

Eye-opening enrollment trends signal need for BOAST

The Maryland Catholic Conference is gearing up once again to make a major push for passage of a business tax credit known as BOAST (Building Opportunities for All Students and Teachers).

Long a top priority of the legislative lobbying arm of the state's Catholic bishops, BOAST would give businesses a 75 percent state income-tax credit in exchange for their donations to groups that provide scholarships for nonpublic school students. It would also help nonpublic schoolteachers and enrichment programs in the public schools.

BOAST came close to becoming a reality last year, receiving the endorsement of Gov. Martin J. O'Malley and a 30-17 favorable vote in the Senate. Yet, the measure was thwarted in the House of Delegates Ways and Means Committee, where Chairwoman Sheila Hixson stymied the bill. It was defeated on a 14-7 committee vote.

Ellen Robertson, the Catholic Conference's associate director for education and family life, is convinced there are plenty of votes to pass the bill on the House floor if it could just get out of committee. She contends that the measure is needed now more than ever as Catholic schools struggle with declining enrollment.

Robertson isn't alone. In a 2010 written statement, Gov. O'Malley wrote that the BOAST bill would increase scholarships for children in low- and middle-income families, helping to stabilize enrollment in nonpublic schools.

"I believe the bill is crucial if we are to stem the tide of private school closures in the state," Gov. O'Malley said.

He wrote that school closures "represent a loss of educational diversity and opportunity for our students and will ultimately increase costs and enrollment pressures on our public school systems."

Catholic schools alone save the state more than \$713 million in annual per-pupil costs, according to the Catholic Conference.

Below, check out these startling enrollment reports prepared by the Maryland Catholic Conference. If you think Catholic schools are a vital part of Maryland's educational system, contact your state representatives today and tell them to support BOAST.

As always, stay with The Catholic Review for much more on this important story in the coming months.



Forty one Catholic schools have closed in Maryland since 2002. (Maryland Catholic Conference graph)



Total Catholic school enrollment in Maryland has declined from 64,283 in 2002-03 to 52,875 in 2010-11. (Maryland Catholic Conference graph)



(Maryland Catholic Conference graph)