

## **Legislative Report – Mrs. Bishop**

*(submitted as a written report)*

**October 2013**

At our September 25 Board meeting, a speaker questioned why I was attending the Pennsylvania School Boards Association School Leadership Conference since I am leaving the Board, and suggested it would be more appropriate for another Board member to take my place. I would like to offer my comments about this.

It is really important for school boards to be involved in the work of PSBA and to attend the annual conference, especially the legislative meetings. It is our main opportunity to learn about the legislative issues that have such a major impact on our students and our taxpayers. It is also an opportunity to dialogue with school board members from other districts about those issues. Most importantly, it is our opportunity to have a voice in the legislative advocacy work that PSBA does on our behalf. PSBA is our lobbying organization. They are in the Capitol every day lobbying with the legislators for or against legislation that affects what our students learn, how much they are tested, how much funding we receive from the state, pension reform, what unfunded mandates we will have to comply with, and how much we pay in property taxes. At PSBA's Delegate Assembly, school board members from across the state debate about what position PSBA will take on each of the legislative issues that concern our districts and our communities, then vote on the Legislative Platform that PSBA uses as the basis of its lobbying efforts for the coming year.

Every year, all North Allegheny Board members are extended the opportunity to attend the conference and serve as voting delegates, of which our District is permitted up to four. This year, Mrs. Grosheider and I were the only Board members who volunteered. I specifically told Mrs. Grosheider that in the event that other Board members wished to attend, I would gladly relinquish my seat to any of my colleagues who would be continuing on the Board after November. No other Board member volunteered.

This year, and for the past several years, I have served as the Board's official Liaison to the Pennsylvania School Boards Association and as the Board member responsible for our legislative lobbying efforts and our monthly Legislative Report. Attending the conference as a voting delegate and participating in the development and approval of PSBA's Legislative Platform is a crucial component of my Board responsibilities this year. I believe that I have represented the District very well at this conference the past several years. I offer no apology for doing my (unpaid) job, and will continue to do so until the end of my term next month.

At the same time, I surely agree with the speaker that it would be beneficial if other members of the Board would also take advantage of the opportunity to attend the annual PSBA School Leadership Conference 26 as well. Certainly it is difficult for any of us to take time off to travel four hours to the not exactly glamorous destination of Hershey PA in the middle of a work/school week in October, yet several of us—myself, Mrs. Grosheider, Mrs. Boujoukos and

Mr. Hubert—have managed to do so over the years. I would challenge my colleagues who are continuing on the Board, and any new Board members who are elected next month, to mark your calendars now for the PSBA Conference next October so that North Allegheny can continue to be well represented at this important legislative meeting.

Highlights of this year's conference are as follows:

- PSBA has a new Executive Director, Mr. Nathan Mains, formerly president and state director of Communities in Schools of Pennsylvania. He identified his two priorities as improving PSBA's legislative advocacy and making PSBA more member-centered. One change that has already occurred is ending the printing of the School Leader News and replacing it with a new, daily e-mail communication to members. There have also been some personnel changes at PSBA, including the replacement of the Assistant Executive Director for Governmental Relations.
- The results of the election for PSBA officers was announced: William LaCoff for President-elect defeated Mark Miller in a close vote, Charles Ballard for Vice President, Otto Voit for Treasurer, and Dan O'Keefe of Northgate SD for At-large Representative of W. PA.
- There was a regional cabinet meeting of Board members from western PA. It was decided that we will hold our winter legislative meeting just after the Governor's budget is announced in early February since there was a good turnout of both school board members and legislators for this last year.
- The Legislative Platform was adopted for the coming year by the Delegate Assembly. It contains several new and revised items, including advocacy for increased state appropriations for STEM initiatives, limiting the number of state-mandated tests administered to students, and tightening controls and accountability for charter and cyber charter schools. Mrs. Grosheider served on the Platform Committee again this year.
- Dr. Pedro Noguera, an urban sociologist at NYU, was the opening speaker at the Conference. Calling public education the “great equalizer”, he shared his vision for closing the achievement gap between the best and worst public schools by meeting students' academic and non-academic needs and motivating students to believe that with effort, everything is possible. He also called for state standards for schools and adequate state funding for public education.
- Jeff Clay, Executive Director of PSERS, addressed pension issues. The PSERS plan is only about 2/3 funded. Governor Corbett's proposed pension reform would actually make the situation worse, due to the costs of closing the existing defined benefit plan. HB 1350 and SB 922 on pension reform are basically going nowhere. There is a new proposal by Rep. Glenn Grell for a cash balance plan to be established for new employees with a guaranteed 4% rate of return, and one uniform employer contribution rate of 4-5%. This would be a defined benefit plan so there would be no closing costs. PA would issue \$9 billion in bonds to help fund the new plan. This proposal is in the early stages in the General Assembly.

