Guest opinion

**Guest opinion: Catholic schools serve students with diverse needs**

By TIM UHL
Feb 25, 2016
Darrell Ehrlick’s Feb. 21 column (“Why public education matters most”) deserves a response. As the superintendent of Montana Catholic schools — effectively the seventh largest school district in the state of Montana — I believe Ehrlick is a bit misguided in his criticism of private schools such as our Catholic schools.

Catholic schools are not opposed to public schools. In fact, in areas such as Billings we have fruitful partnerships between excellent educators. We share the same dedication to the education of Montanans to become fruitful, productive citizens. Billings Catholic Schools, for example, have produced excellent citizens who have gone on to become valuable leaders and public servants.

Where we differ, however, is our belief that education in a faith-based environment is the best kind of education. We believe in an excellent, rigorous education supported by our Catholic faith. We see our students come alive. Our faculty and staff are committed to our mission. Our parents are engaged and active. And, most importantly, our students are happy and are growing. Our Catholic schools are places where students thrive.

The questions surrounding school funding are complex. Catholic school parents pay the same income and property taxes to support their local public schools. Their enrollment in private schools, in fact, saves the school district millions of dollars every year. We have supported efforts to set up scholarship organizations to provide tuition assistance because we believe that opens up possibilities for students in the middle and working classes. These efforts are not done at the expense of our public education system.

Ehrlick suggests that Catholic schools can “pick and choose” their students. That is certainly true. The foundation of Catholic schools is parents committed to the mission — parents committed to support the high behavioral and educational standards of our schools. He goes on to suggest that we don’t accept students with special needs or students from poverty. Nothing could be further from the truth.
Our Catholic schools enroll students with special needs who would qualify for special education. But the same funding available for students in public schools is not available for students in private schools. If the state were to allow that funding to travel with the student, we would see many students travel to faith-based schools.

The notion that Montana Catholic Schools do not serve poverty students is ludicrous. Statewide more than a quarter of our students qualify for free/reduced lunch and our schools enroll more than 40 percent non-Catholics. In Billings, our schools are willing to work with any family committed to Catholic education. There is a financial sacrifice to enroll in our Catholic schools but there is a financial sacrifice for any family’s priority. Show me how a family spends money, the old saying goes, and you’ll figure out that family’s priority.

Our priority is to provide excellent Catholic schools for Montana students and families in order to educate our future leaders.

*Dr. Tim Uhl, of Helena, is superintendent of Montana Catholic Schools.*

Statewide more than a quarter of our students qualify for free/reduced lunch and our schools enroll more than 40 percent non-Catholics.