

California Catholic Conference of Bishops

Advancing Educational Excellence

February 28, 2025 – Sacramento, CA

Good afternoon, my friends! It's an honor to be with the remnant. I'm sorry to have missed the morning sessions due to a long scheduled medical procedure, but I came straight here to be with my Catholic brothers and sisters and talk about the future of our families, state and how we get to a place of universal and humble prosperity by working together towards educational freedom. It's the least I could do for two of my favorite advocates, Samara Palko and Kathleen Domingo, both of whom are dedicated and diligent stewards of our families and faith.

As I've mentioned at previous engagements, I'm a happily married father of five seventh-generation Californians, and a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. For over two decades, I've fought for families like ours in the capitol to have the freedom and resources to guide our children's education. Today, I want to share a message of hope, unity, and urgent opportunity to advance educational excellence for every child, even here in California.

I want to step back and provide a broader perspective before I end with the particulars. I want to view the vistas before we get lost in the weeds.

Let me begin with Psalm 127:3: "Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord." You and I know this truth deep in our bones—our children are not just ours; they are His. And yet, for too long, California's education system has treated them as wards of the state, sidelining parents and faith

communities who've nurtured learning since long before Sacramento ever took notice.

Catholic education in California laid an early foundation of basic literacy, numeracy, philosophy, languages, history and science centuries ago. By the early 1800s, as California's population grew with settlers and the Gold Rush, the focus shifted from mission-based education to more structured systems.

Article IX of the state's first constitution in 1850 mandated a public school system, declaring education a state responsibility and requiring funding for common schools. Section 1 of that article says, "A general diffusion of knowledge and intelligence being essential to the preservation of the rights and liberties of the people, the Legislature shall encourage by all suitable means the promotion of intellectual, scientific, moral, and agricultural improvement."

In response to this vision, Catholic parishes built parochial schools, mirroring a national trend, accelerating in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and fueled by broad immigration. As California's Catholic population swelled, church supported emerged in nearly every community, often staffed by religious sisters at minimal cost. Enrollment grew steadily: by 1920, over 1.8 million Catholic students nationwide attended elementary schools, with California reflecting this trend proportionally. Costs remained low—tuition in the early 1900s was often a few dollars annually—thanks to unpaid nuns and parish fundraising, contrasting with today's averages of \$8,000 per year due to fewer religious vocations.

But government schools took over as the status quo, and the status quo they remained.

Though enrollment has declined, Catholic education still has a place of respect and is in demand in many corners of this state, echoing the missions' original outreach to the underserved. Catholic education in California, from its mission roots to its parochial heyday, has left a lasting mark—balancing faith, academics, and societal influence against a growing public system and shares a rich history with my people, the Latter-day Saints.

In the 19th century, before public schools dominated, our communities built schools together—think of the Catholic missions and the early Latter-day Saint academies in places like San Bernardino. We taught reading, arithmetic, and virtue, side by side. One harrowing story stands out: during the Gold Rush, when lawlessness threatened, Catholic nuns and Mormon settlers in Northern California sheltered orphans, educating them in makeshift classrooms while the world outside unraveled. That's our legacy—a sacred partnership for our kids.

But today, that legacy is under siege. As I ran for State Superintendent in 2022, I heard from parents from across the spectrum of faith desperate for a voice. One mother from Los Angeles told me her son, struggling with dyslexia, was stuck in a failing public school. She begged for options, but the system said no. Another father in Sacramento shared how his daughter's school hid her mental health struggles from him, citing state policy over parental rights. These aren't just stories; they're a call to action.

Whatever your politics—and I know this room holds a spectrum of views—the new administration’s focus on education freedom offers us a rare chance. President Trump has promised to dismantle federal overreach, push for school choice, and empower parents with tools like Education Savings Accounts (ESAs). These aren’t Republican or conservative ideas alone—it’s about family. And in California, where state leaders often resist, a federal tailwind could tip the scales.

Now, I’ve written about how ESAs could save our kids from a one-size-fits-all warehousing system that’s failing too many kids stuck on rickety conveyor belt. California spends over \$23,000 per student, yet half can’t read at grade level. Recent National Report Card results reveal that less than one third of students proficient at grade level standards.

