

Archbishop O'Brien urges delegates to pass BOAST

ANNAPOLIS – On the same day the Maryland State Senate voted 30-17 to pass a business tax credit benefitting public and nonpublic schools, Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien urged a House of Delegates committee to approve the measure and allow it to face a vote on the House floor.

Testifying March 17 before the House Ways and Means Committee, Archbishop O'Brien told lawmakers that Catholic schools are facing enormous financial and enrollment challenges. He cited the announced consolidation of 13 Catholic schools in the Baltimore archdiocese.

While the archbishop acknowledged that the tax credit would not solve all the problems, he said it will provide "a critically important tool" to assist nonpublic- and public-school families.

The proposal, known as "BOAST" – Building Opportunities for All Students and Teachers in Maryland – would grant businesses a 75 percent state income tax credit for donations to scholarship organizations for nonpublic school students. It would also support enrichment programs in public schools and professional development for public and private school teachers.

"This initiative represents an opportunity for government, nonprofits and the business community to meet our mutual challenges in a way that benefits all students without taking away from anyone," Archbishop O'Brien said.

The archbishop said it should be "abundantly clear" that Maryland's public schools "could not possibly accomplish their mission of educating the students of Maryland without the existence of their partners in the nonpublic school community." He pointed out that Catholic and other nonpublic schools save the state more than \$1.5 billion in annual per-pupil expenditures.

Del. James Proctor, a Prince George's County Democrat and chief sponsor of the House bill, told the committee that the BOAST bill doesn't give anything to schools.

School leaders must work to earn support from the business community.

Responding to lawmaker concerns that there isn't state money available to support the program, Proctor emphasized that the bill seeks no money. It merely establishes BOAST into law so future governors can fund it as they see fit – with legislative approval.

"When happy times are here again, we will have money in the budget for this program and other programs you will come up with to help the children in this state," said Del. Proctor, a former public school principal in Prince George's County.

Casper R. Taylor Jr., former Speaker of the House and a current member of Archbishop O'Brien's blue ribbon committee on the future of Catholic schools, emphasized that both public and nonpublic schools serve Marylanders. Both deserve support, he said.

"Over the centuries of building American society, we have educated K-to-12 children in a system of education that was and is today a coalition of many different systems," he said.

Responding to questions on whether the archdiocese would accept state-imposed anti-discriminatory policies as part of legislative approval of the BOAST bill, Archbishop O'Brien said Catholic schools do not discriminate in accepting children, nor do they produce graduates who discriminate. He said conscience rights should be respected so schools can operate in accordance with Church teachings.

"I just hope this doesn't get mixed up with all kinds of political stuff," he said. "I would not like to see that question intrude on this."

Montgomery County Democratic Del. Sheila Hixson, chair of the House Ways and Means Committee, has not allowed the BOAST bill to come up for a vote in the past. Now that Gov. Martin J. O'Malley has publically endorsed the proposal, she has indicated that she may allow a vote this year. In an early March interview with The Catholic Review, she said she is "talking about it and looking at it."