

Governor cuts textbook/technology funding by \$400,000

ANNAPOLIS – Catholic school leaders are decrying Gov. Martin J. O'Malley's decision to cut \$400,000 from a state program providing nonreligious textbooks and technology to nonpublic school students.

The governor unveiled his budget Jan. 16, including \$3.6 million for the textbook/technology program – down from \$4 million last year.

"It's very disappointing and frustrating," said Dr. Ronald J. Valenti, superintendent of Catholic schools. Dr. Valenti and other nonpublic school leaders had asked the governor to restore funding to the original \$6 million level when the program was launched in fiscal year 2001.

"I'm discouraged because, once again, the losers in all this are the children," he said. "Our expenses are continually rising, and when you make these kinds of cuts, you never advance. We need to move forward, not backward."

Mary Ellen Russell, deputy director for education and family life with the Maryland Catholic Conference, said she understood that the governor had to make budget cuts in a lean year. But she said nonpublic schools "took a hit a long time ago" as the amount allocated for the program has declined significantly from its start.

Because participation in the textbook/technology program has increased by more than 10,000 students since the program began, the per-pupil allotment at most schools has decreased drastically when combined with budgetary reductions to the program, according to Ms. Russell.

The program provides a guaranteed \$90 per-pupil allocation for students attending schools that serve a high population of lower-income families. Money that remains is allocated among other nonpublic schools whose tuition does not exceed the state average public school per-pupil cost. Last year, it amounted to about \$30 per student.

“I think it’s important to recognize that our school community has been seeking more support from the state for a very long time now,” she said. “In that time period, our challenges have increased significantly - to the detriment of the entire community.”

According to a December letter to Gov. O’Malley signed by Dr. Valenti and the superintendents of Catholic school systems of the Archdiocese of Washington and the Diocese of Wilmington, Catholic schools have experienced significant declines in enrollment in recent years.

In the Archdiocese of Baltimore, for example, enrollment decreased from 37,259 students in the 2001-02 school year to 34,974 in the 2006-07 school year - a decline of approximately 6 percent.

With nonpublic schools saving Marylanders an estimated \$1.5 billion in per-pupil expenditures, Ms. Russell believes it is a matter of economic justice to receive stronger support from the state. She hopes the governor will consider increasing funding for the textbook/technology program in a supplemental budget.

According to state law, legislators may approve the funding at the level set by the governor or reduce it. They may not increase it.

Rick Abbruzzese, the governor’s spokesman, could not be reached for comment.