



CCI September Newsletter 2011

Hello!

I hope and trust your summer was restful and regenerating. As a parent of children attending a Catholic school, I know the beginning of the school year is an exciting and busy time. We are working back into schedules, meeting new people and learning new things. I hope this first CCI newsletter of the 2011-12 school year will augment these experiences, at least in the realm of Catholic schools' interaction with the state and public policy initiatives.

Perhaps the most important request I have of you in the new school year is to ensure your school has appointed a Legislative Action Person (LAP) for the year. In the next few weeks, I will mail to each school a letter formally requesting this appointment with a contact form and a LAP Manual describing our advocacy system and the expectations for all. Your LAP may be the same person as appointed last year or someone new. You may appoint more than one LAP. The LAPs' primary responsibility will be disseminating this newsletter and any action alerts to your school and parish community. Many schools have success in appointing a serving board member as LAP, but whomever is chosen, please ask their commitment to the essential work of advocating for CCI's education agenda in service to your and all Catholic schools in Illinois.

Another encouraged LAP activity is the building of a relationship between school and local state representative and state senator. This is best done by inviting him or her into the school to observe the good work being done there. Coming with the letter asking for LAP appointments will be a small "advocacy card" that describes our advocacy agenda and can be used to engage your local legislators.

The following is a description of the outcomes of the 2011 spring session, plans for the future and a recap of important deadlines for nonpublic school state recognition and various immunization reports. Please take time to review it all and share what is appropriate with your staff and school families.

Legislative Issues

Grant Programs – As reported over the last two years, the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) cut funding to most grant programs, including Textbook Loan, Transportation Reimbursement and the Educational Improvement and School Safety Block Grant. The Catholic Conference of Illinois (CCI) has testified at every budget and committee hearing, attended many ISBE board meetings, met with the State Superintendent, every legislative leader and the Governor's office, and introduced legislation to restore funding to these programs.

This year, to rally support for funding the textbook program, we introduced legislation in both the House (**House Bill 1199**) and Senate (**Senate Bill 1964**) to restore full funding. We used these pieces of legislation for focusing grassroots advocacy and as a means for proving support among members of the General Assembly. As a result, funding for the textbook program (\$9.5 million) was included in the budget passed by the Senate but not in the budget passed by the House. The Senate then passed the House budget but attached a number of funding items, including textbooks, to an agreed Capitol Bill that funds building projects throughout the state. The Senate passed the expanded Capitol Bill, but the House refused the changes.

Unfortunately, on the last day of June the State Senate backed down and voted to rescind the \$270 million in spending that had been attached to the Capitol Bill (including the textbook money). Governor Quinn, before signing the budget bills, cut another \$376 million from the budget, including \$100 million from education (transportation and regional offices of education). The result is that a reduced version of the original House budget, which cut several hundred million from education and did not restore textbook funding, is the law.

Even as that occurs, both the Senate Democratic caucus and the Governor claim the 2012 fiscal year budget remains unfinished and advocate a supplementary appropriations bill be taken up in November or January. The Senate claims to have found funding sources from within the budget and the Governor's staff indicated the funds he cut last night could also be used for additional spending. This action would give us another chance to fund textbooks in the upcoming school year.

However, the failure of the legislature to fund textbooks in this initial budget – after several years of increases for this program, the safety block grant and transportation reimbursement – is extremely frustrating. Obviously, the state's fiscal condition (\$8 billion in the red) is a primary culprit but that such an important program can be continually ignored is hard to accept. Most of the state's educational grant programs have suffered the same fate, but two grant programs considered “sacred cows” – Preschool for All and Bilingual Education – have endured only modest cuts and continue to receive substantial funding. Despite our best efforts, neither the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) nor the Governor's office has elected to regard the textbook program in a similar vein. We have been left with a substantial number of legislators in our corner, but they have not been enough.

