# Catholic Review Column: The Time is Right for Education Tax Credits

The recent events in Baltimore have prompted myriad opinions and possible solutions to the underlying problems that surfaced after the death of Freddie Gray Jr. It's worth noting before going any further that it shouldn't have taken his untimely death for these serious, systemic and degrading conditions – lack of education options, insufficient housing, racial inequality, rampant drug use and violence, and a lack of jobs – for us as a community to begin having a serious conversation as to how to rid neighborhoods like Sandtown-Winchester of the conditions that undermine the dignity of its residents and our neighbors.

These and other issues prevent Baltimore's communities from improving, and thus the lives of its citizens from improving, thereby contributing to the hopelessness, despair and frustration that erodes the souls of people and can even cause flashes of anger to erupt, such as what we saw recently in Baltimore.

It is easy to become disillusioned when looking at the aforementioned problems, each of which is complex and requires a comprehensive, almost Herculean, response from not just the government, but also people and institutions in the public, private and nonprofit sectors, including churches. Whether it's drugs or violence, these problems have existed for generations, and countless dollars and time have been spent on various initiatives over the years to rid the city of these cancers. Leaders have come and gone, along with their well-intentioned, if not-always-effective strategies, but the problems persist. It is easy, indeed, to become disillusioned.

One issue, however, that I believe can be sufficiently addressed is the access to quality education for our youths. Among the many "solutions" discussed by people from all walks of life – from politicians to talk show hosts to the average citizen – as the aftermath was unfolding in Baltimore the past few weeks is this: the only way to end the cycle of poverty that grips these neighborhoods, the only way to give hope to children who see no hope around them, the only way to guarantee a future for kids who don't envision a future for themselves – is to give them access to a life-changing education.

Catholic schools do that. Catholic schools have been doing that in Baltimore since the beginning of the 19th century. Mothers Elizabeth Ann Seton and Mary Elizabeth Lange created schools for disadvantaged girls and black youths, respectively, because they recognized the need. They also knew that these children had no hope of realizing their God-given gifts without an education. The same remains true of our schools today, especially those serving children from some of the poorest neighborhoods in our city.

A few years ago, the Archdiocese of Baltimore asked a local economist to quantify the impact of our schools on their graduates and on the communities they serve. The results were impressive, but even more so for students from disadvantaged homes and communities, where the difference in Catholic versus public school graduation rates and college entrance rates were disproportionately higher than in other areas of the state.

For 20 years, the archdiocese has partnered with members of the local business and philanthropic community to provide scholarships to needy families. And Catholics throughout the archdiocese who support the Annual Appeal or our recent capital campaign are making a difference for these children. Unfortunately, for many families a Catholic education is still out of reach, even as they acknowledge the strong desire for educational options.

The State of Maryland had an opportunity once again this past legislative session to remedy the situation by providing a tax credit to businesses as an incentive to donate money to third-party scholarship programs. Pennsylvania is among several states to have passed such legislation. As a result of Pennsylvania’s vision and leadership, struggling families have true educational options for their children.

Imagine if every child in Sandtown-Winchester could attend school in a system that graduates 99 percent of its students and sends 98 percent of them to college. The proposed Maryland tax credit program has the support of Gov. Lawrence J. Hogan Jr. and enough bipartisan support in both the House of Delegates and the Maryland Senate to pass. Though it would have also benefitted public school children, the powerful teachers union vigorously opposed it, as did the Speaker of the House, Michael Busch, and the measure was never brought to a vote.

For the sake of the children our schools serve, we must not give up on getting the education tax credit passed in Maryland. As we continue to have important and necessary conversations about the real problems facing many, many of our sisters and brothers every day, let us not give in to despair, and continue pushing together for the kinds of changes that can make a real difference in people’s lives.