

FOCUS SECTION

INTRODUCTION

GLENN ANNE MCPHEE, O.P.

Department of Education

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

At their general meeting in November 2002, the bishops of the United States approved the document USCCB Mission Statement: Goals and Objectives 2004-2006, which was developed by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' (USCCB) Committee on Priorities and Plans. In major goal #3, the USCCB Secretariats and Departments are directed "to assist the bishops individually and collectively in fulfilling their roles as teachers of the faith community" (p. 4). Objective #3.7 identifies the USCCB's Department of Education as the lead agent in efforts:

To foster maximum participation of parents, teachers and students served by Catholic educational institutions in programs of federal assistance, to represent the Catholic voice in the educational community of this country, to encourage the continued Catholic identity of institutions of higher education and to provide guidance on issues of public policy. (p. 9)

In order to obtain this goal and fulfill the objective, the Department staff works collaboratively with other USCCB Secretariats and Departments, as well as national, state, and local groups. This is especially true with regard to the interaction between the USCCB's Offices of Government Liaison and General Counsel.

For many years, but especially since the bishops issued their 1990 statement, *In Support of Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools*, and their 1995 statement, *Principles for Education Reform in the United States*, the bishops' federal education agenda has rested on two governing principles, in support of legislation that:

- allows all parents, but especially low and middle income parents, to choose the education they believe is best suited for their children, whether that is a public, private, or religious school.
- provides services aimed at improving the educational environment, especially for those most at risk, and to work for the availability of

such services for students and teachers in private and religious schools when similar services are available to students and teachers in public schools.

In this focus section of *Catholic Education*, the four authors, all staff members of USCCB, provide insights into the issues of both parental choice and the equitable participation of private and religious school students in federally funded programs for children with disabilities. John Liekweg, Associate General Counsel, provides a case study of the Cleveland voucher case, *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*, and the recent Washington State scholarship case, *Locke v. Davey*, with an analysis of the pertinent federal court decisions as well as how the Supreme Court's decisions might affect future legislation and litigation on choice initiatives. Reverend William F. Davis, O.S.F.S., Deputy Secretary for Schools, and Christopher S. Pearsall, Education Research Associate, join together to provide an overview of the historic vote to enact the DC Choice Incentive Act of 2003, what the details of the program are and what may lie ahead in the implementation of the program. Michelle Doyle, Assistant Director of the Office of Government Liaison provides highlights of the USCCB's study on the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and how up-to-date, accurate data were used in the development of the USCCB's public policy agenda that would better serve students with disabilities in Catholic schools. Finally, Marie Powell, Assistant Secretary for Parental Advocacy, and former Academic Dean at Paul VI Catholic High School in Fairfax, Virginia, traces the expansion of services to students with disabilities at Paul VI in order to demonstrate how a primarily college preparatory high school became more inclusive despite few publicly-funded resources being available.

I hope that these four contributions, touching on parental choice and equitable participation in federal programs, will show the need to advocate for greater active participation by the Catholic school community in the public policy arena so that we can obtain justice for our students and teachers on the federal, state, and local levels, in order to ensure the continued positive contribution of our Catholic elementary and secondary schools to the common good of our nation.

Sister Glenn Anne McPhee, O.P., currently serves as the Secretary for Education at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.