

As session closes, \$2 million added for textbooks/technology

They didn't get their much-sought business tax credit to help students and teachers in nonpublic and public schools, but leaders of the Maryland Catholic Conference (MCC) were elated to win an additional \$2 million in state funding for nonreligious textbooks and technology in nonpublic schools.

Gov. Martin J. O'Malley increased funding for the state textbook/technology loan program by introducing a \$2 million supplemental budget that was approved by lawmakers - raising total funding to \$4.4 million.

The move was one of several measures lawmakers approved before the Maryland General Assembly ended its 90-day session April 13.

Legislators also provided \$5 million in emergency funding to Bon Secours Hospital in west Baltimore and reduced funding by \$3 million for state-funded stem-cell research to \$15.4 million. The Legislature did not restrict stem-cell funding to the non-embryonic forms of research favored by the MCC.

Mary Ellen Russell, MCC executive director, said Gov. O'Malley had promised to provide additional textbook and technology funding if federal stimulus money was approved.

"We're pleased that he very generously kept his promise," said Ms. Russell, who completed her first legislative session as leader of the Annapolis-based lobbying arm of Maryland's Catholic bishops.

"This is the highest level of funding the program has received in several years," she said, "and is a welcome support to our schools especially in light of the fact that the BOAST tax credit did not pass."

BOAST (Building Opportunities for all Students and Teachers in Maryland) would have provided tax credits to businesses that donate to scholarship programs benefiting students in nonpublic schools.

Businesses that contribute to enrichment programs for students in public schools would have also received tax credits, and the program would have allowed nonpublic school teachers to receive grants for professional development.

BOAST was stymied in the House of Delegates Ways and Means Committee, where it failed to come up for a vote.

"I think we had the support of the governor," said Ellen Robertson, MCC associate director for education and family life. "He and his staff worked hard on it. We need more support from the speaker (Del. Michael Busch) and the chairwoman (Del. Sheila E. Hixson)."

Ms. Robertson said a lot of progress has been made on BOAST and there are now more BOAST supporters in the Legislature than in previous years.

"This was a tough year with the budget," she said. "It superseded everything. We'll try again next year."

Although Senate Bill 566, which would have prohibited discrimination based on "gender identity," did not come to a vote, lawmakers approved Senate Bill 785, which exempts same-sex domestic partners from the inheritance tax. The MCC opposed both bills, arguing that they undermine moral principles regarding marriage and human sexuality.

The MCC was also disappointed that lawmakers did not provide more support to immigrants when they approved a compromise measure on immigrant driver's licenses that takes driver's licenses away from those who are not in the country legally by 2015.

"We would have liked to have seen legislation that was more generous to people who will eventually be unable to do basic things like drive their kids to school and get to their jobs," Ms. Russell said. "Immigration is a very difficult issue, and I think the real hope in this area is at the federal level."