On the plus side, we completed our work with ISBE on legislation to redesign the Textbook Loan Program to a Textbook Block Grant that will operate in a manner similar to the School Safety Block Grant – meaning a school's share of textbook money would be sent directly to the school for the purchase of secular textbooks. The textbook redesign passed the General Assembly, as **House Bill 3115** (Gordon-D), and was signed into law by the Governor on August 25. The enactment of this legislation ensures the program will run more efficiently once funding is restored.

School Choice – One of the effects of CCI’s work last year on the voucher bill (and how it came to passage) is there are a lot of people trying to get in on the act now. There were seven bills introduced this year that included some type of school choice component. In line with the Department’s preference, CCI designed and introduced the Educational Improvement Tax Credit (EITC) legislation:

House Bill 3479 (Yarborough-D & Senger-R) – creates a tax credit for contributions, by any taxpayer, to qualified student assistance organizations. The credit may not exceed \$100,000 for any one taxpayer and will total 90% of the contribution. SAOs will use the money to provide educational support services or to provide scholarships covering the qualified educational expenses of low-income students enrolling in a nonpublic school. At least 50% of expenses must be used on students living within the boundaries of failing or overcrowded public schools as defined in the legislation. The program will include statewide coverage and be capped at \$30 million annually. Unfortunately, the bill was assigned to a subcommittee of the Revenue Committee, and we were unable to pass it out.

Senate Bill 1932 (Murphy-R) – Entitled the School Choice Act, this legislation is exactly the same as the voucher bill that narrowly failed in the House last spring (Chicago program focused on chronically failing and overcrowded schools). CCI testified for the bill in committee but communicated to Senator Murphy’s staff our preferred approach was the tax credit legislation in the House. The bill passed the Senate Education Committee (7 to 3), but it was not brought up for consideration of the full Senate.

There are a number of reasons we are having a difficult time gaining traction for these school choice bills, including the state’s financial condition, the transition from a voucher to tax credit concept and the state’s political environment. The prevailing ideology of our legislature and the Governor, backed by the powerful teachers’ unions, leave little room for meaningful education reform which must begin and end with empowering parents to make the best education decisions for their children.

We should not lose hope. Politics is dynamic and we have seen a wave of change in our neighboring states of Indiana and Wisconsin that brought about new and expanded school choice programs. We continue to work to that end in Illinois.

ADDITIONAL LEGISLATIVE ISSUES

House Bill 1240 (Franks-D) – This legislation provides that upon request of a school, school district, community college district, or private school, any information obtained by a school district pursuant through criminal history records checks and checks of the Statewide Sex Offender Database and Statewide Child Murderer and Violent Offender Against Youth Database within the last year must be made available to that school, school district, community college district, or private school. CCI supports the bill, and it passed both the House and Senate and awaits the Governor’s signature.

House Bill 2870 (Chapa-LaVia-D) – This legislation seeks to require all Illinois schools to ask their students if their parents are currently enlisted in the Armed Forces and then report that data to the Illinois State Board of Education via the Student Information System (SIS). CCI met with the sponsor and asked her to exempt nonpublic schools as they do not use the SIS system. She agreed, the amendment was adopted, and CCI dropped its opposition to the bill.

Senate Bill 1619 (Steans-D) – This legislation would require public schools to utilize programs of comprehensive sex education when choosing to teach any form of sex education. The bill effectively prohibits abstinence only education in public schools. CCI opposes the bill, and we provided testimony in the Senate Public Health Committee. The bill passed the Senate with the minimum number of votes, but was not taken up by the House due to insufficient support. We know the proponents of this legislation will continue their work, and we continue our opposition.

ESEA Reauthorization – I travelled to Washington DC in early March for a meeting of the Federal Assistance Advisory Committee (FAAC) to discuss with USSCB staff the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Reauthorization is unlikely this year, but priorities were discussed. In accordance with the superintendent's desire, I pushed to include the idea of establishing an alternative model (third party provider) for determining and distributing federal grant dollars for services entitled to Catholic schools, administrators, teachers and students, and USSCB included it. A full list of our priorities in the reauthorization is available upon request.

