

Legislative Session Losers: MD Students

Last week marked the close of the 2009 session of the Maryland General Assembly, bringing with it cause for both celebration and some frustration as we contemplate the issues promoted by the Catholic Church in the public square.

Pro-Life

While our many years of advocacy for full repeal of the death penalty have not yet been fully realized, the legislature has passed a measure that will significantly raise the standards of evidence required in capital punishment cases. This is encouraging progress, and at the very least, will help prevent the execution of an innocent person. We will continue to work and pray that the powerful witness of the Church's consistent pro-life voice will influence more lawmakers to recognize the moral imperative of protecting the sanctity of life in all our laws, whether they apply to nascent embryonic life, the unborn, the terminally ill, or the convicted criminal.

Other pro-life issues continue to face an uphill battle in our state legislature. Year after year, even the most modest proposals, such as those allowing parents to be notified when their minor daughter has an abortion, or allowing a woman considering abortion the option of viewing a sonogram of her unborn child, continue to be rejected by the legislature. At the same time, we continue to confront legislation affecting terminally ill or elderly patients that moves dangerously close to encouraging patients to refuse treatment that would sustain their lives, rather than ensuring their right to make an informed decision about their options for continued medical care. It is vital that concerned Catholics and others continue to raise our voices conveying to legislators the primary value of life, no matter how fragile, over expediency or political ambition.

Marriage

As expected, legislation did not advance again this year that would have dismantled the state's recognition of marriage as the union of one man and one woman by

legalizing same-sex marriage. Though it failed this year and is likely to do so again in 2010 – an election year, this legislation will be introduced again. We trust that people of all faiths must continue to be vocal in protecting the legal status assigned exclusively to traditional marriage because of its unique capacity to create and nurture society's future generations.

Some Financial Relief

Despite the challenging economy, we are grateful that most programs that support our state's poorest and most vulnerable citizens were held harmless. As the demand continues to grow for these services, however, we remain concerned about the chronic lack of staff support in many state agencies that serve those in need. I am grateful to note that reductions to the state's only support for students in Catholic and other nonpublic schools – the Nonpublic School Textbook and Technology Loan program – were restored by the Governor at the end of the session, bringing the total allocation for the program to \$4.4 million.

Education Tax Credit

The fate of legislation to create the BOAST Maryland Tax Credit was a great disappointment however. By allowing corporations and small businesses to claim a 75 percent state tax credit for donations to organizations that support Maryland's K-12 public and nonpublic schools students and teachers, BOAST (Building Opportunities for All Students and Teachers) would increase scholarships for Catholic and other nonpublic school students, provide grants to Catholic and other nonpublic school teachers for continuing education, and benefit students in public schools through increased support for enrichment programs. In short, it benefits everyone.

Despite the urging of countless constituents: leaders in the religious, business and political community, the support of our Governor, and a solid majority of our Senate and House of Delegates – despite all of this, the chair of the House Ways and Means Committee, Del. Sheila Hixson, puzzlingly, has again refused to bring this worthy proposal to a vote in her committee. The proposal would have had no immediate cost to the state, but would have been an important step forward in authorizing a program that holds great promise for many Maryland families.

Del. Hixson's efforts to block BOAST mean thousands of low-income students will not benefit from the much-needed assistance this cost-effective, modest program would have provided. Catholic schools in our Archdiocese save Maryland taxpayers over \$380 million annually in per-pupil costs. Among all other nonpublic schools statewide, the savings is \$1.5 billion.

As we continue to witness the devastating impact that the cycle of declining enrollment and increased tuition has had on our schools and the families they serve, we refuse to accept arguments against the BOAST proposal claiming our state cannot afford – even in the future – to assist the families who could benefit from the program.

In the 2007-08 school year in Pennsylvania – the first state to pass an education tax credit aimed at corporations – 44,000 children across the state benefited from the scholarships generated by the tax credit and countless numbers of children in public schools benefited from innovative programs that would have likely gone unfunded. While Del. Hixson makes excuses for why Maryland cannot afford even a pilot program or one with no funds at all attached to it, our neighbors to the north manage to set aside \$44.6 million annually for scholarship organizations, \$22.3 million for innovative educational improvement programs in public schools and \$8 million for a separate pre-kindergarten scholarship program.

In its report, *Who Will Save America's Catholic Schools?*, the Thomas B. Fordham Institute determined that "America's urban Catholic schools are in crisis. ... Over 1,300 schools have shut down since 1990. As a result, some 300,000 students have been displaced ... cost[ing] taxpayers more than \$20 billion to accommodate the additional students that public schools have had to absorb."

The report found the primary causes of the closures of many Catholic schools to be "demographics and economics ... many Catholics moved to the suburbs, leaving weakened parishes (and parish schools) in their wake ... as the number of priests, sisters and brothers working in the schools declined, school leaders hired lay teachers and principals at competitive salaries. The increased costs led to rising tuitions, which in turn discouraged low-income and minority families from applying to schools they could no longer afford."

While Fordham's report challenged Church leaders to revamp school systems to "make Catholic education affordable for all Catholic children" – the very mandate of our Blue Ribbon Committee hard at work today on a long-term strategic plan for Catholic education here in our Archdiocese – it also challenges public policymakers to "find ways beyond Title I services and school lunches to provide financial assistance to urban Catholic schools and needy children who attend them."

I hope Del. Hixson and her colleagues in the General Assembly are listening. The delay in providing much needed financial relief to our schools and the needy children who attend them by not authorizing the program this year is inexcusable. For one more year, they are slamming a door we are desperately trying to keep open for struggling, taxpaying families who see a quality education as a lifeline for their children.