

Position Statement on Education

Recommendations by the Voice of the Poor Committee
Society of St. Vincent de Paul, Council of the United States

Everyone has the right to an education.

United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (2)

From Our President

**Vincentians envision
a more just society in which the
rights, responsibilities and
development of all people are
promoted.**

Rule of the Society (1)

Brother and Sister Vincentians,
Founder, Blessed Frederic Ozanam,
model teacher and scholar, servant of
the Poor and champion of social
reform, had a vision of hope calling
for charity and justice. Let us follow
in his footsteps as a Voice of the
Poor, by identifying the root causes of
poverty and contributing to their
elimination.

Yours in Vincent and Frederic,

Joseph Flannigan, National President

The Situation

According to US government statistics, 30,000,000 adults in the United States, an estimated 14 percent of the US population over the age of 16, lack basic literacy skills. They can barely read, write and understand written content. Another 63 million are only slightly more adept. This totals 93 million adults in the US aged 16 or older living in households or prisons without skills to enroll in post-secondary education or job training. (3) (4) (5) (6) While employment over the next decade is expected to increase by 15.6 million (2006-16), in the fastest growing occupations, workers will require post-secondary education or training as an associate or higher. (7)

Vincentians visit unemployed and low-skilled, minimum wage workers struggling to make ends meet. They see young single mothers with poor literacy skills who have no idea how they will ever get off public assistance. Vincentians visit the incarcerated; many lack basic education and now, with a criminal record, the hope of landing a legitimate job diminishes even further. Vincentians visit immigrants who have little chance of assimilation if they do not learn English. Vincentians call on high school dropouts and see children who lack educational opportunities because they live in neighborhoods where quality education is inaccessible. How can one hope to learn in sub-par, unsafe schools, with limited school supplies, outdated textbooks, often tired and frustrated teachers, and little encouragement? Success seems far, far away. The inability to obtain a proper education sets one up for a life of struggle. Feelings of inadequacy, low self worth, loss of dignity, and hopelessness follow. Accessible, affordable, and adequate educational opportunities are critical factors in alleviating poverty.

Studies show that educational success is impacted by access, funding, and societal factors. Poverty is one of the leading determiners of educational outcomes, most especially among minorities, migrants, the homeless, and single parent families. (8)

Children come to school in varying states of readiness and with a variety of special needs. Risk factors include mothers whose highest level of education was less than a high school diploma or having a primary home language other than English (8). While dropout rates improved slightly in 2007, the US drop out rates of Blacks and Hispanics far outweighed those of White students. (All races 11.8%, White, 7.7%; Black 13.8%; Hispanic, 29.5%) (9)

Per pupil expenditures range widely from state to state and from school district to school district causing an inequality in the services available to students. Poorer school districts are often unable to fund education to the same extent as wealthier districts. (10)

Education affects earning power and the ability to provide for families.

- 82% of children whose parents don't have a high school degree live in low income families
- 57% of children whose parents have a high school degree, but no college education, live in low income families
- 24% of children whose parents have some college live in low-income families (11)

Complicating matters is the difficulty of accumulating accurate data because of the varying methods by which educational statistics are compiled. (12) For example, most recent studies of census data show that many minorities are not counted in census gathering, a situation which affects decisions involving needed services and funding (13) Data is often misleading or inaccurate with states using different benchmarks (14) for comparisons. Data disproportionately misses minorities. The census bureau acknowledged that the 2000 Census over-counted 1.3 million (mostly Whites) and undercounted 4.5 million, mostly Blacks and Hispanics, "hard to find" immigrants, non English speaking residents and displaced homeowners who together make up roughly 14% of the U.S. population. This is a severe problem since census results are used to allocate billions of dollars for schools and other vital programs. (15)

Our Position

We must rethink the objectives of America's educational system. Practical training programs that put people back to work and educational fundamentals leading youth on the path to gainful employment after graduation are critical. America must invest in the education of its least. It is a matter of investing now or paying much more later.