Administrative Issues

ISBE & State Recognition – Our contacts and avenues of communication with the ISBE are better than they ever have been. As example, we worked with ISBE to tailor the new principal certification requirements, alternative teacher certification process, teacher safety legislation and textbook block grant legislation to meet the needs of Catholic schools. The recently passed reform of the teacher certification process appears to hold intact the positions we seek to protect in these areas. We have also engaged ISBE in talks on federal grant program funding (Title & IDEA) to varying degrees of success. And finally, we have designed and codified a state recognition of nonpublic schools process that suits the characteristics and needs of religious nonpublic schools.

Still, there are a number of challenges. ISBE's failure to assist in our effort to restore textbook funding is a setback in relations. ISBE is first and foremost influenced by the public school apparatus, and their inability to support funding for programs that serve both public and nonpublic schools is troubling.

Moreover, due to ISBE's budget shortfalls and a lack of priority, the process for state recognition has not been well run. Now that we are close to working through the rulemaking process (adjustments pending), have completed the probe document, set a new method for scheduling visits and are geared to begin discussion of the inclusion of private accrediting agencies, I hope this will turn around. But we have just been introduced to our 5th division administrator in about as many years, and there are no guarantees. Maintaining the recognition status of all our schools, including securing state recognition for a number of new schools, is our top priority and so far has been successful.

Catholic School President/Principal Conference – CCI will co-sponsor a statewide Catholic School President & Principal Conference for elementary and secondary school administrators on March 18-20, 2012, in Bloomington/Normal. This event will be similar to the Summit for Catholic School Education in Illinois held in February of 2007. We have reserved space at the Normal Marriot, will also use the newly refurbished chapel at the Illinois State University Newman Center, and have an outline of an agenda set including a keynote speaker. The theme of the conference is “The Vocation of Leadership” and the speaker is Fr. Anthony Ciorra, S.J., Dean, Graduate School of Religion and Religious Education, Fordham University.

You should have or soon will receive additional information about this event from your diocesan school office. Please do all you can to participate in this important event.

IMPORTANT FORMS & DEADLINES

Nonpublic Registration, Enrollment and Staff Report – This report is scheduled to become available on the IWAS system beginning on or about October 1, 2011. Completed reports must be received by ISBE no later than December 31, 2011. Nonpublic schools that have registered with ISBE at least once in the past must submit their data online via IWAS. Nonpublic schools that have never registered must submit their data using paper form 87-01: http://www.isbe.net/research/htmls/np_entity.htm. This report (and Immunization Data) must be submitted before the annual Application for Recognition and School Calendar can be submitted!

Nonpublic School Application for State Recognition and School Calendar – This IWAS system is also schedule to be opened on or about October 1, 2011 and be due December 31, 2011. As was the case last year, ISBE will include an affirmation checklist in the application that was typically part of the probe document. My office sent guidance to you on how to complete the checklist last year. If you need the guidance again, please let me know.

State Recognition: Snapshot of Important Dates

- October 1 Nonpublic Registration, Enrollment and Staff Report available on IWAS *
- Nonpublic School App. for State Recognition and School Calendar available on IWAS
- Student Health Data – Immunization system available on IWAS *
- November 15 Completed Health/Immunization Data Reports Due
- December 31 Nonpublic Registrations, Enrollment and Staff Report & Nonpublic School Application for State Recognition and School Calendar Due

** Nonpublic Registration, Enrollment and Staff Report and Student Health Data – Immunization must be submitted before Recognition Application and Calendar will be accepted.*

I apologize for the length of this month's newsletter. My intention and effort has been to abbreviate these newsletters and focus on only active issues. However, as the summer has gone by without a newsletter and certain updates needed to be provided, this month went long. It will be shorter next month.

May God bless you in your work on behalf of Catholic education.

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