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Indiana's voucher program benefits Kunkler family

BY MEGAN ERBACHER
The Message assistant editor

Editor's note: This is part of a series highlighting the 10th anniversary of Indiana's Choice Scholarship Program.

When Indiana's Choice Scholarship Program became available 10 years ago, Julia and Bill Kunkler's four children all were attending Diocese of Evansville Catholic schools. Once Julia and Bill learned about the new program through Resurrection Catholic School's administrative staff, they decided to apply.

"So when we chose to use the voucher program, we saw it as a way we could recuperate our tax-payer dollars," Julia said.

This year marks the 10th anniversary of Indiana's Choice Scholarship Program, commonly known as the voucher program, which allows parents and guardians to choose the school they believe is best for their kids. In the

spring of 2011, then-Gov. Mitch Daniels signed Indiana's Choice Scholarship Program into law. In the past 10 years, more than a quarter-million Indiana students have benefitted from the voucher program.

The Kunkler's are parishioners of Resurrection Parish in Evansville.

Julia and Bill have four children. Michaela, 22, is a senior at the University of Evansville, where she is majoring in Visual Communication Design and minoring in Communications. Jonah, 20, is a sophomore at Vincennes University majoring in Precision Machining Technology. Their youngest two kids attend Mater Dei High School. Levi, 16, is a sophomore; and Caleb, 15, is a freshman.

Julia said, "The voucher program has benefitted our family by giving all four of our children the opportunity to have a quality, faith-based, Catholic education without stretching our family's finances too thinly."



Submitted photo

The Kunkler family: Julia, front row left, Bill, Michaela, Levi, back row left, Jonah and Caleb.

ICC praises bipartisan budget, school-choice expansion

BY VICTORIA ARTHUR
Statehouse Correspondent for
Indiana's Catholic Newspapers

Social distancing did not deter lawmakers from joining together to pass an overwhelmingly bipartisan budget at the close of the 2021 General Assembly that included a historic expansion to school choice in Indiana.

Only five of 150 legislators voted against the two-year, \$37 billion budget that was boosted by \$3 billion in federal COVID-19 relief funding. The budget saw major increases in funding

for K-12 public education, along with sweeping changes to extend the reach and impact of the state's school choice programs. That includes Indiana's Choice Scholarship Program, more commonly known as the voucher program.

The Indiana Catholic Conference and other advocates heralded the hard-fought success, which came exactly 10 years after they played a key role in the passage of the state's original Choice Scholarship legislation that has become a model across the nation.

"Hoosier families won," said

John Elcesser, executive director of the Indiana Non-Public Education Association (INPEA), which represents the state's more than 400 non-public schools, including Indiana's 175 Catholic schools. "Most of the choice expansions lobbied for by the INPEA and the ICC will soon be a reality, and more families will now find non-public school options affordable.

"We thank the legislative leadership for their bold vision for funding Hoosier education."

Among the school-choice provisions in the budget passed by lawmakers on April 22 are a

dramatic expansion in eligibility for the voucher program and a sizable increase in the scholarship amount that voucher students receive.

The current eligibility for vouchers stands, in most cases, at a maximum family income of 150 percent of the federal Free and Reduced Lunch program. Under the new guidelines, that threshold would jump to 300 percent by next year, helping middle- and upper-middle-class families still struggling to pay for private school tuition, Elcesser explained.

In addition, eligible families

will see increases in the dollar amounts of the vouchers their students receive.

Currently, the program operates under three tiers, with students receiving vouchers of 50, 70 or 90 percent of state tuition support based on family income. Going forward, all eligible students will receive a 90 percent voucher, representing 90 percent of the state's tuition support for their child if they attended their local public school.

"These are historic developments that will help so many families send their children to the schools that best meet their needs," said Angela Espada, executive director of the ICC, the public policy voice of the Catholic Church in Indiana. "Even the highest quality public school still may not be the best choice for a particular family and their unique situation. We always support what is best for the child, and families are best at making those decisions."

Session recap

In addition to the school-choice legislation, the ICC closely tracked numerous other bills during this long session of



Bishop announces new pastoral assignments

BY THE
MESSAGE STAFF

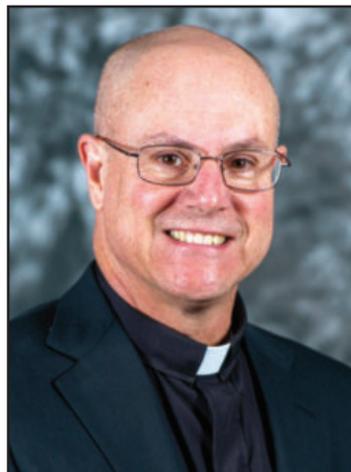
Bishop Joseph M. Siegel has announced a number of new pastoral assignments that will take effect later this year.

Bishop Siegel accepted a request from Father Bernie Etienne, pastor of Evansville's Holy Rosary Parish, to step down as Vicar General of the Diocese of Evansville, effective June 30, after serving almost 10 years. Father Bernie will continue as pastor of Holy Rosary Parish.

Bishop Siegel appointed Father Alex Zenthoefer as the new Diocesan Vicar General,

effective June 30. To help facilitate Father Alex taking on the many responsibilities of Vicar General, he will be moving from Evansville's Annunciation Parish, where he has served as pastor since 2014, to become pastor of Sts. Mary and John Parish in Evansville, effective June 30.

In announcing the appointments to diocesan priests and pastoral life coordinators, Bishop Siegel said, "I hope you will join me in thanking Father Bernie for his many years of service as Vicar General. He has been of tremendous assistance to both Archbishop Thompson and



FATHER BERNIE ETIENNE

me in fulfilling the many and varied duties that are included



FATHER ALEX ZENTHOEFER

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