

OPINION

What we owe religious school parents: Non-public schools need assistance during pandemic

By Andrew Hamilton
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As a parent of children in Catholic schools, my family is blessed to access this educational option. I wish that more children could be so fortunate to have a nurturing, robust education that Catholic schools deliver.



The Immaculate Conception Catholic Academy is pictured in Queens, New York. (Gardiner Anderson/New York Daily News)

But with the economy still in crisis from the coronavirus pandemic, fewer parents are in a position economically to afford even modest Catholic school tuition. One resulting outcome: Earlier this summer, the Archdiocese of New York announced that 20 of its schools will close permanently. Nationally, nearly 100 Catholic schools announced closure, with many more barely hanging on.

Catholic and other religious and non-public schools are closing because they are reliant on tuition-paying families, most of which are at middle- or working-class income levels. In times like these with economic uncertainty remaining, K-12 tuition is harder for families

to sustain, especially if one parent has been furloughed and their job may never return.

It does not have to be this way. Both New York State and federal governments can do more, not only for families with children in Catholic schools, but for all school families as we struggle to outlast this pandemic.

Legislation in Congress would provide substantial one-time funding to help public and non-public schools open and operate more safely while the coronavirus looms. But larger issues of disagreement among the two political parties and the Trump administration have resulted in a political stalemate.

Schools and families need support now — not three months from now when their schoolhouse doors could close permanently. Public schools, with funding from property taxes and state aid, can and will survive, as well they should.

Non-public schools, like other small businesses that operate with narrow revenue margins, are far more economically vulnerable. Time is running out for their families and their employees.

Senate Republicans have proposed \$70 billion in funding for elementary and secondary education, from which about 10% would flow to non-public schools, a number commensurate with their share of total K-12 enrollment. Schools serving more low-income students would receive a greater share of funding.

House Democrats also proposed nearly \$60 billion in K-12 funding, though none is allotted to families with children in non-public schools. This should change, especially given that members of Congress can and should represent all their constituents, not just some or most of them.

Like Congress, New York State also can do more for tuition-paying families, to sustain Catholic and other parochial and non-public education.

Specifically, Albany can help lower-and middle-income families by passing legislation for tax incentives to encourage greater charitable donations to K-12 scholarship funds. More resulting donations would generate more scholarships to needy families to provide the most suitable education for their children. Similar legislation, the School Choice Now Act, was recently proposed in Congress.

Such proposals were once under serious consideration in State Capitol in Albany. Gov. Cuomo joined with Timothy Cardinal Dolan several years ago in support of the scholarship tax credit, and a sizable bipartisan majority of lawmakers in both houses of the Legislature supported such a bill.

Ultimately, however, this support collapsed under political pressure from the city and state teachers' unions.

The result was predictable: Low-income and middle-class families are losing the financial struggle to provide needed parochial and alternative education for their children, which has led to more school closures and lost teacher jobs. The pandemic has exacerbated this crisis.

With public education costing more than \$24,000 per pupil in New York State, non-public schools, which teach more than 400,000 students, save taxpayers billions on an annual basis. As more Catholic and other parochial and independent schools close, taxpayers will pay even more to accommodate an influx of enrollment.

Non-public schools are an integral part of our state and nation's diversity. It would take only modest steps by our elected officials to sustain these schools during the pandemic and over the long term. Absent such urgent action, our children lose, and our society is diminished.

Hamilton is a New York attorney and a parent of two children who attend Catholic schools.