



Hello!

As the month of April approaches conclusion, the work of the legislature is in high gear and speeding to a close. This year, the legislature is scheduled to adjourn on May 7, and as the Catholic Conference still has a number of hot-button issues, this newsletter will be very short.

There are four primary issues to address: (1) Senate Bill 2494; (2) House Bill 4711; (3) the state budget situation; and (4) an update on the reauthorization of the federal elementary and secondary education act (ESEA).

Legislative Issues

Senate Bill 2494 (Vouchers) – State Senator James Meeks (D-Chicago), also the pastor of Chicago’s Salem Baptist Church (largest African-American Church in the state), came out in December for a school voucher system, embodied in Senate Bill 2494, which will allow families enrolled in the lowest performing and most over-crowded Chicago public schools access to a voucher to pay tuition at local state recognized nonpublic schools. Frustration with Chicago public school’s failing test scores, dropout rates and persistent violence led him to conclude a different approach was necessary.

In March, extensive testimony on the proposal was heard in the Senate Executive Committee’s Subcommittee on Education. CCI, the Illinois Policy Institute and Agudath Israel testified in support. On Wednesday, March 24th, the bill passed the Executive Committee by a vote of 8-2-2. The next day, the bill passed the full Senate by a vote of 33-20-3! Representative Kevin Joyce (D- Worth) picked up sponsorship of the bill in the House and our advocacy continued. Several weeks later the bill was passed by the House Executive Committee by a vote of 10 to 1. The bill now waits the final step – final consideration of the House. The progress on this bill is historic and important to our entire agenda. We expect a vote in the next week and a half and are working hard to put this bill on the Governor’s desk.

Senate Bill 2494 will not be of direct benefit to parents currently enrolled in Catholic schools, but it has the potential to help Catholic elementary schools in or near Chicago and place a foot in the door of the important policy proposal that the state can improve our educational system by supporting a parents’ right to choose the schools best suited to the needs of their children. Please call your State Representative as soon as possible and share this message:

“Senate Bill 2494 provides educational choices to families enrolled in Chicago’s lowest performing and most overcrowded schools. This is a good way to test a public/private educational partnership. Please vote YES.”

To find the contact information for your State Representative, go to www.ilga.gov and click on Legislator Lookup in the lower, right-hand portion of the page. You can then look up your State Representative by district #, your home or school address, or zip code. You can also call our offices for assistance at 312-368-1066 or 217-528-9200.

A fact sheet explaining the bill can be found at the Catholic Conference web site: www.catholicconferenceofillinois.org

House Bill 4711 (Prohibit Unfunded Mandates) – This bill, introduced in January by Representative Roger Eddy (R-Hutsonville), stipulates that school districts do not have to comply with any future unfunded state mandates. The bill exempts certain requirements – such as safety codes and graduation requirements – but is otherwise designed to give school districts more financial flexibility. Upon request of CCI, Representative Eddy amended his bill to include nonpublic schools. CCI supports the legislation, and the bill passed the House on March 18 and the Senate Education Committee on April 20. We are hopeful of passing the bill in the Senate before adjournment.

Education Programs & State Budget Situation – CCI, in coalition with Agudath Israel, the Illinois Coalition of Nonpublic Schools (ICNS) and the American Association of Textbook Publishers, has been working to restore funding to the Textbook Loan, School Safety Block Grant and Transportation Reimbursement Programs since last July. We gave testimony twice at regular Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) meetings, at all eight of their statewide budget hearings, and at appropriations hearings in the House and Senate. We have met with the State Superintendent, the Chairman of ISBE and with members of the legislature and leadership throughout the spring legislative session. In early February, our coalition began a letter-writing effort targeted at the Governor’s office. Schools and LAPs were provided an alert and a sample letter.

To augment this effort, we asked Representative Chapa LaVia (D-Aurora) and Senator Ira Silverstein (D-Chicago) to introduce legislation in the House and Senate respectively to restore funding to the Textbook Loan Program: House Bill 6096 and Senate Bill 3530. Our short term goal is to sign up as many co-sponsors as possible. We currently have 26 co-sponsors in the House and 16 in the Senate.

The Governor and the Illinois General Assembly will make the final budget decisions in May. Unfortunately, it appears that to avoid direct responsibility for more funding cuts, the General Assembly will once again pass a lump sum appropriation. Our advocacy efforts to date tell us the state bureaucrats at ISBE will not fund textbook loan or transportation reimbursement on their own. Obviously, the state’s fiscal condition is terrible: bills are being paid months late and the budget hole for next year could be over \$12 billion. However, ISBE’s continued opposition to any funding for these programs – particularly Textbook Loan – is difficult to understand and not in keeping with the Board’s strategic goals, which call for service to ALL schools and ALL students.

