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As this interminable winter proceeds, the General Assembly came back to Springfield this week and from this point through the end of May will continue the work of the spring legislative session. This beginning of the legislative session seems an appropriate time for this newsletter to explain the Catholic Conference of Illinois' (CCI) advocacy plans in the area of Catholic schools, remind you of the impact of some new laws and to once again promote ideas for each school's Legislative Action People (LAP).

LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

CCI typically deals with three distinct area of education policy when it comes to Catholic schools: (1) school choice (2) state regulations, and (3) funding of grant programs.

Advancing School Choice

CCI has joined a school choice coalition, headed by the relatively new group Educational Choice Illinois (formerly known as Freedom to Learn), in an effort to bolster our efforts at the state capitol.

Educational Choice Illinois (ECI), is a 501c3 public charity, dedicated to advancing public policy that expands quality educational options for Illinois children in need. ECI believes all children are unique and parents, not bureaucracies, are best able to choose which schools match their individual needs. ECI works to advocate for policies that support a 21st educational system designed to best serve children. Policies that provide:

- CHOICE - allow publicly funded private schools to be an option for parents & children
- EQUALIZATION - equalize per-pupil funding between charter, traditional & private schools
- DATA - provide parents academic and nonacademic data to make informed choices
- ACCOUNTABILITY - make all schools accountable by tying eligibility for public dollars to performance; high performers should be expanded and low performers lose public funds
- AUTONOMY - give traditional schools autonomy; allow independent management of curriculum, budgets, hiring and firing of staff, work hours, vendors and school culture.
- TALENT - encourage new talent to enter teaching; current certification requirements should be removed or drastically reduced as a barrier to enter into a career in education.

In pursuit of these goals, Ed-Choice Illinois is building a coalition of nonpublic schools, corporate interests, policy think tanks and parents interested in better options for their kids. The group has recently brought on staff and their work is already making a difference in Chicago and Springfield. Soon, they will publish a set of principles in school choice that we hope will become the basis of future legislative efforts. You can follow their progress through these social media links:

<https://twitter.com/choice4kids> & <https://www.facebook.com/choice4kids>

Regulation, Regulation and More Regulation

Every year, members of the General Assembly think up and introduce bills seeking to implement new ideas for state regulation of schools. Many of these regulations focus on public schools, but there are always a number intended for nonpublic schools. CCI spends a significant amount of time either trying to defeat or negotiate these bills, and we have already begun the work this year – negotiating issues of crisis planning for schools and TB tests for teachers. We typically do pretty well in this area, but it takes a lot of work. Over the next four months, I will keep you updated through this newsletter and alerts issued through our Illinois Catholic Advocacy Network (I-CAN). For more information on I-CAN, please keep reading.

Restore Block Grant Funding

The Textbook Block Grant came into existence in 1975. Its purpose is to provide secular textbooks, learning materials and instructional computer software to **public** and state-recognized **nonpublic** school students grades K-12. Funding for the program is **not** limited to paper textbooks; the purchase of “instructional computer software, and electronic textbooks and the technological equipment necessary to gain access to and use electronic textbooks” is authorized in the statute.

There seems to be some question among Illinois policy-makers about the necessity of textbooks, paper or electronic, in the modern classroom. However, according to the study *Access to Textbooks, Instructional Materials, Equipment, and Technology: Inadequacy and Inequality in California's Public Schools* completed by Jeannie Oakes, Presidential Professor Graduate School of Education and Information Studies at UCLA:

it is universally acknowledged that textbooks and instructional materials are fundamental and essential to education. On the most obvious level, they are fundamental and essential to education because they are the primary tools that schools use to provide students with access to the knowledge and skills they are expected to learn. Considerable research has established that textbooks and materials contribute to students' academic achievement . . .

a large body of international studies and some research in the U.S. make clear that having textbooks for use in the classroom and at home has a positive effect on academic achievement.

At its most recent funding level of \$42.8 million in Fiscal Year 2009, the Textbook Block Grant provided approximately \$40 per student to use for the purchase of approved materials, and served every grade on a two-year cycle: Kindergarten thru 6 one year; grades 7 thru 12 the next. That year, according to ISBE's published analysis, the block grant impacted 2.1 million students and 164,000 educators by providing 849,214 paper and electronic instructional items to pupils in grades 7 through 12.

There are not many grant programs in ISBE's budget that have had as far-reaching an impact for as long a time as the Textbook Block Grant. Funding this program ensures resources are utilized to purchase needed, up-to-date instructional materials, paper and electronic, for all Illinois' students grades K thru 12. No other state funded education program can make that guarantee. In this way, the Textbook Block Grant's purpose is essentially related to the first goal of the ISBE's strategic

plan of ensuring that “every student will demonstrate academic achievement and be prepared for success after high school.”

