

State Update

Expanding Engagement in Early Education Initiatives

Two newly-created state panels will help to expand Pennsylvania's early childhood education initiatives by increasing awareness and involvement from business and civic leaders, and the general public.

Governor Rendell recently signed a pair of executive orders creating the Pennsylvania Early Learning Council and the Pennsylvania Early Learning Investment Commission. The Council will replace the Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL) Advisory Committee structure, and was created through the Head Start Reauthorization of 2007.

The Early Learning Council will help plan for the expansion of effective early learning and development services for young children and their families, and make recommendations to state officials to guarantee those plans are successfully carried out. It will be composed of representatives of educational and business entities, higher education, Head Start agencies, local governments, law enforcement agencies, the media and others. New committee additions include Birth to Three, Early Learning Career Preparation and Development and Transition or Creating the Educational Consortium.

Published by Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, a strong, effective, and trusted voice to improve the health, education, and well-being of the Commonwealth's children. Joan L. Benso, President and CEO.

The Early Learning Investment Commission will enlist the support of the commonwealth's business leaders for continued investments in early childhood education. It will be made up of business leaders and the secretaries of Education, Public Welfare, Community and Economic Development, Budget, and Planning and Policy. It will recommend strategies for the commonwealth to engage business and civic leaders in education planning and advocacy; host an economic summit on early childhood investment; and increase business, civic, and public awareness of the importance early childhood education. Members of both will serve three-year terms.

Candidates Asked to Invest in Kids This Election

The Step Up for Kids press conference held at the state Capitol on Sept. 16 was a great success. The purpose of the event – held in conjunction with PA Partnerships for Children, the PA State Council of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), PA State Education Association (PSEA), and Public Citizens for Children and Youth (PCCY) – was to bring attention to every candidate for state and federal office to keep the focus on children and youth issues during this election year.

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Joan Benso, President of PA Partnerships for Children, joined advocates in asking candidates to invest in children this election.

A statewide coalition of children’s advocates joined together in a nonpartisan nationwide call for action being held in 48 states to draw attention to the millions of children in this country who live in poverty, are abused or neglected, don’t have access to early education or quality child care, have no health insurance or have difficulty transitioning from youth to adulthood.

Children are a diminishing priority in the federal budget, according to the Urban Institute and New America Foundation. If current spending continues, the children’s share of domestic funding will be 13.8 percent by 2018 – down from 16 percent in 2007 and 20 percent in 1960.

Speakers addressed the need for improvements to the child welfare system, child care, health care, education and afterschool programs. In 2007, there were more than 24,000 reports of suspected child abuse in PA, including 46 deaths – deaths that could have potentially been averted. More than 20,000 children are living in the foster care system and more than 133,000 children are uninsured.

Speakers included Joan L. Benso, president and CEO of PA Partnerships for Children; Jeff Hunsicker, legislative director of the PA State Council of SEIU; Jerry Olkesiak, treasurer of PSEA; and Shelly Yanoff, president of Public Citizens for Children and Youth.

Child advocates, parents, child care providers, teachers, health care workers and children from across the Commonwealth also attended.

PLEASE REMEMBER TO VOTE ON NOVEMBER 4

All seats in the Pennsylvania House of Representatives and half of those in the Pennsylvania Senate will be up for election this year. All Pennsylvania seats in the U.S. Congress will be up for election as well.

2008 General Election — Key Dates

Last day to apply for a civilian absentee ballot October 28

Last day for County Boards of Elections to receive voted civilian absentee ballots October 31

Share the Knowledge!

You’ve been there before by helping PPC bring about many changes that impact our children. Most recently, by using your voice, you’ve helped us to secure historic state funding in basic education, Pre-K Counts and the much-needed expansion of CHIP. But now we’re asking you to add your voice to this election.

Urge all candidates running for office – on both the state and federal level – to make much-needed investments in our kids – in their health, education, welfare, and well-being.

Help your friends and neighbors understand how they can help kids this election. Visit www.papartnerships.org/elections.asp to read more about the issues that matter most to children.

“Lights on Afterschool!” Day Set for October 16

In honor of national “Lights on Afterschool!” Day, the PA House of Representatives unanimously approved House Resolution 886, sponsored by Rep. Jake Wheatley (D-Allegheny) Sept. 22. The PA Senate also



is expected to approve an identical resolution when session resumes the week of Oct. 6. Both resolutions will designate October 16, 2008 as “*Lights on Afterschool!*” Day in PA.

