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To: Senate General Laws Committee

From: Missouri Catholic Conference

Date: January 31, 2012

Re: Scholarships for Students in Unaccredited School Districts – SBs 452 and 706

The Missouri Catholic Conference (MCC) supports proposals that offer children in failing districts new educational opportunities through attendance at qualified nonpublic schools. Such proposals uphold a very basic human right: the right of parents to choose a school for their children that corresponds to their own moral convictions. This is a fundamental human right that the U.S. Supreme Court recognized when striking down an Oregon law that required parents to send their children to public schools:

The fundamental theory of liberty upon which all governments in this Union repose excludes any general power of the state to standardize its children by forcing them to accept instruction from public teachers only. The child is not the mere creature of the state; those who nurture him and direct his destiny have the right, coupled with the high duty, to recognize and prepare him for additional obligations. *Pierce v. Society of Sisters* 268 U.S. 510 (1925)

The Catechism of the Catholic Church also affirms this fundamental right:

As those first responsible for the education of their children, parents have the right to choose a school for them which corresponds to their own convictions. This right is fundamental. ... Public authorities have the duty of guaranteeing this parental right and of ensuring the concrete conditions for its exercise. (par. 2229)

The Catechism notes that public authorities have “the duty of guaranteeing this parental right...” At present only the more affluent have school choice. They can move to a wealthy public school district or choose a private school. The MCC supports efforts that will enable families whose children are trapped in failing public school districts to choose a school for them that offers new educational opportunities. Providing these parents real choices in educating their children is a matter of justice.

The MCC also observes that both the Catholic school system in St. Louis and in Kansas City have indicated that they have thousands of vacant seats to enroll children from failing districts. There is no reason to reject this offer and every reason to accept it. Catholic schools have a proven track record of offering quality education, especially to children living in poor, urban areas.

It is time to be creative in addressing the current educational crisis in urban K-12 schooling. Every available tool that could potentially remediate these problems should be examined. SBs 452 and 706 are complex bills, however, the MCC believes they merit debate by the full Senate. The MCC therefore urges the committee to vote SBs 452 and 706 “DO PASS.”

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