Church Teaching

290. Maintaining employment depends more and more on one's professional capabilities. Instructional and educational systems must not neglect human or technological formation, which are necessary for gainfully fulfilling one's responsibilities. The ever more widespread necessity of changing jobs many times in one's lifetime makes it imperative that the educational system encourage people to be open to on-going updating and re-training. Young people should be taught to act upon their own initiative, to accept the responsibility of facing with adequate competencies the risks connected with a fluid economic context that is often unpredictable in the way it evolves. Equally indispensable is the task of offering suitable courses of formation for adults seeking re-training and for the unemployed. More generally, people need a concrete form of support as they journey in the world of work, starting precisely with formational systems, so that it will be less difficult to cope with periods of change, uncertainty and instability. Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church. (16)

Vatican II documents note that school is an especially important instrument of education designed to develop the intellect, and the ability to judge rightly, hand on the cultural legacy, foster a sense of values and prepare for professional life. "It promotes friendship among pupils of different talents and backgrounds and establishes a center whose work must be shared together by families, teachers, associations that foster cultural, civil and religious life, the civil society and entire community." (17)

Pope Paul VI in the encyclical, *The Declaration on Christian Education* said, "Circumstances of our time make it easier and more urgent: to educate young people and to continue the education of adults. (Those), more aware of their dignity, want an active part in social, economic and political life, and see an opportunity offered by technology, science and new means of communication, for mutual cultural and spiritual fulfillment....To fulfill her divine mandate to proclaim salvation and restore all things in Christ, the Church has a role in the progress and development of education." (18)

We call for...

- Providing access to a quality education for every child, particularly early education, including those living in poverty who are at greatest risk.
- Safe and nurturing learning environments that instill the value and joy of learning while teaching self-discipline and respect for oneself and others.
- Parental involvement and cooperation in a child's education, recognizing that "parents are the first educators, not the only educators of their children." (19)
- The availability of affordable and appropriate educational services to all children, recognizing that not all children begin their formal education with the same family or societal advantages.
- Early identification of at-risk children and intervention services offered that are appropriate to each child's needs.
- Children's rights. Every child should have a right to education and should not be penalized because of their family's legal status.
- Added efforts to ensure continuity in education for children from homeless families and families who move frequently to be monitored in compliance with the Mc Kinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Program. (20)
- Education that adequately prepares students so that they have the learning tools to become self-sufficient adults.
- An ongoing priority for vocational and adult education through GED programs, literacy programs and vocational programs that are accessible, affordable and adequate opening the door to employment opportunities.
- Apprenticeships, training programs and programs to retrain the unemployed must be made available in an open and transparent manner and be inclusive of those who are accepted. Education is a life long process.
- Fair governmental funding without discriminating against people who are least able to represent themselves or those who live in low-income areas.
- Choice in the selection of private or charter schools facilitated by government, particularly when the traditional public school system has failed to deliver educational services successfully.
- Public libraries to reflect the diverse needs of their communities in the services offered and in the selection of print and technological materials available.
- Providing access to basic education for children worldwide, especially those in impoverished areas and in places where gender inequality exists.

Vincentian Reflection—Blessed Frederic Ozanam, Advocate for Education

Founder Blessed Frederic Ozanam's call for change resonates today. Like Frederic, Vincentians today must speak out.

Blessed Frederic Ozanam described misery and its causes and believed the remedy will be found in "reform of morals through education rather than through legislation." In "To Good People!" written for *Nouvelle Ere (The New Era)*, Ozanam advocated for education noting that there is a place "in those schemes of reform, for adult night schools, for schools for apprentices, for Academies of Arts, and Trades, Public Libraries, Military Associations, Co-operative Societies." Blessed Frederic Ozanam desired that *people of good will* would hold "the conviction that public authorities of Paris have not discharged all their responsibility." He wrote, "...the time has not yet arrived to forget public starvation, simply because winter and cholera are no longer there to remind us of them." (21)

Charity is not sufficient. It treats the wounds, but it does not stop the blows that cause them.
Blessed Frederic Ozanam (22)

Education and Vincentian Action

As advocates we must work to ensure that educational and governmental institutions meet the needs of all citizens, including the migrant, homeless, immigrant, and non-English speaking residents, as well as those whose economic deprivations have affected their educational opportunities.

Recommendations for Conferences and Councils

Vincentians should...

