

## Federal Update

### Action Needed to Halt Cuts in Food Stamps and Medicaid

Under the budget reconciliation package pending on Capitol Hill, Medicaid could be cut by as much as \$10 billion over five years. A cut of that size is likely to cause many people to lose health insurance or face higher out-of-pocket expenses that they cannot afford. The people who will be affected by these cuts? The elderly in nursing homes, the disabled needing special care, children and low-income working families.

Congress is also considering large cuts in food assistance. In May, the Senate and House agreed to cut \$3 billion over the next five years from agriculture-related programs including Food Stamps. The program plays a critical role in reducing hunger and helping low-income Americans put nutritious food on the table every day.

The message out of Washington is that these spending cuts are necessary to help rebuild the Gulf, but these cuts in domestic programs as well as new tax breaks for the well-off were planned last spring as part of the Budget Resolution, well before Hurricane Katrina roared into town.

Children's advocates across the nation are joining forces next week to send a message to Congress: "Do the right thing and preserve

funding for domestic programs. Protect children and America's most vulnerable citizens. Do not make cuts to Medicaid and Food Stamps."

We ask that you place calls (using the toll-free number included in this newsletter) to Sen. Specter and Sen. Santorum on either Monday or Tuesday, Oct. 17 & 18, and tell them you oppose cuts to Medicaid and Food Stamps and any program vital to the health and well-being of Pennsylvania's most vulnerable citizens.

More than 468,000 PA households (with just over one million members) are enrolled in the Food Stamp program. Deep cuts to this program would result in Pennsylvania losing about \$20 million a year in grocery purchases and other economic activity generated by those purchases. *(Source: Pennsylvania Hunger Action Center)*

In Pennsylvania, approximately 1.8 million people receive Medical Assistance/Medicaid benefits.

It is expected that House and Senate committees will report out their budget-

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cutting reconciliation bills sometime during the week of October 17<sup>th</sup>. The House and Senate Budget Committees will each merge those committee bills into a single bill by Oct. 26<sup>th</sup> and then consider their chamber's version of the budget-cutting reconciliation bill shortly thereafter.

It is unclear which direction House and Senate leadership will decide to take with respect to the budget – they could decide to continue down the same path and complete the budget process as outlined earlier this year with spending and tax cuts; stop budget reconciliation altogether; or pursue even deeper cuts.

**Your assistance is needed to stop budget reconciliation, help protect domestic programs and send a message to Congress about its misguided priorities.**

### HOW TO CALL:

**Step 1:** On October 17 or 18, call 1-800-426-8073 to be connected toll-free to the Capitol Switchboard. Ask to speak to one of the senators from your state.

**Step 2:** When the senator's phone is answered, say: *"My name is \_\_\_\_\_ and I live in [your town/city]. I would like Senator [name] to oppose \$35 billion in cuts to Medicaid, Food Stamps and other vital services, and to oppose \$70 billion in more tax cuts."*

*"The right priorities are providing health insurance and nutrition support that Pennsylvania's most vulnerable families count on to meet their daily needs."*

**Step 3:** Use the toll-free number in step 1 and call your other senator. If the lines are busy, please be patient and try again. Or, dial their direct lines (not toll-free). Sen. Santorum in Washington, DC – 202-224-6324; Sen. Specter – 202-224-4254.

## Continuing Resolution Extends Funding

Last week Congress approved a Continuing Resolution, a makeshift funding bill to keep the federal government operating into the current fiscal year that began October 1.

The Continuing Resolution – which funds each program by the lowest of either the FY 2005 spending level or the levels passed by the House or Senate for FY 2006 – provides funding for domestic discretionary programs, entitlements and mandatory payments until November 18. The House has passed all its appropriations bills; the Senate is expected to complete work on a defense appropriations bill soon and will have three bills including Labor, Health and Human Services and Education to complete upon their return on October 17.

Any discretionary program must have its funding renewed each year in order to continue operating. Most defense spending is discretionary, as are the budgets for education, health research, housing, veteran's health care and environmental protections. Altogether, discretionary programs make up about one-third of all federal spending.

## Senate Agriculture Mark-up Cancelled

As this issue was going to press, PPC learned that the Senate Agriculture Committee was to meet Thursday, Oct. 6 to begin marking up its budget reconciliation package. However, in a last-minute turn of events, Chairman Chambliss cancelled the Ag Committee reconciliation meeting. Late Wednesday, Oct. 5, Sen. Santorum sent a letter to the Chairman stipulating that he has "serious concerns with any amendments that may be offered that would find additional savings through nutrition programs."

*PPC will provide additional updates as they become available.*

### Head Start Reauthorization Moves in House

Legislation re-authorizing Head Start, known as The School Readiness Act (H.R. 2123), passed the House in late September. Funded at \$6.8 billion last year, Head Start provides education, health, and nutrition services to nearly one million low-income children. In Pennsylvania, 66.5 percent of eligible children ages 3 and 4 are enrolled in Head Start.

