January 16, 2020

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Journal Gazette Newspaper
600 W. Main St.
Fort Wayne, IN 46802

Dear Editor,
In a recent “Political Notebook” column of the Sunday Journal Gazette, mention was made of St. Jude School and a 6 year old untrue allegation about the misuse of School Choice Scholarship funds. As Pastor of St. Jude Church, who sponsors St. Jude School, I have an obligation to respond.

What Father Jake Runyon, Pastor at that time, recorded was misinterpreted and is still being used and misinterpreted by Rep. Phil GiaQuinta. It is true that the parish that sponsors a school might have more funds to perform building improvements because of more students attending the school whose parents benefit from School Choice Scholarship funds. However, this is not because so called “voucher money” is or was used to pay for building improvements. It is because the parish subsidy to the school could become lower. St. Jude Parish spends 40% of parish offertory income each year to subsidize our school. It is not the other way around.

What can be said without equivocation is that School Choice voucher money was and is not used for parish needs, but is used exclusively for the education of the students. GiaQuinta’s contention that St. Jude Church used voucher money to remodel parish buildings and construct a new steeple is false.

For over 90 years since the parish was founded, St. Jude has educated thousands of young people at little or no expense to the state. St. Jude graduates have gone on to give great service to the community. The same story plays out nationally with other parochial and non-public schools that have saved tax payers billions of dollars. Non-public schools that accept students on School Choice Scholarships are subject to random audits. St. Jude was recently audited and passed without concern. Non-public schools that accept students on Choice Scholarships take state accountability tests, iLearn, etc. In fact, non-public schools are held to a high standard regarding state accountability grades and ramifications.

Parents, not the state, are the primary educator of children. Parents are in the best position to determine the best school for their child. As stated by the U.S. Supreme Court
in 1925, the child is no mere creature of the state. The Indiana State Supreme Court upheld the legality of the state’s Choice Scholarship Program by a vote of 5-0 in 2013. Children, especially lower and middle income children, are the primary beneficiaries of the Choice Scholarship Programs. Non-public Schools are secondary beneficiaries when the parents decide where they want the funding attached to their child to go.

Money is not being taken away from public schools. It is not the public school’s money. The state money is designated for each child. If the child moves from one public district to another public district, the money follows the child. Why should it be any different if the parents choose to send their child to a non-public school?

To make a more nuanced point: public K-12 education is financed by a combination of state money and local property taxes. It is roughly 50% state money and 50% local property taxes. When parents decide to send their child to a non-public school, 90% (or 70% or 50% depending on their income level) of the child’s state education funding is designated by the parents to go to the non-public school of their choice. The remaining 10% (or 30% or 50% depending on family income) stays with the state and is redistributed to public schools. Meanwhile, the local property tax money stays with the public school. In other words, the local public school continues to receive the same property tax allocation although they are servicing less children. This helps pay for the upkeep of buildings and such. The non-public schools, on the other hand, do not receive any portion of the local property tax money.

Other state and federal money can be used at non-public institutions such as hospitals and colleges. Think of federally subsidized Pell grants, GI bill funding following a soldier to a non-public college, or Medicare money following a patient to a religiously affiliated hospital.

It is unfortunate and disheartening that St. Jude continues to be misrepresented and maligned by false accusations for several years now. But, Indiana is no stranger to bias against minority groups. One must only look at the history of the Ku Klux Klan and the so-called Blaine Amendment that were rooted in anti-Catholic bias. As stated earlier, we have no beef with the public schools, but what we are asking for and what the Indiana Supreme Court approved 7 years ago, is that a parent can decide where some of the state education dollars assigned to their child can be used. St. Jude will continue to educate children sent to our school (and not all of our students are Catholics) as we have for over 90 years, and they will continue to become leaders and strong citizens of our community, state and nation. And hopefully all parents will continue to have the freedom of multiple choices in deciding what school can best educate their child.

Msgr. Robert C. Schulte
Pastor