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TOUR OF ITALY

Legislators urged to restore tax credit program

Proposed \$10 million EITC cut drives awareness campaign

Pittsburgh Catholic Staff Report

Parents and non-public school officials should press state legislators, now in the middle of debate on the annual budget, to restore the Educational Improvement Tax Credit program to last year's total of \$75 million, said Dr. Ron Bowes.

Bowes, assistant superintendent for public policy and development in the diocesan schools office, hosted a town hall meeting April 13 at St. Paul

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Seminary for Operation Restore, a campaign to restore funding for the tax credits.

The effort is an initiative of the REACH (Road to Educational Achievement Through Choice) Alliance to win support for the EITC program, which helps non-profit scholarship or educational improvement organizations to make non-public education more affordable for families.

Bowes urged those in attendance to combat the legislature's proposed \$10 million cut in the \$75 million program — after an earlier \$15 million cut last year.

"We're trying to stop that \$10 million cut," he said.

He said the tax credits are targeted for cuts even as the budget includes an increase of \$354 million in basic education funding.

Many legislators support the EITC program — the first such effort in the country, he said. "We're very blessed to have this here."

In the Diocese of Pittsburgh, money from EITC goes into the Scholastic Opportunity Scholarship fund, which is distributed in the form of tuition aid to families based on need. More than 7,000 scholarships a year are distributed from the money.

"In our 114 Catholic schools this should be Priority 1," Bowes said of the fight to restore funding. "It has enabled us to sustain ourselves and move ahead to better serve parents and students."

Between 2001 and 2008 the program saw four increases in funding. If schools were forced to close due to a further reduction in this money, Bowes predicted a disaster.

Operation Restore estimates that if the 44,000 non-public school students in the state who received scholarships through the program last year re-entered the public school system, it would cost taxpayers an additional \$531.6 million each year.

"We get \$3.5 million a year in the diocese, yet our need is \$11 million. We are far from meeting the needs of our parents," Bowes said.

Danielle Kozich, Internet strategies specialist for the Bravo Group, gave an overview of the situation and strategy on behalf of the REACH Alliance.

Parents and educators need to speak up as the budget debate continues, she said. "Everyone should talk to legislators about how this impacts you."

The state House on March 23 passed Gov. Ed Rendell's version of the budget, with the \$10 million cut in EITC funding and increase in public school funding.

Deliberations continue through May, heading for a June 30 deadline.

Operation Restore is targeting media and the General Assembly "to spread our message," she said.

The group has produced bulletin inserts and bookmarks to distribute. It also encourages use of the Internet, e-mail and social media to get the message out, plus planning events to invite legislators.

Supporters will be on hand at the capitol in Harrisburg for the ninth "birthday party" for EITC on Tuesday, May 4, to continue advocating for the restoration of funding.

Sean McAleer, education director for the Pennsylvania Catholic Conference, added his encouragement for the fight to restore the funds.

He thanked those in attendance for their support. "We fare very well compared to other states," he said of non-public education.