Sponsored by the Afterschool Alliance and its national partners, the purpose of “*Lights on Afterschool!*” is to call attention to the importance of afterschool program for children, families and communities. The commemoration began in October 2000 with events in 1,200 communities throughout the United States. Currently, there are more than 7,500 “*Lights on Afterschool!*” events nationwide with one million Americans participating. The Pennsylvania Afterschool network expects that Pennsylvania alone will have around 225 events Oct. 16.

For more information on the ninth annual “*Lights on Afterschool!*” Day or afterschool programs, visit the Pennsylvania Statewide Afterschool/Youth Development Network website at www.psaydn.org.

Senate Poised to Vote on Legislation Improving Permanency Hearings

On Sept. 17, the PA Senate Appropriations Committee reported out House Bill 1511, sponsored by Rep. Frank Shimkus (D-Lackawanna). The legislation improves upon the effectiveness of Act 76 of 2007 by providing pre-adoptive parents, foster parents and relatives providing care with the opportunity to submit a report on a child’s adjustment, progress and condition in permanency hearings. This law provided such persons with the opportunity to be heard at any hearing regarding a child in question. The bill will help ensure that courts are provided with pertinent information regarding a child’s current progression in permanency hearings.

The bill also directs the Department of Public Welfare (DPW) to make a form available to foster parents, pre-adoptive parents and relatives providing care to be used for the purpose of submitting a report in permanency hearings. The form will delineate the type of information required that will

help courts gain a more clear understanding of a child’s adjustment, progress and condition. In addition, House Bill 1511 assures persons providing care that they will receive guidance by requiring county agencies to notify foster parents, pre-adoptive parents and relatives providing care that they have the right to submit a report using DPW’s form and making that form available to them.

In an effort to ensure that changes to the Juvenile Act are able to get to the governor’s desk before the 2007-08 legislation session ends, the Senate also amended House Bill 1511 on the Senate floor. The amendment, sponsored by Senator Stewart Greenleaf (R-Montgomery), incorporates the provisions of Senate Bill 1269 into House Bill 1511. The amendment seeks to prohibit statements, admissions or confessions made by a child or incriminating information obtained from a child to be admitted into evidence against the child on the issue of whether the child committed a delinquent act or on the issue of guilt in any criminal proceeding under the Juvenile Act.

The Senate is expected to vote on the bill when it returns on Oct. 6.

Dropout Prevention/Recovery Legislation Amended and Approved by the House

A bill that seeks to provide school districts and community partners with the resources and tools necessary to curb the number of children dropping out of school and reengaging those youth who have already left the system is before the state Senate. House Bill 2466, sponsored by Rep. James Roebuck, D-Philadelphia, was amended Sept. 22.

H.B. 2466 would require common dropout data collection and analysis among Pennsylvania’s 501 school districts. The measure also would establish grants to help community partners and schools work together to implement research-based programs to, among other things: provide outreach and education options to dropouts; hire individuals to seek out, recruit and reengage dropouts;



implement programs to improve literacy and numeracy in dropouts whose skills are critically low; provide learning to work occupational preparation programs to dropouts and promote options to help dropouts participate in postsecondary education.

In Pennsylvania, more than one in five ninth graders fails to graduate from the same high school four years later. While it's likely not surprising that dropouts are a serious problem in our urban school districts where two out of five kids fail to graduate, it also radiates out to our suburbs and rural areas. In Pennsylvania's rural school districts, one out of six kids fail to graduate; and in our suburban districts, one in eight don't graduate.

"Far too many of our young people drift away from school without any means of reconnecting, said Joan Benso, president and CEO of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children. "These youth may lack the resources and opportunities to reconnect to education, but research tells us they don't lack the motivation."

The amendment removed the requirement for the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) to create an Office of Dropout Prevention and Data Collection. It now places all of the responsibilities related to data collection and the proposed dropout prevention and recovery grant programs on PDE as a whole.

Child Deaths to Undergo Review

A bill to examine the deaths of children under 21 recently passed in both the House and Senate. The House Children and Youth Committee unanimously approved Senate Bill 684, sponsored by Senator Lisa Baker (R-Luzerne). The bill codifies current child death review practices that occur in partnership among the PA Department of Health (DOH), the Department of Public Welfare (DPW), and the American Academy of Pediatrics – PA Chapter. The legislation authorizes the creation of child death review teams, in statute, at the local and state levels to examine the deaths.

