

# Iowa Association of Christian Schools Legislative Update



March 10, 2009 Volume 1

## A New General Assembly Convenes Amidst New Economic Realities

Although we are monitoring or advocating on fewer bills this legislative session than is normal, there are many questions remaining as the Federal Stimulus Package will steer the final weeks and determine most of what passes this year.

### Four Dreaded Words

“...and accredited nonpublic schools...”

Few phrases capture my attention more than those. We monitor 75-150 bills per session that include the words, “and accredited nonpublic schools” to make sure that nothing is added to the Iowa Code that would preclude our



members from participating in state accreditation if they choose to.

As you know, those of our member schools that are accredited by the state of Iowa enjoy access to AEAs,

transportation & textbook reimbursement dollars, and the ability to participate in the Educational Opportunities Act.

For decades, we rarely had to worry about legislation or administrative rules negatively having an impact on our schools or our ability to be accredited. Times have changed.

Among our accomplishments the last three sessions are the amending of the comprehensive sexual education bill (2007), the removal of language giving the Department of Education “oversight” or “operational control” of private schools when accreditation issues arise (2009), sustaining the transportation and textbook reimbursements, securing

our ability to participate in the four-year-old preschool program (2007), the defense of the College Preparatory Accreditation (2008), defeat of bills that lower the compulsory age, and an increase from \$5 million to \$7.5 million in tax credits through the Educational Opportunities Act (2007) among many others.

But in spite of our efforts and those of other like-minded organizations, we have seen the Civil Rights bill of 2007 open our hiring practices to scrutiny, the Anti-Harassment and Bullying bill advance the GLBT agenda in Iowa (2007), the Iowa Core Curriculum create an unfunded mandate for our schools while virtually ensuring the mediocrity of our public school counterparts (2008), and the Healthy Kids Act advance the “nanny-state” mentality throughout Iowa’s education community (2008).

In reality, we are only four words away from fighting a battle to keep our state accreditation: “...and nonpublic schools...” If these words are included in a bill that attaches any number of unconscionable requirements or programs to state accreditation, we’ll need to find alternatives.

IACS has such an alternative in “Third Party Accreditation” and is working with our friends in other organizations to build consensus on legislative language that would allow us to be recognized by a regional or national accrediting body in lieu of state accreditation. The criterion for accreditation would be determined by the school’s accrediting body. This would allow us to maintain our access to state assistance

through the AEAs, reimbursements, and the EOA without having to satisfy future requirements for state accreditation that may become incompatible with our faith.

Please pray that the language comes together soon and that we can find the right legislator to champion our cause on this issue.

When we are successful, it will hopefully take more than just those four dreaded words to put Iowa's School Choice programs out of reach for Iowa families.

## Transportation & Textbook Dollars

For many years, Iowa's accredited nonpublic schools have enjoyed the ability to receive some state aid for nonsectarian textbooks and our parents have had the benefit of transportation reimbursement dollars from the state for not using the public school busing system.

Almost every year these appropriations have been raised at the same level as "allowable growth," the percentage of growth set by the Legislature that determines the increase in funding for public education each year.

This year, however, public schools standing to receive a 2%+ increase in public funding while our transportation and textbook appropriations are suggested to be cut by 7.9%

IACS and the IA Catholic Conference joined forces to generate 1,600+ emails in many legislators' inboxes! Thank you for your response! We are now waiting to see if legislative leaders do the right thing and backfill our appropriations like they are doing for almost every other line item being cut this year. Please be prepared to send another round of emails if we need some additional help persuading the legislature to restore our funding.

## Educational Opportunities Act

Action on the EOA usually happens late in the legislative session. Iowa Advocates for Choice in Education is working with IACS and the Iowa Catholic Conference to increase the number of tax credits to \$10 million and include corporate gifts in the tax credit EOA.

We will be encouraging the Senate to start the process of sustaining this program, adding corporate tax credits to the program, and meeting their commitments to raise the number of credits available. Stay tuned for more details as the session winds down!

## Answers To Common Questions

Here are some of the questions and issues that have arisen over the last year by some of our schools:

**Bullying Bill** - many schools used similar language in their policies to comply with the law that did not list the protected classes listed in the law. These policies are not passing muster with the DE during site visits.

**Please contact our lobbyist, Eric Goranson, if you have any questions or would like samples of policies** that have been successful in addressing some of our concerns while meeting the Department's requirements. IACS and member schools are looking at options to increase flexibility but in the meantime need to work together to comply with the DE's request without compromising your school's faith principles.

**Iowa Core Curriculum** - many have asked if it is mandatory for administrators and/or teachers to attend the training modules for the Iowa Core. The answer is no. They also have not released administrative rules about the Core Curriculum

because they are still wrapping up the 21st Century Skills component.

Also, please remember that the DE CANNOT mandate any specific teaching methodology, textbook, or textbook series. Also, they CANNOT require the use of any specific worksheet or exercise. There is some content that must be covered but your school can decide how best to cover that material based on your curriculum and faith requirements.

**Healthy Kids Act** - the rules for the Healthy Kids Act are not set and are being debated hotly by advocates on both sides of the issue. The Department of Education is doing a good job balancing the requirements of the law with the realities of our school environments but is under a tremendous amount of pressure to make the rules more stringent than their first draft. We are waiting to see the final set of rules. We may see them sometime over the summer.

## Have IACS Speak To Your Group/Event!

A special thanks to Trinity Lutheran for allowing Eric Goranson to speak to one of their parent groups recently and Pella Christian for allowing Eric to speak to a large assembly of their students this year.

We are looking for opportunities to connect with parent-groups or events! Please contact Eric Goranson if you are willing to let us speak to your group about IACS, the Legislature, School Choice, and/or to answer any specific questions you may have.

We also need help finding connections with Christian Schools that are not dues-paying IACS members. We would love to speak to their administrators, boards, or parent groups about IACS and the work it does for their school. Thank you!

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## **IACS Lobbyist**

**Eric Goranson**

Goranson Consulting

eric at goranson-consulting.com

## **Contact Your Legislator:**

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