

**Legislative Report**  
**Submitted by Linda Bishop**  
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The state legislature has been in recess. The fall session ended with the House dropping its plan to run a taxpayer funded tuition voucher bill when it became clear there were not enough votes to pass it. In addition, a proposal to expand charter schools and the Education Improvement Tax Credit (EITC) program was defeated on the House floor with a vote of 90–105. Many thanks to those members of the Board, the staff, and the community who engaged in advocacy with our state legislators on these issues. Clearly, all those efforts made a difference.

The legislature is just getting back into action. Education initiatives, including school choice, will continue to be on the front burner. This week the House Education Committee met with Education Secretary Ron Tomalis, who said that the Corbett Administration's top priorities continue to be tuition vouchers, charter school expansion, EITC, and revisions to the system of teacher evaluations. Tomorrow, the House Education Committee will hear from cyber charter school administrators on cyber charter school funding. Auditor General Jack Wagner has urged the General Assembly to fix the flawed charter school funding formula, which he says is costing taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars. “This funding formula must be fixed before the General Assembly considers spending more money on alternative forms of education.”

The Senate Education Committee met with Education Secretary Ron Tomalis yesterday to discuss financially distressed school districts, including Chester Upland School District in Delaware County. In December, Chester Upland announced that it was broke due to state funding cuts and the loss of one half its students to charter schools. The district made a public appeal to Gov. Tom Corbett for an advance of \$18.7 million so the district could meet its payroll. The Corbett Administration refused and even went so far as to deduct from Chester Upland's state subsidy the payments that Chester Upland owes to charter schools, which of course worsened the district's financial plight. The district's teachers agreed to work without pay so the students could continue to go to school. Last week, a federal court judge ordered that the state keep the bankrupt district afloat for a few more weeks by advancing it \$3.2 million. Yesterday, the Senators urged Governor Corbett to develop a plan for Chester Upland and other distressed districts, including Harrisburg, Erie, Lancaster, York, Allentown, Reading and (locally) Steel Valley, Sto Rox, and Duquesne. Fifty students from Chester Upland were in the audience holding placards pleading for financial help for their district. Secretary Tomalis said the administration already has a plan for financially distressed districts, which is a new system of teacher evaluations to weed out bad teachers, and legislation allowing districts to furlough low quality teachers. The Senators told the Secretary that this plan is not enough. Senator Dinniman, the minority chair of the Senate Education Committee, went so far as to reverse his earlier support of taxpayer funded tuition vouchers. He said: “**I will not vote for even limited vouchers or any other types of vouchers when SB 1 or any other voucher legislation** is returned from the House to the Senate. While I might have been fooled once I will not be fooled again after reviewing what I believe to be the true implications of the Corbett Administration’s approach to the Chester–Upland and Duquesne City School Districts and by implication all the other poor and fiscally distressed districts. It is clear to me and I believe others that the Governor and the Pennsylvania Department of Education want to destroy public education in the poorest districts and we all must not allow this to happen. ”

In early February, the Governor will give his annual Budget Address, which will include his priorities for the next fiscal year. Last year, funding for public education suffered \$900 million in budget cuts. It remains to be seen what will be proposed this year. Given that Pennsylvania's state tax collections halfway through this fiscal year lag nearly \$500 million behind projections, the outlook for education spending next year is probably not good. One

good piece of news is that Pennsylvania has been awarded \$41.3 million under the federally funded Race to the Top grant program. Half of the funding will be appropriated to local education agencies and intermediate units. Governor Corbett said the state's portion of the funding will be used primarily to provide students with greater access to charter schools and cyber schools as well as for new teacher and principal evaluation programs.

Pennsylvania is seeking relief from the No Child Left Behind law. PA Education Secretary Ron Tomalis apparently spoke to US Education Secretary Arne Duncan about tweaking the state's plan for implementing NCLB to keep the proficiency targets at this year's level until a new federal education law is passed, which is expected within the next two years. No word yet on whether this waiver will be granted.

On the local front, the big story is the Allegheny County property reassessment. The property values for Pittsburgh were sent to taxpayers in December, triggering a firestorm of protest about the significant increases in assessed values. Many property owners panicked, assuming that because their assessments increased dramatically, their property taxes would too. This is not necessarily the case. Act 1 requires school districts to adjust their millage rates when a reassessment occurs and prohibits them from receiving a windfall as a result of reassessment. Individual property owners may pay more or less after the millage rate is adjusted, depending on the value of their properties in relation to other properties in their district. Not understanding this, however, many property owners protested the reassessment. County Executive Rich Fitzgerald jumped into the fray, saying that Allegheny County was being singled out for unfair treatment and calling on the state legislature to stop the court ordered reassessment and to tackle the issue on a statewide basis. The upshot was that Judge Wettick, who is overseeing the reassessment project, agreed that property taxes this coming year will be based on the old assessments, allowing taxpayers a year for appeals. North Allegheny property owners have not yet received their new assessments.

The annual PSBA Legislative Meeting for our Region is scheduled for Wednesday, February 29 at the AIU. There will be a regional cabinet meeting first, followed by a discussion between school directors, superintendents, business managers and our local legislators about legislative issues, particularly meaningful mandate relief, charter school reform, vouchers and education funding. Mrs. Grosheider and I will be attending. If anyone else is interested, please let me know. Two additional meetings with local legislators are being planned, one in the North Hills and one in the South Hills. We're hoping that we can bring out parents and community members to these regional meetings. **The northern area meeting is scheduled for Thursday, February 23 at 7 PM in North Hills Senior High School auditorium.** Tentatively, it will start with a short, factual presentation of the issues facing public schools today, including vouchers, charters, cybers, mandates, and budgets, followed by a panel discussion with legislators and educational experts, and a question and answer period. Please mark your calendars for this very important event, which is being coordinated by Mrs. Grosheider and Mr. Lou Nudi, North Hills School Director.

As the meeting was beginning, late-breaking news was reported. It was the understanding of the group that the re-apportionment of legislative districts was disapproved by the Pennsylvania Supreme Court. The 2002 plan will remain in place.