

Educators outline ways Catholic schools contribute to wider society

PORTLAND, Ore. – Love or hate their politics, new House Speaker John Boehner, a Republican from Ohio, and Democratic Vice President Joe Biden are products of Catholic education. Both men rose from humble circumstances.

Contributing to civic life is seen by some as a hallmark of Catholic schools, but others note another benefit the schools provide to the wider community – what they save states in public education dollars.

In Oregon, for example, the amount is about \$80 million annually. The savings come because every student who does not attend a public school equals \$5,700 Oregon does not need to send to a school district.

“This is our contribution to Oregon’s economy,” said Bob Mizia, superintendent of Catholic schools for the Archdiocese of Portland. “That, plus the good citizens created,” he told the Catholic Sentinel, the archdiocesan newspaper.

About 14,500 students are enrolled in Catholic schools statewide. Some estimate that the total amount that these schools save states nationally is more than \$26 billion annually.

Families who send their children to Catholic schools still pay their taxes to support public education, in addition to paying tuition and helping create hundreds of jobs.

Each year the National Catholic Educational Association and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops jointly sponsor Catholic Schools Week to draw attention to their contributions. This year’s observance, Jan. 30-Feb. 5, has as its theme “Catholic Schools: A+ for America.”

Schools typically celebrate the week with Masses, open houses and activities for students, administrators, faculty, school staff, the community and families.

“Historically, Catholic schools are known for their high level of academic

achievement, moral values and high graduation rates,” said Karen Ristau, NCEA president.

Marie Powell, executive director of the USCCB Secretariat of Catholic Education for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, pointed out that this year nearly 30 percent of the nation’s 2.1 million Catholic school students come from minority populations.

Catholic schools spend less per student and usually get better results, if a SAT scores in Oregon’s state capital, Salem, are any example. They show that students at Blanchet Catholic School score 200 points higher on average than their public school counterparts, even though demographics are about the same.

“It could be any number of things – discipline or family support or the ability to focus resources,” said Kevin Mannix, a former state legislator and chairman of the board for Blanchet. “Catholic schools reflect a dynamic community that supports education. The graduates are imbued with solid moral values and can provide leadership to the community.”

Catholic schools contribute to the wider good by giving public schools an example of steadfastness in educational thought, said Tom Green, a former public school administrator and now dean of graduate studies at the University of Portland, a Catholic institution.

“Catholic schools provide some good lessons about constancy of purpose; they’re less swayed by political rhetoric and the latest fads,” said Green, who was assistant superintendent in two Portland-area districts.

The Portland-based Cascade Policy Institute in 2008 found that 44 percent of Oregon families would send their children to private school if they could.

“Catholic schools particularly give students a lot of one-on-one attention,” said Kathryn Hickok, who directs a fund that helps low-income students in Oregon attend private schools. The Children’s Scholarship Fund has aided 600 students in Oregon so far, many of them choosing Catholic education, even though the families are not Catholic.

“We hear from parents that students at Catholic schools feel shepherded through by

caring teachers and principals,” said Hickok, a member of Our Lady of the Lake Parish in Lake Oswego.

“You never know how kids will be touched by Catholic education,” Hickok said. “Catholic schools are good at teaching children values and responsibility. That’s really a hallmark of private schools, especially Catholic and other faith-based schools – personal formation, how you live your values.”