

Nonpublic schools come up short as 2015 legislative session closes

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Although they came close to passing a long-sought state program benefitting students in Maryland's nonpublic schools, supporters of the proposal were thwarted in the waning hours of the 2015 legislative session.

The Student Assistance Organization Business Entity Grant, a budget proposal by Gov. Lawrence Hogan Jr. that would have offered up to \$5 million in grants to student assistance organizations that provide financial support for students in nonpublic schools, failed to win passage in the General Assembly by the end of the April 13 close of the legislative session – a victim of a bruising budget battle.

The proposal was based on a similar bill introduced by Hogan at the start of the legislative session that would have provided tax credits to businesses that support public and nonpublic schools. Since that bill was blocked in the House of Delegates early in the 90-day session, the governor proposed the grant program as an alternative.

"We're obviously very disappointed and frustrated that the tax credit didn't pass," said Mary Ellen Russell, executive director of the Maryland Catholic Conference, legislative lobbying arm of the state's Catholic bishops. "We will not let up our efforts and we will continue to fight for it until we find justice for children who deserve the opportunity to have the best education possible."

Russell blamed Michael Busch, Speaker of the House of Delegates, for being the "one person standing in the way" of the credit.

"He has steadfastly, year after year, refused to allow delegates to vote on it, in spite of the fact that it has bipartisan, widespread support in both chambers," she said.

Garrett O'Day, MCC associate director for education and family life, praised Hogan for proposing the tax credit and offering the alternative business grant after the tax credit did not move forward in the House.

"He has built upon all the work that Sen. Ed DeGrange (one of the early supporters of the tax credit) has done in the past years," O'Day said. "He kept his campaign promises to push the tax credit as an initiative."

In passing a budget April 13, lawmakers restored \$3.5 million cut by Hogan for the nonpublic aging schools program, which helps older nonpublic schools pay for deferred maintenance projects.

Lawmakers also increased funding for a textbook program in nonpublic schools from the \$6.04 million proposed by the governor to \$10 million. The nearly \$4 million increase is contingent on Hogan spending \$68 million lawmakers allocated for the state's largest public school systems. Hogan is not required to spend the \$68 million, however, and has said that in the interest of fiscal discipline he is not likely to spend it or the \$132 million in other funding passed by lawmakers.

Russell said it is not clear whether the increased textbook funding will ever come to fruition. She added that while she appreciates the increase, it "doesn't help put children in the seats of our schools" as she believes the tax credit would do.

One of the highlights for the Catholic Conference this year was the defeat of the proposed legalization of physician-assisted suicide, which was tabled in House and Senate committees.

"I think the advocates working against the bill did an excellent job raising many questions in the minds of legislators about how this bill would affect the most vulnerable in our society - especially those with disabilities, the frail, elderly and those who already are challenged to afford adequate health care," Russell said.

Russell credited the testimony of O.J. Brigance, a former Baltimore Ravens linebacker diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's disease, with playing a major role in defeating assisted suicide.

Dana Davenport, MCC associate director for social concerns, said she was pleased that funding for social safety-net programs was preserved in the approved budget and that lawmakers passed the Second-Chance Act, legislation that allows those with non-violent, misdemeanor criminal records to petition the court to shield court records and police records after three years.

A bill supported by the Catholic Conference to help working families with paid sick-leave failed in the legislature, as did the Pain-Capable Unborn Child Protection Act, which would have banned most abortions after 20-weeks into a pregnancy.

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