The Educational Improvement and School Safety Block Grant, also known as the ADA Block Grant, began to provide **public** and state-recognized **nonpublic** schools per-pupil basis funding to meet otherwise unfunded education, health and safety mandates in 2008. For nonpublic schools in particular, the statute requires the block grant’s resources provide reimbursements for local, state and federal health and safety mandates such as fingerprint-based criminal history checks, the purchase of Automated External Defibrillators, the implementation of School Crisis Plans, and many other expectations of fire, health and safety codes. The existence of the School Safety Block Grant allowed policy makers to at least partially fund the many unfunded school safety mandates the General Assembly adds to each year.

The Governor and the General Assembly have demonstrated an understanding of the requirements of ensuring school safety in the past year through the creation of the *School Security and Standards Task Force* and by enacting new school safety measures (Senate Bill 1625). In addition, CCI has worked with ISBE on legislation to be filed this year that will require nonpublic schools hold an annual review meeting to ensure their crisis planning and school safety drills are up to date. However, the legislature and governmental agencies like ISBE fail to ensure the implementation of these measures when they do not provide funding for new or existing school safety mandates. Hopefully, recommendations for funding will be part of the Task Force’s report due this month. We should begin by restoring funding to the School Safety Block Grant, so the General Assembly could again begin to meet its responsibilities in ensuring the health and safety of all Illinois’ students in all Illinois’ schools.

In Fiscal Year 2009, the School Safety Block Grant was funded at \$74.8 million and broke down to approximately \$36 a student, grades K thru 12. In Fiscal Year 2010, funding was reduced by 75 percent. In the next fiscal year, under the continued pressure of Illinois’ budget crisis and the greased skids of lump-sum appropriations, the block grant’s funding was eliminated entirely.

The requirements associated with School Safety Block Grant expenditures in nonpublic schools, and their conformity with safety mandates of local, state and/or the federal government, proves the ADA Block Grant’s alignment to the third goal of ISBE’s strategic plan, which states “every school will offer a safe and healthy learning environment for all students.” In today’s environment, the importance of the School Safety Block Grant hardly requires explanation. It provides resources to protect students and in so doing, conforms to ISBE’s strategic goals.

House Bill 1625 – This legislation (now law) amends the School Safety Drill Act to require that the one annual law enforcement drill already required focuses on a reverse evacuation scenario. It also clarifies that this drill is intended to “address and prepare” school personnel, meaning student participation is not required. A local law enforcement agency is required to contact the school about participating in the drill. If a mutually agreed upon date cannot be found, the school will conduct the drill without participation of the law enforcement agency. This is not a new drill, just a new focus for an existing drill.

House Bill 3190 – This legislation (now law) amends the School Code and the Communicable Disease Prevention Act and requires that, *beginning July 1, 2014*, upon entering the 6th and 12th grade of any public, private, or parochial school, a student shall present to the school proof of having received an (meningitis) immunization containing meningococcal conjugate vaccine. Please note the effective date of this law is for next school year, not the current school year.

Concealed Carry – There seems to be some confusion as to how the new law allowing concealed carry of firearms in Illinois affects schools. The law clearly prohibits the carrying of firearms into or on real property or a building under the control of an elementary or secondary school, pre-school, and childcare facility, regardless of whether the individual carrying the weapon has a concealed carry license. The law also requires that schools, pre-schools, and childcare facilities post at their property entrances and building entrances an official sign notifying the public that weapons are prohibited in the premises. You should not create your own sign; the official sign can be downloaded free from the Illinois State Police web site here: <https://ccl4illinois.com/ccw/Public/Signage.aspx>. The sign must be printed in color on white paper, and you may have to re-size the sign so that it is 4 inches high and 6 inches wide.

I-CAN

Illinois Catholic Advocacy Network (I-CAN) – CCI has adopted this technology to improve our advocacy efforts in Springfield across the board. Our Principal and Legislative Action Person (LAP) email lists are now housed in this database and our action alerts are better designed and MUCH easier to act on. In fact, after receiving an action alert through the I-CAN network, you will now be able to send a pre-drafted email to your state representative and state senator in as little as three clicks and under a minute. It can't be beat!

I-CAN is a grassroots advocacy email network, and the best news is you do not have to be a principal or LAP to sign up for I-CAN. If you care about Catholic schools (or any other issues the Church speaks on), you can sign up today and be an informed and active participant. When signing up for I-CAN you will be asked for both an email address and home address so we can pinpoint your state lawmakers. You will also be allowed to sign up for specific issue areas, so that you can receive alerts on issues you care about and not for those you don't.

Please go to <http://capwiz.com/ilcatholic/mlm/signup/>, and fill out the form. CCI does the rest.

In addition to signing up for I-CAN, LAPs should be focused on building a relationship between your school and your state legislators, in the House and Senate. Because there are a lot of bad voting records out there, I do not recommend holding events awarding legislators, but having your state representative and state senator into your school for a tour, so they can witness the good and essential work being done there, is always a good idea. Please contact me if you need any help with this.

Thank you for all your continued help and support – what is described above is our only method for influencing public policy debates in Springfield. May God bless you.

Zach Wichmann
Director of Government Relations
Catholic Conference of Illinois