was appointed the 11th archbishop of New Orleans in 1965. Learning the church-state ropes in his hometown of Washington, D.C., Archbishop Hannan was well-versed in the inner workings of the federal government and became a staunch proponent of the church working with governmental officials and agencies to form beneficial partnerships.

Abp. Hannan's clear vision

"It was Archbishop Hannan's vision," said Rob Tasman, executive director of CEF as well as the Louisiana Conference of Catholic Bishops (LCCB). "He knew that since so many people had a voice in the public forum, why shouldn't the voice of the church – and non-public schools – be heard as well?"

Over the last 50 years, at the urging of CEF and CEC, legislators have approved approximately \$500 million in state appropriations for non-public schools in areas such as required services (reimbursements for reports required by the state), bus transportation and salary supplements for school food service workers.

The state also offers non-public schools grants for educational programs through the Louisiana Quality Education Support Fund (8g), established through a major offshore oil and gas revenue settlement.

Last year, the state appropriated to non-public schools about \$8 million for required services and \$7 million for the school lunch salary supplements. But Tasman said that outlay was down from just a few years ago when the state provided \$15 million for required services alone.

A yearly battle

"We need to keep a keen eye on programs like required services and the school lunch salary supplements," Tasman said. "This is money given to non-public schools that helps those schools operate at a very high level, and that transcends into how it impacts the student, whether it's in student life or in the administration of school programs.

"In general, non-public schools are providing a service to the state by serving students and forming them into capable adults. There's no doubt non-public schools have done that very well and usually with far less red tape and resources than are required by public schools."

Citizens for Educational Freedom, a statewide organization, actually was the precursor to the Louisiana Conference of Catholic Bishops, which is the current public-policy arm of the state's seven Catholic bishops, with the archbishop of New Orleans serving as its chairman.

The first president of CEF was T.M. Barker of Lockport. Emile Comar, the managing editor of the Clarion Herald, served as executive director and acting vice president. In January 1968, Kirby Ducote made a transition from the public relations office of the Archdiocese of New Orleans to serve with Comar as associate director and later executive director of CEF.

The goal of CEF was to seek both state and federal assistance for children attending state-accredited, non-public schools. In a 1967 Clarion Herald article announcing the formation of CEF, Barker said the fundamental justification for Catholic schools receiving funding from the state was that they served a public purpose by educating children for the benefit of the broader civic community.

Catholic schools help state

At the time CEF was founded, approximately 150,000 children attended non-public elementary and secondary schools in Louisiana, and the vast majority – 130,000 – were enrolled in Catholic schools. If the state had to

educate all those children, it would have had to spend an additional \$62.5 million in operating costs alone, not counting the millions of dollars the non-public schools had invested in school buildings, land and movable property.

Every year, CEF pointed out, the cost of educating students in public schools went up.

Comar said at the time: "On the one hand, parents with students in private schools are being asked to pay higher tuition, and on the other they are being taxed at higher levels to pay for public schools, which their children do not attend but which are nonetheless essential to the preservation of America's cherished public educational system."

Comar called it "a practical impasse."

"Private resources cannot be stretched further to continue the system of non-public schools," he said. "Public resources are not available – without new major tax increases – to care for tens of thousands of Louisiana students who (would) be inherited by public schools as non-public schools close their doors. There must be a solution to this impasse, and we hope to find it."

CEF was organized nationally in 1958, with state chapters to follow.



Hit the ground running

"I think Louisiana was one of the most popular ones, and we got off on a good foot because Archbishop Hannan was pushing us," said Ducote, who now lives in Baton Rouge. "When we went up to the Legislature, we had quite a few backers already. Emile had covered the Legislature for a period of years for the New Orleans Item, so he knew everything there was to know about the Legislature. And, he was a great teacher. He gave me so much confidence in the way he talked. He was great with statistics, and he studied those figures coming out of the Louisiana Department of Education about the cost per child."

Louisiana's CEF was committed to the principle that every child is entitled to a fair share of education taxes and that such participation in tax funds should not be conditioned on attendance in a public school. Ducote said he and Comar blanketed the state with informational seminars for anyone who would listen.