We continue to work for some direct funding from the legislature to these programs. Even if successful, the massive delays in state spending could push the reinstatement of the programs back many months. At some point in the future, the state's fiscal condition will stabilize, the General Assembly will get back to line item budgeting, and the support in the legislature we have built up for these programs will see them restored. Until then, we must do our best to persevere and be heard.

Reauthorization of Elementary and Secondary Education Act – On Friday, March 12, 2010, the US Department of Education released its proposal for the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Act (ESEA), A Blueprint for Reform. In response to this document, which also reflects the wishes of the Obama Administration, the Congressional education committees have been holding hearings on various sections of the proposal. The House Education and Labor Committee (E&L) held most of its hearings in March and also requested input from the public through email comments by March 26.

So far in April, the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee (HELP) has held four hearings and has scheduled three more up to May 4. The Chairman, Senator Tom Harkin (D-Iowa), requested that the public communicate its concerns and suggestions to his committee by Friday, May 7 to: ESEAcments@help.senate.gov

I submitted the same comments to the Senate Committee as I did earlier to the House Committee. Those comments were included in the March Newsletter and are included here again:

Under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the most recent form of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, many Catholic schools have found accessing services for their students and teachers to be very complicated and frustrating. Therefore, the following priorities should be addressed in reauthorization:

- 1) Equitable participation by students in nonpublic schools has been a requirement in ESEA since it was first passed in 1965. This has been done to ensure and maintain the child benefit theory, meaning every child should benefit from the government's effort no matter where their parents choose to educate them. This practice must be maintained.*
- 2) The provisions relating to the participation of nonpublic school students, teachers, and parents in ESEA programs should be combined into one Title. These provisions are currently referenced in three separate Titles and language differs. Reference to this new Title should be referenced in each ESEA program's statutory language to direct program coordinators to the requirements for nonpublic school participation.*
- 3) In recent years funds generated by students in nonpublic schools have been diverted to public school programs in which our students cannot participate, such as Supplemental Education Services and All School Improvement programs. These "set asides" do great harm to our community of schools and families, and they should not be allowed to divert resources from each child.*
- 4) Accordingly, ESEA should be changed so that the proportional share of funds to serve nonpublic school students and teachers in nonpublic schools will be based on the total allocation of a program prior to a school district setting aside funds which only public schools can use.*

- 5) *Additionally, the law should be amended to require state education agencies, instead of local districts, to make the determination of the proportional share of funding for all federal programs which require services for nonpublic school students and teachers and to inform both the local public school agencies and nonpublic schools of the amount of their proportional share of such funding.*
- 6) *Finally, the law should allow state education entities to subcontract to a third party or private entity to administer the equitable participation of Title programs for nonpublic school students and teachers. The third party would carry out consultation and design and implement a program of equitable services for the benefit of those students and teachers.*

Please use this opportunity to send your own comments, including examples of personal experiences in the current federal education programs. No one can be certain that a bill to reauthorize ESEA will be introduced anytime soon, but we must impress Congress with the importance of improving access to federal education programs for Catholic schools students and teachers.

Administrative Issues

State Recognition - CCI has spent the last year working with ISBE to draft administrative rules for the governing of the nonpublic school recognition program. These rules are taking the place of the current Policies and Guidelines Manual controlling state recognition operations. We were successful in shaping these rules to meet our needs and expectations. In February, the Nonpublic School Advisory Committee began meeting with ISBE staff to begin revisions to the probe document (used in state recognition visits) to match the new rules. The new probe document will not be used in the field until next school year.

Principal Certification - ISBE and the Illinois Board of Higher Education are working on a program of revising how principals are certified in Illinois. They have provided a briefing to CCI and ICNS indicating that new administrative rules implementing the changes would be promulgated in April or May. CCI stands ready to ensure Catholic schools and Catholic school personnel are represented and equitably treated in the process.

Facebook Page for Catholic School Advocacy - Always hoping to improve our system and methods of communication, and eager to invite more into new technologies, I have begun a Facebook page for Catholic School Advocacy in Illinois. Facebook users simply need to look up the page at

<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Springfield-IL/CCI-Catholic-School-Advocacy-in-Illinois/124415842483?created>

or do a search on Facebook of Catholic School Advocacy. Being a fan of the page will allow you to receive real time updates and action alerts, links to pertinent articles and videos and access to the monthly newsletter. Sign up as a fan today!

Thank you for reading and for supporting the work of the Catholic Conference of Illinois. I hope that your progression to the end of the school year is not as hectic or illogical as the General Assembly's end of session. May God bless you and the work of your schools.

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