



Parent Advocate

Scholarship Tax Credit Proposal Still Alive GRASSROOTS SUPPORT REMAINS CRITICAL

On February 27, the Legislature's Revenue Committee conducted a public hearing on **LB 67**, the Nebraska Elementary and Secondary Educational Opportunities Tax Credit Act. This legislation proposes to establish annual state income tax credits for a controlled amount of contributions made by individuals and businesses to entities that award scholarships to help students enroll in private-sector elementary and secondary schools.

As of May 18, with only 10 days remaining in the Legislature's session, LB 67 was still held by the Revenue Committee. It appeared likely that the eight-member committee would carry the bill over to the 2010 session. Apparently there were not enough votes—five being needed—to either advance the bill to the full Legislature or to indefinitely postpone it. Senator Mike Friend of Omaha, introducer of the bill and a member of the committee, has worked to sustain the measure.

Senator Friend's efforts have been aided by a substantial outpouring of support on the part of Catholic-school parents and patrons, responding to leadership and encouragement from NFCSP. Revenue Committee members have acknowledged receiving large numbers of supportive communications on LB 67—more than 300 e-mails and letters. More of the same is needed to keep attention on the bill and to enhance its chances of passage in 2010.

Revenue Committee members in addition to Senator Friend are Senators Abbie Cornett of Bellevue (chair), Tom White of Omaha, Cap Dierks of Ewing, Galen Hadley of Kearney, Greg Adams of York, Dennis Utter of Hastings and Leroy Loudon of Ellsworth. Contact information can be found on page three of this newsletter.

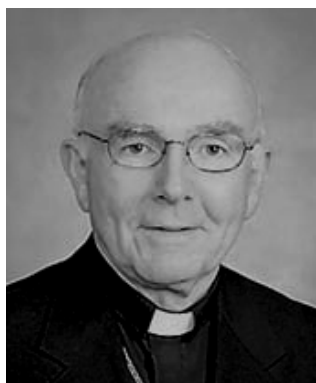
A strong, multi-faceted presentation in support of LB 67 was made at its public hearing. Testifying for the bill were: Bishop William Dendinger of the Diocese of Grand Island; NFCSP board member Jim Stolze from Omaha, NFCSP members Sheri Robertson and Patty Richard from Lincoln; Jim Ballard, a parent of children attending Parkview Christian School; Greg Logsdon, Superintendent of Grand Island Central Catholic; James Jeffers, grandparent of private school students; and Jeremy Murphy, Associate Director for Education Issues of the Nebraska Catholic Conference, which represents the mutual concerns and interests of the three dioceses.

Opposition testimony was presented on behalf of the Nebraska State Education Association teachers' union, the Nebraska Association of (public) School Boards, and the Nebraska affiliate of the American Civil Liberties Union (NCLU).

After the hearing, Mr. Murphy submitted a brief to the Revenue Committee refuting several NCLU assertions.

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Excerpts from Bishop Dendinger's Testimony on LB 67:



Most Rev. William Dendinger
Bishop of Grand Island

"Faith-based schools and private schools in the State of Nebraska are a tremendous asset for all the people of Nebraska. It is in the best interest of the state to protect the continuation and development of these schools as a state asset. In simple terms, these schools are worth at least \$250 million to \$350 million annually for the State taxpayers.

"Given the present economic climate and the future maintenance and development of these schools, I and many other others are very concerned about the financing... Presently, we rely on tuition, parish support, and endowment funds to run these schools.

However, these three legs of support are stretched beyond limits right now. Realistically, our only response can be to rely more and more on tuition, and thus limit the opportunities for parents to choose these schools. A scholarship tax credit program would allow us to reach out more to the low-income and even middle-income parents, and not just the few who can afford massive tuition increases. Our enrollment would certainly be sustained and increased with greater availability of tuition assistance for these middle- and lower-income parents; a real advantage to the State and to taxpayers. A fourth leg of funding is critical to keep the other three legs in proportion."

PRIVATE SCHOOL TEACHERS GAIN NEW ACCELERATED LOAN FORGIVENESS

In a new law passed by the Nebraska Legislature, a state program that financially assists teacher-education students has been revised in a way that treats teachers who work for certain private-sector schools more equitably.

LB 547, which passed 49-0 and was signed into law by the Governor, brings about several changes to what has been known as the Attracting Excellence to Teaching Program, including changing the name to the Enhancing Excellence in Teaching Act.

In this program, \$1 million in state lottery proceeds is appropriated for loans to teacher-education students, now post-graduate as well as undergraduate students, who agree to take or continue employment as state-certificated teachers in approved or accredited private or public schools. The appropriation will now be divided into \$600,000 for graduate students and \$400,000 for undergraduates. **LB 547** increased the maximum amount that can be borrowed annually from \$2500 to \$3000 per individual. Also, the bill established a priority for loans taken by teachers whose teacher-education program enables them to be



Sen. Fulton

Sen. Nordquist

Sen. Wallman

endorsed in shortage areas as determined by the State Department of Education.

