

With Assembly's end near, MCC hopes education tax credit may still get vote

By Maria Wiering

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With only days left before the Maryland General Assembly's 2012 session ends at midnight April 9, the Maryland Catholic Conference is hoping some legislation can still keep momentum, including the education tax credit bill that motivated a 400-student rally at the State House March 27.

The students, including groups from St. Mary's Catholic School in Annapolis, St. Louis School in Clarksville, St. Pius X School in Rodger's Forge, Our Lady of Victory School in Arbutus and St. Joan of Arc School in Aberdeen, spent the morning meeting with lawmakers to bolster support for a tax credit that would encourage business donations to public and nonpublic schools. The students then rallied at Lawyer's Mall outside the State House, where the bill's supporters spoke.

The "Partnership for Student and Community Investment Tax Credit" (SB 844/HB 1216), would allow businesses to receive state tax credit for donations to organizations offering financial assistance to students attending nonpublic and public schools. The bill is awaiting action from the House Ways and Means Committee. The Senate has passed a similar bill in the past and is expected to pass it if the House does, said MCC associate director Ellen Robertson, who oversees education and family life public policy issues.

Maryland currently offers more than 20 tax credits, which incentivize programs ranging from bio-heating oil to work-based learning. In a statement, Robertson pointed a finger at the \$22.5 million tax credit bill supporting the Hollywood film industry (SB 1066) that the Senate passed March 23. The House Ways and Means

Committee was scheduled to hold a hearing on the bill April 3.

“Why is financial priority in Maryland given to filmmakers while an important piece of legislation that would greatly enhance the educational future of our children is being ignored?” Robertson asked.

According to the MCC, which advocates for the public policy positions of the state’s Catholic bishops, nonpublic schools save Maryland taxpayers more than \$15 billion per year.

There’s still opportunity for a vote on the bill before the end of the session, Robertson said. The MCC has coordinated Catholic school visits with lawmakers with 12 schools in the Archdiocese of Baltimore throughout the session. Nearly 60 students from St. John the Evangelist School in Severna Park visited lawmakers April 3 to support the bill.

The MCC also hopes to see bills pass requiring abortion statistic reporting, repealing the death penalty and requiring public school teachers to be trained in child sexual abuse prevention and reporting.

- **Abortion Reporting Requirement.** The abortion reporting bill (SB 427/HB 967) was heard by House and Senate committees March 20 and 21, but it has not been scheduled for a vote. The bill would require the state’s abortion providers to report confidential abortion statistics annually to Maryland’s Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. Maryland is one of only four states that requires no abortion statistics reporting.
- **Death Penalty Repeal.** The Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee voted down legislation to repeal the death penalty March 30 with a 6 to 5 vote. The House Judiciary Committee heard testimony March 20 on the bill (SB 872/HB 949), but it has not scheduled a vote.
- **Child Protection.** The bill (SB 613/HB 1256) would require Maryland’s

public schools to develop a program by Dec. 1 for training its school employees on the prevention, identification and reporting of child abuse. Both chambers have held hearings on the bill, but they have not voted on it. However, there is still a lot of interest in the bill, said Mary Ellen Russell, the MCC's executive director.

"At this point, most of the outcomes of the session are to be expected," Russell said. "While we are gravely disappointed in the Legislature's decision redefining marriage, we're confident the people of Maryland will overturn that decision."

Final budget decisions have yet to be made, but the MCC is also optimistic that a number of safety net programs will be preserved to protect the state's vulnerable populations, she added.

After the General Assembly adjourns, the MCC plans to escalate efforts surrounding referenda expected to be on November's ballot challenging the state's new same-sex marriage law, which passed earlier this year, and the DREAM Act, which passed in 2011. The MCC has been working with the coalition Educating Maryland Kids to support the DREAM Act, which makes documented and undocumented immigrants eligible for in-state tuition rates if they meet certain criteria. The MCC has partnered with the Maryland Marriage Alliance to support traditional marriage and overturn the state's law legalizing same-sex marriage.

In both efforts, the MCC is working with parish advocates to coordinate education efforts. It is also working with partners to organize a petition drive to obtain about 56,000 valid signatures required to bring the marriage law to popular vote - one-third of which are needed by May 31. It expects parishes to host petition drives in the weeks following Easter, and is still working to train parish volunteers to oversee the drives.

The dual efforts showcase that Catholic social teaching transcends political parties' platforms, said MCC communications director Kathy Dempsey. "It gives us a chance to share the Catholic faith and why these two seemingly diverse issues are in harmony," she said.