The bill makes a number of changes to the program, including requiring more stringent financial reporting by operators of the program; increasing teacher training requirements; and requiring Head Start operators to meet local academic standards for curriculum. Though H.R. 2123 does not change the

funding structure of the program, it does not include enough funding to pay for the increased teacher training requirements.

One of the most controversial aspects of the bill was the adoption of an amendment that would permit potential job applicants to be denied employment at Head Start if their religious beliefs conflict with faith-based organizations overseeing the program.

The House bill also removes Head Start policy councils, which are groups of parents, delegate agencies and grantees, who meet to discuss and exchange information on the program.

It is not clear when the Senate will consider its Head Start reauthorization bill (S. 1107).

## State Update

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### Education News Takes Center Stage this Fall

The State Board of Education has scheduled three hearings on pre-K program regulations that the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) is proposing to the State Board's Early Childhood Education Committee. The draft regulations would amend Chapters 4 (curriculum, standards, assessment, and planning); 11 (student age and length of program); and 12 (comprehensive services). Hearings will be from 1-4 p.m. in Harrisburg, Nov. 1; Pittsburgh, Nov. 2; and Allentown, Nov. 7.

The Board also will hold public roundtable discussions on PDE proposals to alter the scope of certificates for future early childhood, elementary, and special education teachers. PDE proposes that an early childhood certificate would be required to teach pre-K through grade 2 and that an elementary education certificate would be required to teach grades 4-6. A holder of either certificate would be permitted to teach third grade. Both of the two new

certificates would be combined with a special education certificate for grades pre-K-6. These roundtables will be on the same dates and in the same locations from 10:30 a.m. until noon.

### PSSA Test Results Released

PDE released state PSSA test results late last month. While more students scored proficient or advanced on the state tests than in prior years, fewer schools (2,311) managed to achieve adequate yearly progress (AYP) than last year (2,388), at least in part because the AYP standards were increased this year. Student results are summarized below:

GRADE LEVEL	READING — % PROFICIENT OR ADVANCED	MATH — PROFICIENT OR ADVANCED
3rd Grade	68%	81%
5th Grade	64%	69%
8th Grade	64%	63%
11th Grade	65%	51%

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### **Corporal Punishment**

Late last month the House Education Committee voted 14-10 to disapprove State Board regulations banning corporal punishment while the Senate Education Committee did not take action on the regulations. The Independent Regulatory Review Commission (IRRC) approved the regulations on October 6, and barring any action by the legislature, the regulations will go into effect when published in the PA Bulletin. Pennsylvania was one of only 13 states that permitted corporal punishment, and only 18 districts used it.

### **Special Education Lawsuit Settled**

On Sept. 16, Federal District Judge Eduardo Robreno approved a settlement in the 1994 class action lawsuit, *Gaskin v. PDE*. The suit alleged that PDE systematically failed to enforce the right of children with disabilities to be educated in regular classes with appropriate aids and services rather than in segregated special education classes. The settlement will result in a new monitoring system in which every district will receive an LRE (least restrictive environment) Index based on data elements yet to be determined. The 20 worst performing districts will be subject to Tier 1 monitoring – on-site visits by PDE monitoring teams and preparation of a corrective action plan. The 30 districts with the next worst Index ratings will receive Tier 2 monitoring – required attendance at training and technical assistance sessions and preparation of a corrective action plan. The rest of the districts in the bottom half will be subject to Tier 3 monitoring – notification by PDE of areas of deficiency and identification of resources available to aid in improvement. The settlement also requires PDE to investigate future parent complaints about student placement issues.

### **Secretary of Education Nominated**

Gov. Ed Rendell last week announced the nomination of Dr. Gerald L. Zahorchak as Secretary of the Department of Education. Zahorchak has been Acting Secretary for the last two months. Prior to serving as Acting Secretary, Zahorchak was the Deputy Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education. He led the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education's development and implementation of support systems for public schools that are working to meet the demands set by Pennsylvania and No Child Left Behind targets.

### **Pre-School Return on Investment Focus of New Report**

On Oct. 31, the Department of Education will release findings from a study commissioned by the Pennsylvania BUILD Initiative on "The Cost Savings to Special Education from Pre-Schooling in Pennsylvania." The author of the report, Dr. Clive Belfield of Queens College, City University of New York, and Teachers College, Columbia University, will present his findings.

The event will be held from 1 to 3 p.m. at the Forum Building, corner of Walnut Street and Commonwealth Avenue, Harrisburg.

The public is invited to attend, but space is limited. Please e-mail Catherine Carretti at [ccarretti@state.pa.us](mailto:ccarretti@state.pa.us) if you are interested in attending.

**PA General Assembly Session Days  
Oct. 17-21; Oct. 24-28; Oct. 31-Nov. 4**