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Despite a number of high profile speeches, not much was accomplished by the General Assembly in February. However, the March legislative calendar is full and we do expect to see much more activity. It is obvious that the state's fiscal condition remains in dire straits and deciding how to fill the budget gap this fiscal year (\$1.5 billion) and agreeing to a budget for the next fiscal year (\$6 billion in the red already) will be a tall order. Let's get right into issues:

### **Quality Schools Tax Credit**

As you may recall, the proposal is multi-faceted, but the provision we most care about is:

- A dollar-for-dollar state income tax credit up to 100 percent of an individual or corporation's tax liability based on the previous year's tax filing if they donate to scholarship granting organizations that provide scholarships to low and middle-income students to attend private schools.
- An increase in the Education Expense Tax Credit from \$500 to \$750.
- The tax credit for this portion of the bill is capped at \$100 million.

The Catholic Conference of Illinois and the six Diocesan Offices of Education have joined over 70 other community organizations, advocacy groups and schools in the campaign to push this legislation. By doing so, we have committed to giving priority to working on this issue.

Your school can also be a part of this campaign. You are already represented in the campaign through CCI, but by adding your logo, you can affirm your school's individual support for the cause. It costs nothing and requires no action other than what I will ask of you anyway in action alerts to come. If you want to join this campaign in support of school choice, answer this email with your consent and a digital copy of your school's logo. You will then be represented as a Catholic school both collectively – through CCI and your diocesan office – and individually through your school logo.

### **Child Care Assistance Program**

The Child Care Assistance Program provides funds for the children of working parents, who earn less than 185 percent of the federal poverty level, to pay for child care services. These services include some pre-school and programs of before and after school care. Many of our schools, particularly in Chicago, receive money through the Child Care Assistance Program for services.

The Child Care Assistance Program, due to poor state budgeting and even worse spending practices, is short \$300 million for the remainder of the fiscal year (July 1, 2015). Because half the program is federally funded, the program will not disappear, but if action is not taken, the payment cycle to

providers will be severely delayed while beneficiaries of the program could be asked to pay higher co-pays. There are currently about 176,000 enrollees in the program and 65 percent of them go to schools or day care centers.

We are working with a number of organizations to support either a supplemental funding bill or a grant of extraordinary powers to the Governor to move money into the program. We are targeting the effort, asking schools who receive money through the program to contact their legislators.

### **Immunizations**

The recent introduction of Senate Bill 1410 and Senate Bill 1776 signal an interest in the General Assembly to tighten up exemptions to the state's required immunizations for students. Under current law, parents can claim a documented medical exemption or a broader religious objection exemption. The religious objection exemption does not require the citation of a particular religion, teaching or practice.

The proposed bills seek to require a higher standard. Senate Bill 1410 requires the signed attestation of a religious official that the objection is based on a documented religious belief. Senate Bill 1776 simply requires the objecting parents attest to a slightly higher standard of citing their religious tenets and practices as opposed to just religious belief.

At this point, CCI is only monitoring these bills. We want to maintain an avenue for religious objections, but there could be a better way of invoking these objections than the broad approach of current law. In the meantime, I would advise schools to decline media interview requests on this topic. The debate is very heated on both sides, and until we get a clearer sense of where this is going, we serve no good by jumping to the forefront.

### **State Recognition & the Illinois State Board of Recognition (ISBE)**

ISBE has been able to employ new staff and has contracted with Illinois Service Center West 40 to help coordinate and conduct school visits. This year they are trying to conduct around 140 school visits. In November and December, ISBE sent letters to the schools they hope to visit this year, so you should know if you are on the list and when you will be visited. We are also in the process of working on a long range 5 year school visit plan.

### **Teacher Licensure and Professional Development**

We did reach agreement with ISBE on their process of implementing new administrative rules in the areas of teacher licensure and professional development. Although the changes appear to impact nonpublic school teachers, the changes are primarily cosmetic.

First and foremost: the new rules DO NOT impede the licensure or licensure renewal of nonpublic school teachers. In fact, the new rules assist teachers in tracking their licensure status and professional development by allowing individual accounts in the Educator Licensure Information System (ELIS).

Second: the new rules DO NOT prevent nonpublic schools or their administrative offices from requiring professional development of their teachers or from designing and carrying out programs of professional development.

Last: The rules DO make it much more administratively burdensome for nonpublic schools and their administrative offices, as well as private vendors, to become “state approved providers of professional development.” Your school or diocese may no longer wish to take on the increased burden of maintaining an approved provider status. Remember, “approved provider status” is unnecessary to the provision of professional development to licensed teachers working in nonpublic schools.

Probably the worst that can be said of the new administrative rules is that they alter some nomenclature and perhaps affect perceptions. However, their substantive impact is minimal.

Thank you and May God Bless you in your work.

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