

Forums focus on benefits of nonpublic schools

With 36 new members of the House of Delegates and 11 new state senators set to be sworn in at the start of Maryland's new legislative session in mid-January, Mary Ellen Russell thinks it's imperative to educate lawmakers about the contributions of nonpublic schools.

Especially at a time when increasing costs and declining enrollment have forced the Archdiocese of Baltimore to close or merge 10 Catholic schools within the last several years, the Maryland Catholic Conference's associate director for education said nonpublic schools need help now.

A series of 17 legislative forums throughout the state will be held Jan. 8 beginning at 7 p.m. to introduce legislators to the ways nonpublic schools benefit Marylanders. School leaders will also suggest ways the state can provide more support.

"There is a great urgency everyone feels about our ability to keep providing the kind of quality education for Marylanders that we've been doing for centuries," said Ms. Russell.

The forums, eight of which will be held in the archdiocese, will focus on issues like the state's nonpublic school textbook/technology program and a proposed tax credit benefiting nonpublic school students and teachers.

While nonpublic schools save Maryland's tax payers more than \$1.35 billion each year in per-pupil expenditures, Ms. Russell said the state provides only a tiny fraction of the support other states show to their nonpublic schools.

She would like to see the allotment for the state's textbook/technology program returned to the \$6 million level when it was launched by Gov. Parris N. Glendening. Funding dipped to \$3 million two years ago, but was increased to \$4 million last year by Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr.

Gov.-elect Martin J. O'Malley has pledged to maintain at least the current funding

level.

Nonpublic schools are also seeking support for a proposed Maryland Tax Credit called “BOAST,” Building Opportunities for All Students and Teachers in Maryland.

Modeled after a similar program in Pennsylvania, BOAST would provide up to \$15 million in state tax credits to businesses that donate to educational scholarship organizations for students attending nonpublic schools that charge tuition equal to or less than the state average per-pupil cost.

The program would provide additional support to public schools and the ongoing education of public and nonpublic schoolteachers.

During the forums, nonpublic schools will also seek the inclusion of nonpublic school teachers in benefits already available to public school teachers, such as teacher scholarships and the Quality Incentive Tax Credit.

While previous legislative forums have been held solely in Catholic schools, this year several Jewish and Christian schools will also participate.

There are approximately 142,000 students enrolled in grades K-12 in Maryland’s nonpublic schools, according to the Maryland Catholic Conference.

For more information, visit www.mdnonpubs.org.