"We were almost like candidates giving speeches," Ducote said. "We talked to the various parents' organizations of private and parochial schools. I remember giving talks in one 24-hour period in Shreveport, Alexandria and Baton Rouge."

Many of the legislative bills were crafted by attorney Thomas Rayer, the archdiocesan lawyer who worked for Denechaud and Denechaud, and who later was a key figure in the 1973 state constitutional convention.

Over the first 10 years of CEF's existence, there were both legislative victories and defeats, Ducote said.

"I never considered it a job to me because I enjoyed it so much – it was almost like a game," Ducote said. "We won some and we lost some, but like I told the legislators, 'You're on our schedule for next year!'"

"Emile and I always prided ourselves on the fact that the two of us never had an enemy because we got along with everybody. We knew that some of the people from north Louisiana couldn't vote for us as a result of the particular district they were in. We knew they didn't have a Catholic school in Lincoln Parish. But over the course of many years, various things happened, and we would wind up getting votes from some of those same people."

Blaine Amendment removed

When Gov. Edwin Edwards called lawmakers into session in 1973 to rewrite the state's constitution, Comar and Ducote helped ensure that the controversial Blaine Amendment – which barred public funds from being used for religious purposes – was removed from the new document. Rayer helped write the language that pulled it off.

Louisiana actually had two Blaine Amendments in its constitution. One prohibited state resources going directly or indirectly to any religious organization. The other barred state support of any "private or sectarian school."

In the end, the constitutional convention allowed voters to choose between two versions of the new article on education – one with a Blaine Amendment and one without. Voters approved the constitution without the Blaine Amendment.

"Even though we had the Blaine Amendment (in the previous constitution), Catholic Charities still was getting funds from the state and the schools were getting funds from the state in the form of lunches and textbooks," Ducote said. "The new constitution just made everything legal. In the 37 years we were up in Baton Rouge, we were able to bring in a half-billion dollars to private and parochial schools that could be used for educational purposes."

In 1979, Ducote did an overview of legislative achievements by CEF to bring some financial relief to parents of non-public school children. He said one of the most successful years came in 1978 when the Legislature approved an educational package that benefited all children in the state:

- \$7 million to reimburse parents whose children lived more than a mile from their school but were not provided school bus transportation by the local parish public school system. More than 40,000 non-public school children were eligible for the program.
- \$2.3 million for the continuing education of non-public and public school teachers.
- \$4.8 million for textbooks, library books and school supplies for non-public and public school children.

Emphasis on school choice

Tasman said Citizens for Educational Freedom was transformed into Citizens for Educational Choice in 2007 to reflect the growing national sentiment for using “tax justice” to give parents more options for the education of their children.

“We were trying to mirror the national organizations that were committed to the notion of school choice,” Tasman said, adding that many non-Catholic organizations across the state have an interest in school choice.

But Citizens for Educational Freedom in 1967 was the Louisiana church’s first effort to take a proactive step in advocating its public policy positions.

“It was the foot in the door for the church to become politically engaged and politically active,” Tasman said. “It started with Catholic school issues and then obviously expanded upon that. I think when the Roe vs. Wade decision came down (in 1973), that’s when the Louisiana Catholic Conference was formed.”

Tasman said the Catholic conferences of most states have an educational arm to promote issues concerning Catholic schools. Louisiana is different – the CEC is a distinct entity – because it pre-dated the LCCB.

Tasman is one of 400 registered lobbyists with the state of Louisiana – “I need to do that to have the kind of access I need” – although he prefers to refer to himself as a public policy “advocate” for the Louisiana bishops.

Pushing a great end product

He said it is easy to make the case to legislators that Catholic schools are working because the lawmakers can see the end results.

“In general, any kind of education provides a service to the state by virtue of the fact that it is serving students and trying to form them into capable adults and citizens,” Tasman said. “There’s no doubt non-public schools have done that very well.

“It is good when parents have the ability to weigh in on what is the best fit for their individual children. Today’s marketplace of education is so diverse. You have public schools, charter schools, even virtual schools with online curriculums, and you have non-public and private schools. It’s very important that parents have the ability to choose what the best fit is – whether it’s the academic rigor, the safety of the environment, the teaching of a moral foundation.”

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