

School choice is becoming less partisan

WASHINGTON - "School choice is becoming less and less a partisan issue," Morgan Brown, an assistant deputy secretary of the U.S. Department of Education, told a group of Catholic education leaders gathered in Washington for congressional advocacy days.

The Bush administration "is the most pro-school-choice administration we've ever had at the federal level," said Mr. Brown, who heads the Education Department's Office of Innovation and Improvement.

About 70 educators from more than 20 states came to Washington March 11-13 to discuss current federal legislative issues that may affect Catholic education and to lobby members of Congress on behalf of measures that would provide more equal participation of private school students and teachers in federal programs.

"Much of the real action on school choice is in the states," Mr. Brown acknowledged. But he said the federal government can "create incentives" for states to improve school choice possibilities by providing "seed money" in the way of programs that include participation by those in private schools.

The federal government can also serve as a "bully pulpit" to make the case to the American public that parents should have a choice in what schools their children attend, he said.

Mr. Brown said advances on issues such as tax credits for parents of children in private schools or the equitable inclusion of private schools in public programs to improve all children's education "are usually incremental ... a little here, a little there."

But he cited Utah's new law, the first universal school-choice legislation in the United States, as a major breakthrough.

The Parent Choice in Education Act, adopted by the Utah Legislature in early February and signed into law Feb. 12, provides scholarships ranging from \$500 to

\$3,000, based on family income, that parents can use to send their children to any private school of their choice.

Among issues the education leaders lobbied for were:

- Tax credits or deductions for families with children to help pay educational expenses, including tuition.
- Tax credits for personal and corporate donations to organizations providing scholarships for children.
- Keeping language in the No Child Left Behind Act that protects full, equitable participation of eligible children and teachers in nonpublic schools wherever they are currently covered.
- Expanding that coverage to other areas where children in nonpublic schools currently are not eligible to participate, such as the “Striving Readers” program.
- Strengthening requirements that state and local educational administrations consult with appropriate representatives of religious and other private schools before making any program or funding decisions that could affect their students, teachers or institutions.
- Enforcement measures, such as withholding of funds, for those public administrations that fail to carry out such consultation where required by the No Child Left Behind law.
- Continuing to include religious and other private schools in the Universal Service Fund provisions of the Telecommunications Act when it is reauthorized. The fund is a fee that consumers pay on their phone bills and the money provides a subsidy for technology programs for schools.

Mr. Brown, who worked on private education issues in Minnesota before coming to Washington, said one example he likes to cite to illustrate the value of Catholic schools is Ascension, an elementary school in Minneapolis that “serves almost 100 percent African-American students, the vast majority from low-income families.”

He said that besides a solid core curriculum in reading, math and science, the school has a music program that requires every student to learn to play an instrument.

In Minnesota's eighth-grade basic skills tests for reading and math in 2005, he said, "91 percent of the students in Ascension School passed the math test and 95 percent passed the reading test. Ascension scored 43 percentage points higher on the math pass rate and 31 points higher in reading than the Minneapolis public schools' average. Not only that, but they did better than almost all of the Twin Cities suburban school districts."

"Here's a school that really has closed the achievement gap," he said.

He also cited the important role Catholic schools played in rebuilding the community life of New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina in 2005, when the New Orleans Archdiocese quickly reopened many Catholic schools and also welcomed students from public schools that were still closed.

"Be sure to tell your story," he said.

"The bottom line is, the public needs to have a broader appreciation for nonpublic education," he said.