



## **STATEMENT ON PUBLIC EDUCATION**

**February 9, 1989**

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Public education is a respected tradition in the United States. It has contributed greatly to the success of American democracy. But it has recently received a great deal of criticism and lack of trust from parents, citizens in general and by many sectors of American life which have historically benefited from it.

We, the Catholic Bishops of the State of Florida, wish to address ourselves briefly to this problem in a pastoral way, expressing great concern for the maintenance of our public educational system and encouraging our Catholic citizens to continue support of their public schools. There are many reasons for the dissatisfaction and unhappiness with public education: a perceived lack of discipline and the inability to teach moral and religious values; semi-literate graduates and a high rate of dropouts; bureaucratic administrations; and influx of refugees from other countries; spiraling inflationary pressures which increase costs continually, as well as additional financial burdens on an already heavily taxed citizenry.

In view of the problems of the moment it is essential that citizens of every religious persuasion and no religious persuasion unite in support of a strong and effective public education system.

While the primary responsibility for education rests with the parents, they must turn to public and private schools for assistance. Thus, public education must always remain responsive to the needs of these parents and their children. Parents, for their part, must see to it that public education fulfills its obligations efficiently and effectively. Parents are strongly encouraged to become active in the formation policies for their local public schools. This can be accomplished by membership in Parent-Teacher Organizations and Associations, attendance at meetings of local school boards, and a constant awareness of the goals and plans for the school district.

Public and private education must be child-oriented, directing attention to meet the individual needs of each and every child. Despite our desires and efforts, Catholic schools cannot serve every child who wants to attend. We recognize that in excess of 200,00 Catholic students attend public schools in this state. Yet our concerns are for all children in public, parochial and private schools. The best possible learning environments, with good teachers, sufficient materials and adequate facilities, must be provided for all children. The location of the school or the socio-economic level of the students should not affect the quality of the instruction provided. Much remains to be done. We pledge our continued support in it.

In the area of religious conscience, care must be taken to see that public education never violates the religious conscience of its students. There is an acknowledged dilemma in this since every public education system reflects a diversity of religious and non-religious backgrounds. Our nation was founded "under God." All political authority rests ultimately on this authority, God. Thus public schools are in the delicate position of having a background of theism and at the same time of not wanting to offend the conscience of any student. In the area of education in human sexuality, for example, programs must take into account the whole person, present the ethical-

moral dimensions of human sexuality, not be an expression of any one sectarian or secular philosophy, and respect the conscience of the students and the rights of their parents. Respect for self and others should be a constant policy of our schools.

There needs to be a continuing challenge to American ingenuity to develop an educational system that will provide, according to the free choice of parents, formation and growth in personal and social responsibility and an acknowledgment of moral values.

We encourage all our Catholic people and citizens of good will everywhere in our great state to continue to support public schools. It is not likely that there will be a better way in the future of providing for the educational needs of the vast majority of our children. This support should never be of the unquestioning, unchallenging variety, but must arise from a citizenry which demands accountability of its public educators and at the same time strongly supports what is truly good.

We encourage our Catholic citizens to be informed and involved in the public schools. The Catholic community especially has had a long tradition of cooperating with public authority in promoting civic interests in many fields. We affirm this cooperation and pledge our support for our public schools in Florida.

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