



Catholic Conference
of Illinois

65 E. Wacker Place
Suite 1620
Chicago, IL 60601
Ph. 312-368-1066
Fx. 312-368-1090

108 E. Cook St.
Springfield, IL 62704
Ph. 217-528-9200
Fx. 217-528-7214

www.ilcatholic.org
Diocese of Belleville
Archdiocese of Chicago
Diocese of Joliet
Diocese of Peoria
Diocese of Rockford
Diocese of Springfield-in-IL

It has been longer than usual since my last newsletter. The spring legislative session has been very busy for us, particularly in the education arena, and time has passed quickly. I hope to catch you up to speed today.

The biggest issue we have going is still our push for the Invest in Kids Act. You will remember this as the Quality Schools Tax Credit Act. The name is changed, but the provisions of the legislative push remain the same.

The Catholic Conference of Illinois and the six Diocesan Offices of Education have joined approximately 200 other community organizations, advocacy groups and schools in this advocacy effort, known as the Illinois Kids Campaign. The Illinois Kids Campaign is the name of the coalition pushing for the Invest in Kids Act.

Last week, the Catholic Conference of Illinois participated in a legislative reception to kick off the push for the Invest in Kids Act. Over 40 legislators attended as did Archbishop Cupich. We also took Archbishop Cupich to meetings with the four legislative leaders, and he had dinner with the Governor. The Archbishop discussed this topic with each of the leaders, and we are very hopeful these school choice measures will be considered in the state's upcoming budget negotiations. In case you forgot, here are the important details of the proposal:

Invest in Kids Act

- Up to \$250 nonrefundable teacher tax credit for the purchase of classroom supplies.
- 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:
 - Public or charter schools for education technology, music, arts, and sports programs;
 - District, public school, or charter school foundations;
 - Non-profit organizations that provide education-related supplemental services to public or charter schools; or
 - **Scholarship granting organizations that provide scholarships to low and middle-income students to attend private schools, with assurances that a majority of scholarships will be given to low-income students and students attending persistently low-performing or overcrowded schools.**
- The tax credits are capped at \$200 million – split evenly between the public and charter sectors and the nonpublic education sector.
- **An increase in the individual Education Expense Tax Credit from \$500 to \$750.**

I hope that the details of this proposal are as exciting to you as they are to me. The new scholarship foundations could work throughout the state to help the families of existing Catholic school students and bring new students to your school. In the coming weeks we expect to issue action alerts asking for you and you parents and parishioners to contact their elected officials and support the Illinois Kids Campaign!

LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

Child Care Assistance Program

The Child Care Assistance Program provides financial assistance to working parents, who earn less than 185 percent of the federal poverty level, to help pay for child care services. Qualified services include pre-school and before and after school care. Many of our schools receive money through the Child Care Assistance Program for providing these services.

In January, the Child Care Assistance Program, due to poor state budgeting and even worse spending practices, was short \$300 million for the remainder of the fiscal year (July 1, 2015). Because half the program is federally funded, the program did not disappear, but the payment cycle to providers was under threat of severe delays. There are currently about 176,000 enrollees in the program and 65 percent of them go to schools or day care centers.

CCI worked 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 targeted the effort, asking schools who receive money through the program to contact their legislators. In late March, the General Assembly did grant the Governor power to sweep other state funds in order to fill the budget gap and meet this program's shortfalls.

Textbook Block Grant

Due to the state's extremely perilous fiscal state, and our desire to put maximum energy into the Invest in Kids Act, CCI did not reintroduce our appropriations bills for the Textbook Block Grant Program. We have introduced these bills for several years to no avail. However, we continue to talk to interested lawmakers about the program and do plan on alerting the Governor's education staff to the program and our belief in its many benefits.

House Bill 152

This legislation mandates each school board require their schools to install approved carbon monoxide alarms or carbon monoxide detectors. The legislation allows for existing schools to use battery powered detectors but requires new construction to wire them into the electrical system. As of now, this bill does not apply to nonpublic schools, but it may be only a matter of time. The legislation also gives rulemaking authority to implement this mandate to the State Fire Marshal. If the legislation is passed, the mandate will be effective January 1, 2016.

House Bill 1493 & Senate Bill 565

This legislation seeks to add a requirement to the existing health examinations and immunizations schedule. In addition to the existing requirements, these bills appear to be seeking some type of mental health or social and emotional screening. The bills are still being worked on, so the end goals are unclear. CCI continues to engage in the process and track this bill.

Senate Bill 706

This legislation, introduced by Senator Bill Cunningham (D-Chicago), seeks to extend the requirement that employees of public and nonpublic schools undergo a fingerprint based background check to student teachers. CCI is monitoring the legislation.

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 that parents claiming a religious exemption submit a yet-to-be-created Certificate of Religious Exemption signed by the parents and their health care provider. **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 monitoring these bills and talking with interested legislators. 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.

ADMINISTRATIVE UPDATE

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

ISBE has been able to employ new staff and contract with Illinois Service Center West 40 to help coordinate and conduct school visits. They are in the process of conducting approximately 140 nonpublic school visits this year.

The incorporation of new staff has led to some disagreement in interpretations of certain requirements for state recognition – particularly in the case of health records for new school employees – but the visits continue, and this new system of incorporating Regional Offices of Education into the school visits promises to bring stability to the visit cycle and enable longer range planning. In fact, a five year visit schedule has been drafted and is being reviewed.

CCI was also able to work with ISBE in crafting amendments to the administrative rules that drop the requirement for all new employees to undergo TB tests (the Department of Public Health no longer deems this necessary) and provide for the manner in which nonpublic schools will easily prove their not-for-profit status to the state (Secretary of State file number).

Teacher Licensure and Professional Development

We also reached an agreement with ISBE on their process of implementing new administrative rules in the areas of teacher licensure and professional development. In the end, the changes for nonpublic school teachers were primarily cosmetic.

First: the new rules DO NOT impede the licensure 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.” A school or diocese may no longer wish to take on the increased burden of maintaining an approved provider status. Although we have used the “approved provider status” as a sort of self-affirming tool, it is unnecessary to the provision of professional development to licensed teachers working in nonpublic schools. Still, there are dioceses that want to maintain approved provider status, and we are attempting to work that through.

If you have any questions, please call me at 217-528-9200 or email me at wichmann@ilcatholic.org.

Zach Wichmann
Director of Government Relations
Catholic Conference of Illinois
217-528-9200
wichmann@ilcatholic.org