



CCI December Newsletter 2011

Hello!

Although the fall veto session focused on a number of important tax and budget issues (without coming to any resolution), the two-week session was relatively quiet on education issues. However, the work continues on behalf of Catholic schools in Illinois. The Catholic Conference of Illinois (CCI) has been busy attempting to (1) influence the Illinois State Board of Education's (ISBE) Fiscal Year 2013 proposed budget, (2) push forward on state recognition and (3) establish the groundwork for next spring's legislative session.

Before addressing those issues, I want to thank all of you for participating in our Legislative Action Network. By now, nearly every school in the state has appointed a Legislative Action Person (LAP) and sent his or her contact email to me for inclusion in our school distribution lists. The network for the year is built, so it is imperative that we utilize it to communicate the needs of our schools and the legislative activities in Springfield to all of our parents and supporters. Included in the September mailing to schools asking for LAP appointments there was a LAP Manual that described our system and the responsibilities of LAPs. If anyone needs another copy, please send me an email.

As always, the most important LAP activity is building 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. Please let me know if I can help you in this regard. Also included with the appointment letter, there was a small "advocacy card" describing CCI's education agenda which can be used to educate and engage local legislators.

Legislative Issues

School Choice - CCI has begun working with a relatively new advocacy group known as *Freedom to Learn* to further discuss the tax credit legislation put forth last year and how best to pursue it within the political and economic realities of Illinois. The Educational Improvement Tax Credit (EITC) - as embodied in **House Bill 3479** (described below) - would encourage significant financial assistance to our schools without direct interaction with the state. The model has worked well in Pennsylvania, Florida and Arizona.

There have been two meetings to date. The idea is to form a secular, umbrella organization focused on school choice, through which different coalition elements - nonpublic schools, think tanks, corporate interests, etc. - could work together in advocating for the EITC. We are in the beginning stages, and much work remains, but this approach is essential to success. I hope to have more progress to report to you soon.

Grant Programs – As you learned in my November message, ISBE spent the last month or so collecting public testimony on their Fiscal Year 2013 budget proposal. We used this opportunity to express the need for restored funding to the Textbook Block Grant Program. Our message was straightforward:

On behalf of _____ school in _____, Illinois, I urge the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) to recommend funding for the Textbook Block Grant Program in the Fiscal Year 2013 proposed budget.

Formerly known as the Illinois Textbook Loan Program, the Catholic Conference of Illinois (CCI) and the Illinois Coalition of Nonpublic Schools (ICNS) worked with ISBE in the 2011 spring legislative session to redesign the program as embodied in House Bill 3115, now Public Act 97-0570. This was done at ISBE's request to help streamline and improve the program and in hopes that your agency would support future funding.

Beginning in 1975, the program provides secular textbooks and instructional computer software to public and nonpublic students grades K-12. Students cannot learn or succeed without effective and up-to-date learning materials, and for over thirty years, this program has helped ensure accurate and up-to-date textbooks and other instructional materials are present in ALL schools. In Fiscal Year 2009, the program provided 849,214 instructional items to pupils in grades 7 through 12. There may not be any grant programs in ISBE's budget that have had as far-reaching an impact for as long a time. Providing good textbooks and instructional materials to children is a fundamental responsibility of the state, and this is the only state program that requires all its resources be spent on learning materials for students in classrooms.

In Fiscal Year 2009, this program was funded at \$42.8 million. We understand it is unrealistic to expect that level of funding could be restored in one year, but we do recommend that the program's funding be restored at some level. The Illinois State Senate included \$9.5 million for this program in its most recent budget bill. Additionally, we have appropriations bills (HB 1199 & SB 1964) with many co-sponsors pending in both the House and Senate.

Considering the widespread service of this program – and particularly its essential relation to the first goal of the ISBE's strategic plan of ensuring that every student demonstrates academic achievement and is prepared for success after high school – we hope and urge you to include funding of this program in your proposed Fiscal Year 2013 budget. We remain committed to continued advocacy on behalf of this program in the next legislative session and hope that you will be a partner in those efforts. Thank you.

As ISBE has failed to recommend textbook funding for the past three years, I am realistic about this effort, but we are covering every base and will not relent in pursuit of this important benefit to our Catholic school students.

CCI will also continue to use the appropriation bills filed last spring (**House Bill 1199 & Senate Bill 1964**) to advocate for the legislature to restore textbook funding. This is where we can find success. We use these pieces of legislation for focusing grassroots advocacy and as a means for proving support among members of the General Assembly. Last spring, as a result of this work, funding for the textbook program (\$9.5million) was included in the budget passed by the Senate but ultimately not in the budget that became law.

House Bill 3479 (Yarborough-D & Senger-R) – This legislation 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.

ESEA Reauthorization – Our priorities in reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act 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. A full list of our priorities in the reauthorization is available upon request.

However, President Obama’s administration recently announced a waiver system for allowing public schools to avoid the accountability standards of ESEA. Many states, including Illinois, have signaled their intention to apply for the waiver. CCI has already communicated to ISBE that any waiver sought cannot relieve local school districts of their responsibility to ensure the equitable participation in federal education programs of students enrolled in nonpublic schools. We also intend to pursue the third party provider idea within the context of the state’s waiver request.

Administrative Issues

ISBE & State Recognition – ISBE has finally hired staff for state recognition visits. School visits will begin after January 1, 2012. The most immediate goal will be to visit new schools seeking initial state recognition. ISBE staff has been given this priority list of school visits as well as diocesan contacts to ensure the schedule of visits fits each school’s ability and needs.

Furthermore, the agreed administrative rule revisions on state recognition have gone through the public comment period without problem. The revised rules have another 60 day period at the Joint Committee on Administrative Rules (JCAR), but they are on schedule to be fully implemented by the spring. The biggest changes are (1) state recognition will no longer only be good for the current school year, but will extend to December 31 of the next school year, ensuring enough overlap that schools will not lose recognition in the beginning

of the school year, (2) all deadlines (immunization, state registration, state recognition application and calendar) will be due November 15 of each school year and (3) the seven year visit cycle has been changed to “periodic” visits.

ISBE has also again committed to updating the state recognition application and probe document to remove the question about the annual meeting with local officials on a school crisis plan as the statutory mandate clearly does not apply to nonpublic schools.

We continue to push ISBE on the approval of third party accreditation agencies (such as Advanced Ed) for state recognition visits. We have talked about this in several different forums over the past year, but ISBE has not yet moved forward. Once we get the visits going again and the new rules in place, I hope we can push ISBE forward on this.

Catholic School President/Principal Conference – CCI is co-sponsoring a statewide Catholic School President & Principal Conference for elementary and secondary school administrators on March 18-20, 2012, in Bloomington/Normal. Principals have received registration information. 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. Please plan on participating in this important event.

Due to the New Year and the legislature’s delayed schedule, there will be no January newsletter. Should any issues arise prior to the February newsletter, I will inform you via email action alert. May God bless you, your school, your staff and your students.

Zach Wichmann, *Director of Government Relations*
Catholic Conference of Illinois
108 East Cook Street | Springfield, Illinois 62704
(217) 528-9200 | Fax (217) 528-7214