- ♥ Consider the educational level of those we serve and the needs that they have for personal development and economic self-sufficiency. If there are children in the family, encourage the parents to keep their children in school until they have at least a 12th grade education and a diploma.
- ♥ Understand how funding of education at the school district, state and federal levels impacts the programs that are available to the people we serve.
- ♥ Act as advocates for those we serve, making sure that those with special educational needs (non-English speaking, students with disabilities, the homeless) receive the services they require and to which they are legally entitled.
- ♥ Facilitate appropriate referrals, especially for pre-school at-risk children and act as advocates for early intervention. Assisting parents in registering all school-age children is essential.
- ♥ Create programs that assist low income families with the cost of educational materials and special activities (field trips, rental of musical instruments, etc.).
- ♥ Encourage local libraries to purchase print and technological materials that reflect the needs of diverse communities.
- ♥ Contact officials responsible for area adult education offerings asking that free or low-cost GED and ESL programs be scheduled. When not available, Council/Conference work may also include sponsoring adults in need of these programs. No work is foreign to the Society.
- ♥ Consider sponsoring literacy training programs or participating in existing programs as mentors for those desiring to read or learn English.
- ♥ Become knowledgeable about job training, welfare to work programs, and apprenticeships so that they may make appropriate referrals.
- ♥ Vote in school and library district budget referendums, keeping in mind the needs of the people they serve.

Advocacy Initiatives

Conferences and Councils should set-aside time to write letters or to e-mail officials at their school districts, state or federal levels concerning education-related issues and needs related to those who are Poor.

- √ Be aware of the contents of local school budgets and support measures that assist those in greatest need.
- √ Urge officials to keep TANF (Temporary Aid to Needy Families) monies for intended dedicated programs, such as welfare to work job training and not divert its use to general budget expenditures.
- √ Advocate at the state and federal levels, urging that educational mandates be supported with adequate funding.
- √ Support legislation that provides refundable tax credits/deductions for limited income families with children to help pay for educational expenses including tuition; support tax credits for personal and corporate donations to organizations providing scholarships for children.

Vincentian Reflection—Blessed Frederic Ozanam, Teacher

Blessed Frederic Ozanam, founder of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, servant of the Poor, professor at the Sorbonne University with doctorates in law and literature, journalist, orator, husband and father is an example for our time. The following reflection from *Apostle in a Top Hat*, describes his teaching skills.

“When students entered his lecture hall, they knew they must be alert to every word, for he had the true scholar’s ability to compress a whole chapter into a sentence. They learned to listen with particular intensity to his preliminary outline, for to this he always rigidly adhered. They recognized in this a mark of respect for them as persons; it was obvious that he valued his students’ time too greatly to cause them to waste an instant of it through any slackness in his teaching effort.....He possessed a true genius for stimulating curiosity, arousing interest, imparting knowledge, and inducing students to think, to search, and to speculate. Following the Socratic method, he led his pupils but at the same time compelled them to exercise their minds and imaginations, so as to make the most of their latent capacities and to develop the priceless habit of hard work.” (23)

Global Challenges

Children are not in school, because there is no school to go to or there is no money to pay the tuition fees or the teachers' salary; because they are forced to work for their own survival or to support their family; because they have been abducted and thrust into situations of armed conflict, with schools closed or destroyed; because they belong to religious or ethnic minorities; or simply because it is impossible for them to find a school within the range of their possibilities. Such children, deprived as they are of educational opportunities, are most liable to exclusion from development and, excluded from development, will most probably remain illiterate for the rest of their lives. This vicious cycle must be broken. H.E. Msgr. Celestino Migliore, Oct. 20, 2003, address to the United Nations for The Holy See (24)

An estimated 73 million primary age children are not in school. In Oceania, almost two-thirds of children of secondary school age are out of school, while in sub-Saharan Africa, only a quarter of children of secondary school age are in secondary school. (25)

Vincentian Reflection— Education in the Early Work of the Society

The Vincentians of Blessed Frederic Ozanam's time identified education as a means to lift children out of poverty.

"...we maintain a house of apprenticeship for printing where we lodge, feed, and instruct ten poor children, nearly all orphans.... They learn printing in the fine studios of M. Bailly, and some of our members give them lessons in Scripture, calculus, sacred history, etc. An ecclesiastic friend of ours teaches them catechism. There are even two more advanced who understand a little Latin, which is necessary now in order to be admitted as editor and even as compositor in the better printing houses of Paris." Blessed Frederic Ozanam, July 23, 1836 (26)

The St. Vincent de Paul Society shares in the Vincentian ministry of teaching. Today the Vincentian Family continues to educate domestically and internationally through schools, such as De Paul University, and special works, such as teaching English to immigrants and basic computer training.

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