After two years of qualifying, full-time teaching borrowers under the Enhancing Excellence in Teaching Act become eligible for forgiveness of their loans at a rate of \$3000 for each year of full-time teaching. The loan forgiveness accelerates to \$6000 per year for teachers employed by public school districts that are classified as “very sparse” or that have an enrollment of 40 percent or greater of poverty students.

As originally introduced, **LB 547** did not allow for accelerated loan forgiveness for borrowers who take employment in qualifying private-sector schools.

Senator Tony Fulton of Lincoln offered an amendment to extend the same acceleration provision to borrowers teaching in high poverty private-sector schools. The standard for this determination is that at least 40 percent of the enrolled students qualify for federally subsidized free lunches. Eight Nebraska Catholic schools fit under this standard during the 2008-09 school term.

After some floor debate, Senator Fulton’s amendment was adopted on a 32-2 vote. Only Senators Russ Karpisek of Wilber and Danielle Nantkes of Lincoln voted against it. Senator Fulton ably defended the inclusion of private-school teachers in the program when this was challenged by Senator Nantkes.

Senators Jeremy Nordquist of Omaha and Norm Wallman of Cortland made helpful comments during the floor debate. They pointed out that poverty affects private-sector schools as well as public schools and that private-sector schools provide a high level of taxpayer savings as a quality alternative to tax-funded schools.

New State Budget Includes Modest Increase in Textbook Loan Funding

After four months of hard work by its Appropriations Committee and only a few revisions during floor debate, the Legislature passed a new state budget for the 2009-2011 fiscal biennium on May 11. The budget package, consisting of state aid and state-agency operations, capital construction, salaries for legislators and constitutional officers, deficit appropriations and claims against the state, authorizes approximately \$6.92 billion in General Fund spending for the two-year period. The average growth rate is about one percent per year, but that is skewed by the two-year availability and use of \$524 million of federal stimulus funds from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009.

The “mainline” budget bill, consisting of funding for agency operations and state aid for individuals and political subdivisions, was **LB 315**. It passed on a 46-2 vote.

Of particular interest to NFCSP was the appropriation for the textbook-loan program. **LB 315 sets this line item at \$500,000 for each of the next two fiscal years. That’s an increase of \$115,000 over the preceding biennium.** On this item, the Appropriations Committee and then the full Legislature approved the amounts recommended by Governor Dave Heineman. NFCSP board members met with the Governor prior to the start of the legislative session and urged his support for a modest increase.

Although this appropriation remains quite small in relation to overall state spending for K-12 public education, it is meaningful and appreciated in enabling the purchase of textbooks for loan to Catholic-school and other private-school families.



STATE AID REVISIONS STALL, THEN MOVE THROUGH

After temporarily stalling at the first-stage of floor debate, and after nearly 20 hours of debate in total, legislation that amends the formula that distributes state funding to public school districts was worked out and moved on through to passage by the Nebraska Legislature.

The principal thrust of **LB 545** allows for infusion of \$234 million of federal stimulus funds, from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, into the public-school state-aid budget for the biennium that begins July 1. The bill passed May 13 by a vote of 46-1.

Had it not been changed, the state-aid formula would have called for an increase of \$295 million. Slowing the projected growth by \$61 million became a major factor in balancing the overall state budget. Even as slowed, state aid for public school districts is expected to reach \$925 million for the first year of the new fiscal biennium. The state is spending \$839 million for this purpose in the current fiscal year.

During debate, several senators stressed that the growth in spending would be quite difficult to sustain in the

long term, especially since the federal stimulus funds are to expire in two years.

From an NFCSP perspective, the debate was highlighted by statements made by Senator Arnie Stuthman of Platte Center. He cited the important educational role of private and parochial schools, the burdens and sacrifices of those who pay both taxes and tuition for pre-K-12 education, and their significance in producing considerable tax savings for all Nebraska taxpayers.

SCHOLARSHIP TAX CREDIT *cont'd from page 1*

In addition, in response to a concern expressed by Senator Hadley, an amendment was submitted on behalf of NFCSP to limit the credit to 65 percent of each eligible contribution. And, in response to a concern expressed by Senator White, an amendment was submitted to explicitly prohibit the tax-credit legislation from being used as a basis to expand state regulation over private-sector schools. Despite these revisions, neither senator has yet expressed support for the bill.

The fate of LB 67 might very well depend upon a sustained level of grassroots support throughout the interim leading up to the Legislature's 2010 session. For more information, e-mail nebrc@neb.rr.com.

CONTACT YOUR NEBRASKA STATE SENATOR

You can e-mail senators through the Nebraska Legislative webpage at <http://nebraskalegislature.gov> or by using the legislator's first initial plus their last name followed by (example: lheidemann@leg.ne.gov).

