

MCC, superintendents urge Congress not to cut benefits

Three superintendents serving Catholic school systems in Maryland are calling on U.S. Sen. Barbara Mikulski to keep nonpublic school teachers in proposed legislation benefiting educators.

In a July 26 letter, Dr. Ronald J. Valenti, superintendent of Catholic schools for the Archdiocese of Baltimore; Dr. Patricia Weitzel-O'Neil, superintendent for the Archdiocese of Washington; and Catherine P. Weaver, superintendent for the Diocese of Wilmington, urged the Maryland Democrat to support language that doesn't cut nonpublic schoolteachers out of a loan-forgiveness proposal.

Sen. Mikulski sits on a conference committee that is expected to reconcile differences between the Senate and House versions of HR 2669. The bill would cancel college tuition grants and loans for educators employed 10 years in a public-service position. While the House version of the bill allows Catholic and other nonpublic schoolteachers to benefit from the loan forgiveness program, the Senate version does not.

"As a member of the conference committee on H.R. 2669, you can provide a valuable voice on behalf of our teachers, who as you know, often work for salaries that are significantly lower than those of their public-school colleagues," the superintendents said.

Joe McTighe, executive director of the Council for American Private Education, pointed out in a July 25 letter to members of the conference committee that the average base salary of a public school teacher is \$44,400, while it is only \$31,700 for nonpublic schoolteachers.

"A loan-forgiveness program for educators that applies only to service in public schools could seriously erode the ability of private schools to recruit teachers and administrators, which in turn could weaken the quality of education for students," he said.

Excluding nonpublic schoolteachers from the program would represent "a break with the historic practice of including all teachers" in similar benefit programs, according to the Maryland Catholic school superintendents.

"The inclusion of our teachers in these programs is also consistent with a provision

in recently enacted state legislation that extends eligibility for the state's higher education workforce shortage student assistance grants program to teachers in nonpublic schools," they said.

Mary Ellen Russell, associate director for education and family life with the Maryland Catholic Conference, said she isn't sure why nonpublic schoolteachers were omitted from the Senate version of the bill when the longstanding practice was to include all educators.

"We're not certain if it was cutting corners or an inadvertent omission," said Ms. Russell, who represents Maryland's Catholic bishops in Annapolis. "We certainly see this as an extremely unfair exclusion of our teachers."

Ms. Russell said she hopes the exclusion does not signal a change in policy for future bills.

"It's something we need to be very vigilant about before anything else comes up," she said.

Ms. Russell said action on the bill is not expected until after Labor Day. An "action alert" urging Catholics to contact their congressional leaders on the issue was distributed via e-mail on July 27 and hundreds have already done so, according to Ms. Russell.

For more information, visit www.mdccathcon.org.