Meanwhile, Catholic schools here graduate a nearly all of their students, often on half the budget. Why not let parents choose what works? G.K. Chesterton once said, “Education is simply the soul of a society as it passes from one generation to another.” If that’s true, what soul are we passing on when we trap kids in broken systems?

As C.S. Lewis elucidates in his masterpiece, *The Abolition of Man*, “[The modern educator sees] the world around them swayed by emotional propaganda — they have learned from tradition that youth is sentimental — and they conclude that the best thing they can do is to fortify the minds of young people against emotion. My own experience as a teacher tells an opposite tale. For every one pupil who needs to be guarded from a weak excess of sensibility there are three who need to be awakened from the slumber of cold vulgarity. The task of the modern educator is not to cut

down jungles but to irrigate deserts. The right defence against false sentiments is to inculcate just sentiments. By starving the sensibility of our pupils we only make them easier prey to the propagandist when he comes. For famished nature will be avenged and a hard heart is no infallible protection against a soft head.”

The state’s grip on education is power—and it’s time we reclaim it for families. Let’s not cower to the bureaucrats. Our charge is to teach diligently, together, with God’s grace is to educate families to not abdicate those responsibilities to the government.

This is where you come in—my Catholic brothers and sisters. Your voice in the legislature can move mountains. I’ve worked with groups like the California Policy Center to draft bills, lobby lawmakers, and rally families. But we need your moral clarity, your tradition of justice.

Futurist John C. Wright warned, “One cannot change a man’s mind unless his heart allows it. But one cannot change a man’s heart unless his soul allows it. In the same way politics is downstream of culture, culture is downstream of religion. In the same way a man’s actions are dependent on his beliefs, his beliefs are dependent upon his primal and fundamental assumptions that form his character.”

We’ve done all we can in our homes and churches; now let’s do more in the Capitol. This isn’t about left or right—it’s about right and wrong. Our kids deserve schools that honor their heritage, not erase it. We are bound by the declaration of Paul in 2 Corinthians 3:17, “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.” Education freedom is that liberty—for parents, for faith.

So, what can we do?

First, push for educational options in legislation. Tell your representatives to stop the persecution of parents and ask them to treat our parents with respect. That can be done in any number of ways, but for this audience, by supporting educational saving accounts. Sen. Shannon Grove is going to try for the third time to get her bill on ESAs, SB 64, passed.

Second, join me in building strong, resilient coalitions – a durable freedom infrastructure – with me at California Policy Partners, my friends at California Policy Center, and yes, even ecumenical efforts with Latter-day Saints, Protestants, Jews, Muslims, Sihks and other people of faith.

We will have our 4th annual Parents Not Partisans legislative summit in Sacramento on March 18th and 19th and invite all of you and your associates to attend.

Third, stop censoring yourselves. Tell your stories. Don't be intimidated by the barking dogs of divisiveness. They are being driven away by sharp, rational debate. Write your history of strong Catholic influence in California. Shed the shame of bad actors in your faith and bring to light the good that your candle has done on the top of a bushel barrel. When lawmakers hear from faithful families, they listen.

The Christian apologist, Austin Farrer, propels us to defend our cause. "It is commonly said that if rational argument is so seldom the cause of conviction, philosophical apologists must largely be wasting their shot. The premise is true, but the conclusion does not follow. For though argument does not create conviction, the lack of it destroys belief. What seems to be proved may not be embraced; but what no one shows the ability to defend

is quickly abandoned. Rational argument does not create belief, but it maintains a climate in which belief may flourish."

You must contend for your faith and your families.

In the end, I envision an America and California that former President Calvin Coolidge described a century ago. "We do not need more material development, we need more spiritual development. We do not need more intellectual power, we need more moral power. We do not need more knowledge, we need more character. We do not need more government, we need more culture. We do not need more law, we need more religion. We do not need more of the things that are seen, we need more of the things that are unseen. It is on that side of life that it is desirable to put the emphasis at the present time. If that side be strengthened, the other side will take care of itself."

I love you, my Catholic brothers and sisters. Our faiths differ in degree but not passion – our fight is one. We've educated California's children together for many year and I hope to continue that trajectory indefinitely into the future. Let's seize this moment, with boldness and prayer, to advance educational excellence for every child. Thank you, and God bless you all.