



CCI February Newsletter 2010

Hello All:

I hope this February newsletter finds you and your school doing well. They say spring is right around the corner, but there is not much evidence to support the claim. Hopefully, March will turn the weather quickly and prove to be a springboard for our legislative efforts. The legislative session is in full-swing, and there is a lot going on with education policy. The following is meant to inform and encourage you to act on the two action alerts sent in February. There is still plenty of time: review the action alerts on our web site www.catholicconferenceofillinois.org.

Legislative Issues

Grant Funding – CCI, in coalition with Agudath Israel, the Illinois Coalition of Nonpublic Schools (ICNS) and the American Association of Textbook Publishers, has been working to restore funding to the Textbook Loan, School Safety Block Grant and Transportation Reimbursement Programs since last July. We gave testimony twice at regular ISBE meetings and at all eight of their statewide budget hearings. We met with the State Superintendent, the Chairman of ISBE and provided a great amount of supporting materials to staff and all nine state board members.

Unfortunately, ISBE has not been sufficiently responsive. Although ISBE included funding for the School Safety Block Grant in their January budget recommendation, they did not recommend any funding for the Textbook Loan or Transportation Reimbursement programs. Obviously, the state's fiscal condition is terrible. Bills are being paid months late and the budget hole for next year could be as high as \$12 billion. Still, ISBE's opposition to funding the Textbook Loan program is difficult to understand and not in keeping with their strategic goals, which call for service to ALL schools and ALL students.

ISBE's budget proposal is only a recommendation. The Governor and the Illinois General Assembly will make the final budget decisions in May, and as its members are elected officials, they are much more likely to be responsive to our strong advocacy than were state bureaucrats. In early February, our coalition began a letter-writing effort targeted at the Governor's office. Schools and LAPs were provided an alert and a sample letter from which to work.

To augment this effort, we asked Representative Chapa LaVia (D-Aurora) and Senator Ira Silverstein (D-Chicago) to introduce legislation in the House and Senate respectively to restore funding to the Textbook Loan Program: **House Bill 6096** and **Senate Bill 3530**. Our short term goal is to sign up as many co-sponsors as possible. In one week of work, we have 14 co-sponsors in the House and 8 in the Senate. Please call your State Representative and ask him or her to sign on as a co-sponsor to House Bill 6096 and call your State Senator and ask him or her to sign on as a co-sponsor to Senate Bill 3530.

To find the contact information for your State Representative and State Senator, go to www.ilga.gov and click on Legislator Lookup in the lower, right-hand portion of the page. You can then look up your State Representative and State Senator by district #, your home or school address, or zip code. You can also call our offices for assistance at 312-368-1066 or 217-528-9200.

Catholics at the Capitol - It is late but hopefully your school's participation in the second annual *Catholics at the Capitol* is already planned. The event will be held on March 3, 2010. Every Catholic school was mailed an informational packet including a promotional flyer and a registration form for school representatives. Those who signed up to participate received a welcome packet this week.

We have asked that every Catholic school try to send a small contingent of parents, parishioners, staff, school board members or even the pastor to the *Catholics at the Capitol*. It is vitally important: no one else will be there to talk about education issues to your state representative and senator. If you want to see the Textbook Loan Program restored, the School Safety Block Grant increased, the Parent Transportation Program back on line, and the Education Expense Tax Credit increased, please identify and send a contingent from your school to help lobby lawmakers.

Senator James Meeks' Voucher Initiative - State Senator James Meeks (D-Chicago), also the pastor of Chicago's Salem Baptist Church (the largest African-American Church in the state), came out in December for a school voucher system, embodied in Senate Bill 2494, which will focus on the worst schools in Chicago. Frustration with Chicago public school's failing test scores, dropout rates and persistent violence led him to conclude a different approach was necessary.

CCI and representatives of various school choice efforts have met with Senator Meeks to discuss and support his efforts. Senator Meeks accepted an amendment to his original legislation with our preferred legislative language. Working with Alliance for Educational Choice (formerly Friedman Foundation), Agudath Israel, ICNS and the Illinois Policy Institute we hope to advance Senator Meeks' legislation and invigorate a real public policy dialogue about school choice. The bill has been assigned to the Senate Executive Committee, and we expect a hearing in early March.

Federal Title and IDEA Funding Distribution - Working with Notre Dame's Alliance for Catholic Education (ACE) program, CCI has proposed to ISBE the possibility of establishing an alternative model for determining and distributing federal grant dollars for services entitled to Catholic schools and their students. ISBE's initial response has been to include the issue, via Senate Bill 1882, in their newly formed Streamlining Illinois' Educational Delivery Systems Task Force. In the meantime, we continue to push ISBE to ensure public school districts are living up to their obligations to ensure private school participation in federally funded NCLB and IDEA programs. A meeting with the State Superintendent and his staff has been scheduled for mid-March.

House Bill 4711 – This bill, introduced in January by Representative Roger Eddy (R-Huntonsville), stipulates that school districts do not have to comply with unfunded state mandates. The bill exempts certain requirements – such as safety codes and graduation requirements – but is otherwise designed to give school districts more financial flexibility. Upon request of CCI, Representative Eddy amended his bill to include nonpublic schools. There are several unfunded state mandates with which Catholic schools would not have to apply if this bill were to become law. CCI now supports the legislation, and the bill passed the House Education Committee on February 17 and awaits the consideration of the full House.

