

Legislative Report – Mrs. Bishop August 2013

The US Department of Education approved Pennsylvania's request for a waiver from the provisions of No Child Left Behind. PA is the 41st state to receive a waiver, which will apply to all public schools, charter and cyber schools, career and technology centers and intermediate units. This will make “Adequate Yearly Progress” a thing of the past in PA. Instead, a school performance profile will measure student achievement and growth through various indicators. Under NCLB, all students would have had to achieve 100 % proficiency on the PSSA by next year. In the new system, there are four annual measurable objectives: a 95% participation rate on the PSSA, a graduation rate of 85%, closing the achievement gap of all students by 50% within six years, and closing the achievement gap of historically under-performing students, also by 50% within six years.

The financial crisis of the Philadelphia Public Schools continues. The District started their budget process with a \$304 million shortfall. In June, they began issuing layoff notices to about 3,800 employees. These layoffs affected significant numbers of school-based staff, including assistant principals, teachers, guidance counselors, recess and lunch aides, secretaries, support service assistants and teacher assistants. 27

During the summer, the District was promised additional funding of \$112 million. On August 8, William Hite, Superintendent of School District of Philadelphia, announced that if the District did not receive at least another \$50 million in additional funding by August 16, the District would be forced to postpone the start of school on September 9. Hite said, “Without the funds to restore crucial staff members, we cannot open functional schools, run them responsibly or provide a quality education to students...I want to be clear about why the \$50 million matters now: \$50 million allows us to tell parents that when their child is walking through the hallways, eating lunch or at recess, an adult will be supervising them. It allows us to tell parents that counselors will be available to serve children in our largest and neediest schools, and that an assistant principal will be on hand to resolve disciplinary issues...” On August 15, the city borrowed the \$50 million so that schools could open on time. The crisis is far from resolved, however. A big showdown between the teachers' union and administration over contract negotiations is expected over the next few weeks.

The Pennsylvania Supreme Court has decided to jump into a dispute where a parent was penalized for not ensuring that her twin daughters attended kindergarten. The Court will decide whether kindergarten students younger than 8 years old are required to attend school. Under PA law, school districts are not required to provide kindergarten, nor are students required to attend kindergarten. The “Catch 22” in this case is that the parent enrolled the children but allowed them to stop attending. The mother was fined for violating the compulsory school attendance mandate. The ruling of the lower courts in favor of the school district was upheld by the Commonwealth Court, and the case was appealed to the Supreme Court. This is significant

for school districts because in the face of declining revenue and rising mandated costs, 19 school districts have either reduced kindergarten to a half day or eliminated it completely.

The PA Senate Education Committee is conducting public hearings on Keystone Exams and on the PA Common Core Standards, which have been renamed the PA Core. A new Gallup poll shows that only one-third of Americans have even heard of the Common Core Standards, which are in the process of being adopted in most states. The poll also shows a dramatic shift in perceptions about standardized testing and teacher performances. 58% of Americans now oppose using standardized test results to score teacher performance. The poll shows that Americans on the whole are becoming skeptical about the connection between teachers and failing schools, believing instead that schools need more resources to succeed. 70% of respondents oppose using taxpayer money to fund vouchers for private schools.

Nathan Mains has been named the new executive director of the Pennsylvania School Boards Association. Mains is currently president and state director of Communities in Schools of Pennsylvania, an advocacy organization that works within the public school system, determining student needs and establishing relationships with local businesses, social service agencies, health care providers, and parent and volunteer organizations to provide needed resources. He will begin Sept. 8.

Last Friday, Nick Trombetta, founder of PACyber, was indicted by a federal grand jury on a variety of fraud and tax charges. Trombetta is alleged to have stolen almost a million dollars through tax conspiracy, filing false tax returns for five years, and fraud involving computer purchases by PA Cyber. He is alleged to have created a series of connected for-profit and non-profit entities to siphon taxpayer money from PA Cyber and to avoid federal income tax. Trombetta resigned from PA Cyber in 2012.

On Monday, Governor Corbett forced the resignation of William Harner, his nominee for Secretary of Education. Harner had been nominated by Governor Corbett just three months ago, when he was named Acting Secretary of Education upon the departure of Ron Tomalis. Harner's appointment had not even been confirmed by the PA Senate yet. Harner's dismissal follows revelations that the Board of Cumberland Valley School District, where Harner was serving as superintendent, voted in May in closed-door session not to renew Harner's contract. The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette reported that Harner had made inappropriate comments in an email to a vacationing employee earlier this year, prompting the Board to conduct an investigation by an outside counsel, who turned up more than a dozen other complaints about Harner. For the moment, Corbett has appointed Carolyn Dumaesq, executive deputy secretary, as the acting Secretary of Education. It is not known if she will be the new nominee.

Diane Ravitch will speak in Pittsburgh Sept.16. The event, which is free and open to the public, is hosted by Great Public Schools Pittsburgh, a new coalition of community, faith, and labor organizations. Ravitch, an education historian and former US Assistant Secretary of Education, is a well-known advocate for public education. She will be speaking on her new book, *Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America's Public Schools*.

PSBA members will follow the new procedures for electing officers that were authorized by the bylaws changes of 2012. A major change requires that each member district cast one vote per office instead of individual school board members voting during the annual conference in October. We have all received the slate of candidates for the four officer positions. In September, we are asked to discuss the candidates at one of our meetings, and then decide by majority vote of the board which candidate will receive our Board's vote for each office. Our Board Secretary, Mrs. Ryan, will then register our votes electronically with PSBA.