

Foundations Aid School Choice

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Two Downtown-based foundations rank in the top 15 nationwide in supporting the school choice movement, according to a recent report.

The Sarah Scaife Foundation ranks third at almost \$3.9 million in 2005 and another Scaife philanthropy, the Carthage Foundation, is 15th at \$950,000, says the study, *Strategic Grantmaking: Foundations and the School Privatization Movement*, produced by the Washington-based National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy.

The report ranks foundations on the basis of giving to organizations that advocate vouchers and education tax credits.

"In the Pennsylvania scheme of things, Scaife and Carthage have been consistent funders of conservative causes, in general, and school choice has been a constant part of the conservative ideological catechism," said Rick Cohen, the study's author and a national correspondent for the Boston-based *Nonprofit Quarterly*.

Besides Scaife and Carthage, other Pennsylvania supporters of the school choice movement are the John Templeton Foundation, which ranked fifth at nearly \$2.6 million, and the Annenberg Foundation, seventh, at \$2.1 million.

Barbara Slaney, vice president of the Sarah Scaife Foundation, said she hadn't seen the study and declined comment.

Nationally, foundations gave more than \$380 million to 104 school choice groups between 2002 to 2005, Cohen reported.

Topping the list of the most generous donors was the Walton Family Foundation in Arkansas, the philanthropy of the owners of Wal-Mart. That foundation gave \$25.3 million for school choice in 2005.

"I obviously believe they are placing their money in an area of educational research which is proving to be very fruitful," said Ronald Bowes, of the Pittsburgh Catholic Diocese. "Most of the studies on school choice are showing positive effects."

Bowes said Walton and other foundations helped keep the Road to Educational Achievement Through Choice Alliance solvent for many years.

An advocacy group for vouchers and tax credits, REACH promoted the Educational Improvement Tax Credit in Pennsylvania. It allows businesses to earmark money from tax bills for scholarships for private schools and educational improvement programs in public schools.

Bowes said the credits provide \$2 million a year for scholarships for grades K-12 in diocesan schools and \$1 million a year for diocesan preschools. He said the money reduced tuition for many parents and helped stop the enrollment decline in high schools, especially Bishop Canevin in Oakwood and Quigley Catholic in Baden.

Barbara Matassa, 57, of Oakmont is the grandmother of eight children who attend St. Irenaeus School in Oakmont with scholarships from the program and two who received scholarships in the past. She's a big booster of the tax credits.

"Without that, my grandkids couldn't be there," she said.

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