House Bill 3982 (Transportation of Students) – Passed by the legislature last spring, this legislation will eliminate the use of 11-15 passenger vans, as of July 1, 2010, for interscholastic or other school sponsored non-curriculum related activities. The new law brings Illinois schools into compliance with federal standards for transporting students by eliminating vans that have been deemed unsafe. Students grade 12 and below will be required to be transported in a school bus, multifunction school-activity bus (MFSAB), or First Division Vehicle (vehicles designed by the manufacturer to transport 10 or fewer persons) for these events.

The legislation also prohibited the use of MFSABs for transporting students to and from school as they are not regulated as school buses. CCI has since learned that a handful of Catholic high schools in Illinois use MFSABs to transport students to school, picking up and dropping off these students on private property. CCI is working with Senator Dan Cronin (R-Elmhurst), ranking minority member of the Senate Education Committee, on legislation to allow the continuation of this practice.

Administrative Issues

Important Dates – Most likely, your school has already submitted the following documents and data, but just in case, I wanted to include the deadlines for each. In most cases, a school principal can check ISBE's IWAS system to check the status of these reports.

- 1) Nonpublic School Registration, Enrollment and Staff Report: 12/31/09*
- 2) Student Health Data – Immunization: 11/16/09 (system opened 10/16/09)
- 3) Student Health Data – Vision: 6/30/10 (system opened 10/16/09)

* For this year only, ISBE will accept this form until June 30, 2010.

** Please remember children must receive physical examinations prior to entering Illinois schools for the first time, prior to the date of entering kindergarten or first grade, prior to entering sixth grade, and prior to entering ninth grade. The immunization requirements, K-12, can be found here:

http://www.isbe.net/research/pdfs/immunization_requirements.pdf

State Recognition - CCI has spent the last year working with ISBE to draft administrative rules for the governing of the nonpublic school recognition program. These rules are taking the place of the current Policies and Guidelines Manual controlling state recognition operations. Although the Manual has been a work of collaboration for nearly 30 years and done its job well, the rulemaking will provide some badly-needed stability to the program by raising its profile, providing another source of necessity and requiring ISBE to perform the function not only in statute but also in administrative law. We were successful in shaping these rules to meet our needs and expectations. In February, the Nonpublic School Advisory Committee began meeting with ISBE staff to begin revisions to the probe document (used in state recognition visits) to match the new rules. The new probe document will not be used in the field until next school year.

Alternative Certification - In late spring, ISBE proposed a revision of the administrative rules governing the process for individuals seeking their teacher certification through alternative methods (outside colleges of education). Their first draft required these folks to do their student teaching only in public schools, so they could ensure each candidate was teaching with other certified teachers. During the public comment period, CCI joined a coalition submitting comments asking that proposed rules be revised to include Catholic schools as we require either certification or being on the path to certification as a condition of employment. ISBE responded to our request and revised the administrative rules to allow candidates for alternative certification to teach in state recognized nonpublic schools (all Catholic schools) as long as the school's administrator and 50 percent of its teaching staff are state certified by January 2014. The rules went into effect this year.

Principal Certification - ISBE and the Illinois Board of Higher Education are working on a program of revising how principals are certified in Illinois. They have provided a briefing to CCI and ICNS indicating that new administrative rules implementing the changes would be promulgated in April or May. CCI stands ready to ensure Catholic schools and Catholic school personnel are represented and equitably treated in the process.

Illinois Coalition of Nonpublic Schools (ICNS) - ICNS has committed to working side-by-side with CCI to restore funding to the Textbook Loan, ADA Block Grant, and Parent Transportation Reimbursement programs. As a member of the ICNS board, I participated in the interview process for the hiring of a contract lobbyist for the spring session. ICNS has hired a contract lobbyist who is providing critical assistance to our efforts, and the non-Catholic members of ICNS should be congratulated for agreeing to and participating in this important step. I again ask that your school consider joining ICNS if not already a member. A membership form can be found on their web site - www.icns.net - and the cost is only \$50 a year.

Facebook Page for Catholic School Advocacy - Always hoping to improve our system and methods of communication, and eager to invite more into new technologies, I have begun a Facebook page for Catholic School Advocacy in Illinois. Facebook users simply need to look up the page at <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Springfield-IL/CCI-Catholic-School-Advocacy-in-Illinois/124415842483?created> or do a search on Facebook of Catholic School Advocacy. Being a fan of the page will allow you to receive real time updates and action alerts, links to pertinent articles and videos and access to the monthly newsletter. Sign up as a fan today!

That is all for February. I am afraid I am failing miserably at shortening the newsletter, but my primary concern is that you have all the information necessary to plan for the future and make good decisions. As always, please feel free to contact me with any questions. May God bless you and your efforts.

Zach Wichmann
Associate Director for Education
Catholic Conference of Illinois
108 East Cook Street
Springfield, Illinois 62704
(217) 528-9200
Fax (217) 528-7214