MAILING ADDRESS

Senator _____
District # _____ State Capitol
P. O. Box 94604
Lincoln, NE 68509-4604

Dst. Senator	Capitol #	Room	From
1 Heidemann, Lavon	471-2733	1004	Elk Creek
2 Pankonin, Dave	471-2613	2004	Louisville
3 Price, Scott	471-2627	1528	Bellevue
4 Pirsch, Pete	471-2621	1404	Omaha
5 Mello, Heath	471-2710	1206	Omaha
6 Nelson, John E.	471-2714	2028	Omaha
7 Nordquist, Jeremy J.	471-2721	1208	Omaha
8 White, Tom	471-2722	1120	Omaha
9 Howard, Gwen	471-2723	1124	Omaha
10 Friend, Mike	471-2718	1212	Omaha
11 Council, Brenda J	471-2612	1115	Omaha
12 Lathrop, Steve	471-2623	2000	Omaha
13 Cook, Tanya	471-2727	1115	Omaha
14 Gay, Tim	471-2730	1402	Papillion
15 Janssen, Charlie	471-2625	1403	Fremont
16 Rogert, Kent	471-2728	2011	Tekamah
17 Giese, Robert J.	471-2716	1118	So Sioux City
18 Lautenbaugh, Scott	471-2618	1021	Omaha
19 Flood, Mike	471-2929	2103	Norfolk
20 Ashford, Brad	471-2622	1103	Omaha
21 Haar, Ken	471-2673	1522	Malcolm
22 Stuthman, Arnie	471-2715	1101	Platte Center
23 Langemeier, Chris	471-2719	1210	Schuyler
24 Adams, Greg	471-2756	1107	York
25 Campbell, Kathy	471-2731	1019	Lincoln

Dst. Senator	Capitol #	Room	From
26 McGill, Amanda	471-2610	1017	Lincoln
27 Coash, Colby	471-2632	1117	Lincoln
28 Avery, Bill	471-2633	1114	Lincoln
29 Fulton, Tony	471-2734	2107	Lincoln
30 Wallman, Norm	471-2620	1406	Cortland
31 Pahls, Rich	471-2327	1401	Omaha
32 Karpisek, Russ	471-2711	1015	Wilber
33 Utter, Dennis	471-2712	1529	Hastings
34 Dubas, Annette	471-2630	1018	Fullerton
35 Gloor, Mike	471-2617	1523	Grand Island
36 Wightman, John	471-2642	2010	Lexington
37 Hadley, Galen	471-2726	2104	Kearney
38 Carlson, Tom	471-2732	1022	Holdrege
39 McCoy, Beau	471-2885	1117	Omaha
40 Dierks, M. L. "Cap"	471-2801	2108	Ewing
41 Sullivan, Kate	471-2631	1019	Cedar Rapids
42 Hansen, Tom	471-2729	1012	North Platte
43 Fischer, Deb	471-2628	1110	Valentine
44 Christensen, Mark R.	471-2805	1000	Imperial
45 Cornett, Abbie	471-2615	1116	Bellevue
46 Nantkes, Danielle	471-2720	1008	Lincoln
47 Schilz, Ken	471-2616	1202	Ogallala
48 Harms, John N.	471-2802	2017	Scottsbluff
49 Loudon, LeRoy J.	471-2725	1016	Ellsworth

Nebraska Catholic School Student named 2009 Presidential Scholar

Congratulations to Benjamin Kotopka, a recent graduate of Pius X High School in Lincoln. He was selected as a 2009 Presidential Scholar, one of only two from Nebraska and only 141 in the country.

In addition, Ben was selected by the *Omaha World-Herald* for its “Best of the Best” distinction: the nine-member All-State Academic Team. That team also included Thomas Belatti from Creighton Prep and Erin Leigh Borchers from Omaha Skutt Catholic. Joining Belatti and Borchers on the All-Metro First Team were James Owens from Creighton Prep and Luke Weitkemper from Elkhorn Mount Michael. Kotopka’s Pius X classmate, Thomas Q. Swanson, joined him on the All-Eastern First Team. Michael Joseph Klinginsmith from Kearney Catholic High School was named to the All West-Central First Team. Numerous other graduating seniors from Catholic schools also were honored by the newspaper.

There is a special relationship between Ben Kotopka and the NFCSP. In its promotional spot that NFCSP has sponsored during television coverage of the boys’ and girls’ state basketball championship games each of the past three years, and the television coverage of the state football and volleyball championships in each of the past two years, Ben is the oldest sibling of the Kotopka family featured in the video.

Five of nine Nebraska seniors and one of two juniors earning a perfect ACT score were from Catholic Schools.

The seniors :

Thomas Belatti of **Creighton Preparatory School** in Omaha

Logan White of **Creighton Preparatory School** in Omaha

Benjamin Kotopka of **Pius X High School** in Lincoln

Luke Weitkemper of **Mt. Michael Benedictine High School** in Elkhorn

Erin Borchers of **Skutt Catholic High School** in Omaha

The junior:

Anna Heffron of **Skutt Catholic High School** in Omaha.

CONGRATULATIONS!

These students were among 514 students nationwide to receive a perfect score. On average, roughly one-tenth of one percent of test takers score a perfect 36.



NEBRASKA FEDERATION OF CATHOLIC SCHOOL PARENTS

Identity Unity Collaboration Empowerment

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