- Dr. Terry Madonna of Franklin and Marshall College gave his annual update of the state of Pennsylvania politics, which is always peppered with survey results and interesting commentary. He believes that the Pennsylvania Legislature is almost as deeply divided as the U.S. Congress, with the House and Senate at odds on all three of Governor Corbett's key priorities—pension reform, liquor privatization, and transportation funding. He said recent polling shows that PA voters actually care more about funding cuts to public education than about any of these other three issues. Property tax reform is another hot button issue for voters.
- HB 974 regarding Automatic External Defibrillators is currently being considered in the PA Senate. This bill would require school districts to convene a public hearing within 90 days (and every 5 years thereafter) to consider whether to acquire AEDs for each school building.
- Mrs. Grosheider and I signed up to receive free recordings of a number of the conference sessions, 27 which we will make available to everyone when we get them.
- North Allegheny again this year had winning entries in the PSBA Student Poster and Essay Contest.: Sophia Lee and Eric Mi of NAI both won Honorable Mention in the Essay Contest. Congratulations!

Turning to legislative news, two sets of bills pending in the General Assembly illustrate the very different approaches of the House and Senate to the important matters of Charter School Reform and Property Tax Reform:

- Charter School Reform. HB 618, passed by the House last month, was supported by PSBA because it eliminates the pension double dip. The Senate version, SB 1085, however, differs significantly from HB 618. The pension double dip is addressed by eliminating the state portion of retirement payments, thereby providing no savings to public school districts. SB 1085 also provides for direct pay deductions from school district subsidies to charter schools. PSBA does not support SB 1085, which was approved by the Senate Education Committee last week and awaits further action.
- Property Tax Reform. There is a four-bill package on property tax reform being considered in the House, which has already passed three of the four bills: HB 1189, which authorizes school districts to reduce or eliminate property taxes by increasing earned income tax or levying net profits tax, mercantile tax, or business privilege tax; HB 125, which proposes to amend the Constitution to allow local taxing authorities to exclude up to 100% of the assessed value of homestead properties from taxation; and HB 1677, which repeals current law regarding homestead exclusions. The fourth bill in the package, HB 1685, would amend Act 1 to allow a school district to increase the rate of earned income tax to fund property tax relief without seeking approval via voter referendum. This bill was approved by the House Finance Committee and awaits further action. The Senate Finance Committee is conducting hearings on SB 76 (which has an identical companion in the House, HB 76). This proposal calls for eliminating property taxes altogether and replacing them with higher income and sales taxes at the state

level. In summary, the House's approach is to shift decision-making about property taxes to the local level, whereas the Senate's approach is to eliminate property tax altogether on a statewide basis.

Other education-related bills under consideration in the General Assembly:

- SB 847 requiring the PDE to post on its website the “Guidance on Constitutionally Protected Prayer in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools” published by the U.S. DOE
- SB1113 creating requirements for a detailed analysis of estimated costs to implement Keystone Exams and other education-related regulations
- SB 733 giving school districts the option to publish legal notices electronically on a website instead of in a newspaper
- HB 1734 reducing interscholastic athletics disclosure requirements for public schools
- HB 1728 requiring the display of the national motto “In God We Trust” in all public school buildings
- HB 1424 encouraging school districts to offer Holocaust and genocide instruction to students
- HR 108 directing a study of the status of character education programs in public schools.

In Philadelphia, the chairman of the School Reform Commission, Pedro Ramos, resigned this week, citing urgent family concerns. For the past two years, Ramos has presided over drastic reductions in the spending, operations, staffing and facilities of the Philadelphia Schools. Governor Corbett is empowered to appoint his replacement, which may not be easy. There are five members of the Commission, three of whom are appointed by the Governor and two by the Mayor.