

# Private schools need another choice

By William C. Kashatus

Over the last few years the school-choice debate has attracted a wide variety of professional perspectives from academics, bureaucrats, politicians, union leaders, economists, lawyers, parents and activists. Surprisingly, among the least vocal are independent school teachers who do have a tremendous stake in the outcome.

School choice is quite different from conventional reform proposals which either accept the existing governance structure of public education or would increase control of it. If implemented on a wide scale, school choice could foster the privatization of education. Gov. Ridge's "Keystone Initiative" is a case in point.

According to that plan, state funds would be distributed to parents to be spent on the school of their choice, thereby transferring funding as well as the actual delivery of educational services to the private sector. It also suggests a redefinition of independent education in Pennsylvania.

To be sure, school choice promises some significant advantages to private schools. It might allow those schools to:

- Contribute to the diversity of their student enrollments which would lessen the stereotype of an elitist education and better reflect the pluralistic nature of the society in which our children live.
- Establish a stronger relationship with the public sector that could attract more state funding for private school programs.
- Provide independent schools with an opportunity to contribute effectively to the process of educational reform by making their own institutional success synonymous with the academic achievement of less advantaged students.

At the same time, however, school choice would require a serious reconsideration of the mission and operation of our independent schools because it also threatens to:

- Foster private schools that com-

pete even more rigorously with public education, allowing those with mobility and additional dollars to go to the private sector while simultaneously guaranteeing that those who can't will be relegated to an underfunded, overburdened public system.

- Pit the idealistic hope that private schools can be "all things to all people" against the painful reality that those schools are already being asked to do more with less money. Widescale choice would further deplete the financial as well as human resources of independent schools.

- Require a redistribution of financial and human resources in order to accommodate the tremendous variety of learning styles, differences and motivational levels of the students who choose a private school education.

Inevitably, this would result in the creation of a magnet school system, much like the ones that already exist in urban school districts. And the continuing need for reform in those districts suggests that that kind of system is not meeting the needs of all children.

Regardless of the possible consequences, Ridge will have to demonstrate that school choice will benefit private schools as well as public ones. He should probably begin by readjusting the amount of his \$1,000 tuition voucher, the maximum amount under his current plan. That amount is simply not enough at a time when a private or public school education costs six to ten times that much, leaving the parochial schools as the primary beneficiaries of choice.

A more practical solution might be to concentrate on learning partnerships between the state's public and private schools. Take, for example, some of the partnerships that already exist between Friends schools and public schools in the city of Philadelphia. Their mutual commitment to the process of educational reform has resulted in the establishment of student exchanges, programs for those students with learning disabilities, theatrical productions, community service, and a collaborative project to increase student and teacher

interest in science education.

If given greater funding, these kinds of learning partnerships could expand to other public and private schools and, if successful on a city-wide level, could serve as a model for educational reform at the state level. All we need is for Harrisburg to recognize that meaningful, long-term reform can be

achieved more effectively by encouraging cooperation rather than competition between our public and private schools.

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## The Ridge choice plan doesn't benefit private schools.



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