

Bishop Madden: DREAM Act promotes “God’s children”

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Saying the Catholic Church has a history of working with immigrants and the oppressed, Bishop Denis J. Madden voiced his support for the DREAM Act July 18.

Bishop Madden appeared at the University of Maryland-Baltimore County, along with the school’s president, Freeman Hrabowski, at the launch of a new coalition called Educating Maryland Kids. The coalition will support the DREAM Act, which is aimed at giving in-state college tuition to illegal immigrants who have graduated from high schools in the state and whose parents are paying taxes.

The DREAM Act was passed by the Maryland General Assembly in 2011, but faces a referendum on the November ballot.

“This coalition – this cause – represents what is truly great about the state of Maryland,” Bishop Madden said during the press conference. “We come together today, from many faiths, races, and political persuasions, because we are united when it comes to our love for and belief in the children – all the children – of Maryland.”

The Archdiocese of Baltimore has been vocal in its support of the DREAM Act, even in the face of critics who have said the law would reward people for breaking the law. Historically, he said, immigrants have built the Catholic Church in Maryland, including physical structures and through vocations.

“These young people should have the opportunity to make that contribution,” Bishop Madden said after the press conference. “They are God’s children. It’s not that we’re for breaking the law, but the law itself is in tatters.”

Bishop Madden said people are converted to support it when they know the facts of the law.

“We’re not talking about thousands or tens of thousands,” he said. “We’re talking about one percent of our school population. I think shame on us as Catholics if we say we do not want one percent of these people coming in. We’re talking about one percent.”

The Maryland bishops and their lobbying arm, the Maryland Catholic Conference, have a steep hill to climb during the next four months to sway Maryland voters, including Catholics, to support the DREAM Act. Opponents collected more than twice the needed 56,000 signatures to get on the ballot.

Hrabowski, an African-American who grew up in Alabama during the 20th century Civil Rights movement, said the DREAM Act would benefit all of society, not just “dreamers,” as some immigrants have come to call themselves.

“As an American educator, I have a special belief that the more we can do to educate the children in this country, the better off this country will be,” he said. “As a child in Birmingham, in the ‘50s and ‘60s, I did not always know I’d be able to get high quality education. When adults began to say to us that we believe in you and that you should be able to get an education, it made a big difference.”

The MCC is currently engaged in educational efforts in parishes and at gatherings with the Knights of Columbus and other groups. The MCC is also helping to organize voter registration efforts and is engaging in social media to get their message to the masses.

“It’s pretty easy to support when you understand what it actually does,” said Mary Ellen Russell, executive director of the MCC.

The mobilization of the opposition to the DREAM Act could be perceived as daunting.

“I think the only thing we’re really up against is ignorance,” Russell said. “I think if people understand the facts, then they will be willing to support this issue.”

Russell faces a busy year in Maryland. In addition to issues on the legislative agenda and the DREAM Act, voters will also decide the fate of the same-sex marriage. The General Assembly voted to legalize gay marriage earlier this year, but the MCC partnered with the Maryland Marriage Alliance and was able to get more than twice the number of required signatures.

“I think another challenge walking into the election will be that there will be so many issues on the ballot that it will be unfortunate for people to vote a straight ticket – Democratic or Republican – without stopping to think about each issue. As we all know, the Catholic Church is so non-partisan and this is a very important issue to us, regardless of your politics.”

Russell said she couldn’t remember a time when so many important issues were going to be decided all at once. The MCC has been forced to alter their fall routines.

“We’re usually involved in encouraging continuants to ask their legislators to vote a certain way,” Russell said. “This is different. Now we are saying to continuants that you are the one who needs to make decisions about these laws. It’s a very different dynamic.”

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