It is important to note that Senate Bill 684 differs distinctly from legislation approved by the General

Assembly and signed by the governor this past July. Senate Bill 684 requires a public health-related review as opposed to the more immediate required review triggered when a child dies as a result of suspected child abuse. Act 33 of 2008 (S.B. 1147), enacted this summer, requires DPW to review and report on each case of child fatality or serious injury resulting from child abuse.

Senate Bill 684 was then brought up for consideration on the House floor Sept. 24 and amended by a vote of 198-0.

Richman Pushes for Child Welfare Ombudsman

Welfare Secretary Estelle B. Richman is seeking to establish an independent ombudsman's office to handle issues related to children in Pennsylvania's child welfare system. She will form a work group to discuss the components of such a job and the pros and cons of creating the position. The group will include everyone from child advocates to legislative staff.

"As partners in protecting the lives of our children, it is essential that we work together to promote accountability in our child-welfare system – without it, we leave our children vulnerable to the damaging and traumatic affects of child abuse and neglect," Richman said. "Establishing a children's ombudsperson would add another level of checks and balances to our system that would greatly aid our mission to provide for the health and safety of our children."

In addition, the workgroup will examine the possibility of releasing additional information currently deemed confidential that would further lift the veil of secrecy which exists when a child dies as a result of child abuse or neglect.

PA Recognized for Pre-K Investments

In its annual report, *Votes Count: Legislative Action on Pre-K in Fiscal Year 2009*, Pre K Now, a public education and advocacy organization that advances



high-quality, voluntary pre-kindergarten, highlighted Pennsylvania for its increased investment in Pre-K Counts made in the Commonwealth's FY 2008-2009 budget. In its first year of operation, the program served more than 11,000 three- and four-year olds. During passage of the state budget, funding was increased by \$11 million for a total of more than \$86 million.

According to its recent report, 32 states have acted to increase investments in high-quality, voluntary pre-kindergarten programs even in the face of declining revenues and rising deficits. These increases will bring total state pre-K funding to a record \$5.2 billion nationally and will provide pre-K opportunities to roughly 46,000 additional children across the country. Twelve states have no funded pre-K programs.

Read more about this report at:

http://www.preknow.org/documents/LegislativeReport_Sept2008.pdf.

CHIP Enrollment Continues to Grow

CHIP enrollment increased to 176,151 in September, a 7 percent growth over the previous year. All but six counties experienced growth over the year. There were 9,194 children enrolled in CHIP who would have not been eligible before the "Cover All Kids" CHIP expansion.

State Revenue Update

Pennsylvania collected \$2.3 billion in General Fund revenue in September, \$163.8 million, or 6.5 percent, less than anticipated. Fiscal year-to-date General Fund collections total \$5.8 billion, which is \$281.4 million, or 4.7 percent, below estimate.

Fall General Assembly Session Days

The Senate will be in session October 6-8. No other dates are scheduled. The House will be in session Oct. 6-8 and Nov. 12, 13, 17-19, 24, and 25. The 2007-2008 legislative session ends on November 30. All pending legislation, with the exception of bills waiting final action by the governor, dies at the end of the session.

Federal Update

Historic Child Welfare Bill Sent to President

President Bush is expected to sign an historic child welfare bill that would provide significant aid to adoption funding, training and health and education needs. The U.S. Senate gave final approval Sept. 22 to the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (H.R. 6893) which would be the most significant child welfare legislation since Title IV-E was created in 1980.

Kinship families will receive significantly expanded federal support; more children in tribal communities will be covered by federal foster care, kinship care, and adoption funding; more child welfare workers will benefit from training; more families will adopt special-needs children; and many of the 24,000

young people aging out of foster care each year will be eligible for considerably increased benefits. In addition, when the new health and education planning requirements are implemented, children in care will be helped with their health and education needs.

"As Pennsylvania continues to tackle its own child welfare issues, PPC applauds Congress on its action to pass this law that will provide assistance to more than 20,000 children who are in foster care in Pennsylvania at any given time," said Joan L. Benso, president and CEO of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children.

It is estimated that 500,000 children are in foster care every day throughout the country.

The current Adoption Incentives program expired Sept 30. The legislation renews and expands the



successful program by seeking to enhance the permanency options for foster children. The measure also allows states to develop and institute best practices for adoption.

New Child Care Facility Regulations – Recalled Toys and Equipment

The new regulations for child care centers, group child care homes, and family child care homes were effective Sept. 22. The new regulations require that children's toys and equipment - including furniture and rest equipment - described as hazardous by the United States Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) may not be used by children at the facility. Additionally, a child care center or group child care home operator must submit, at the time of inspection, written affirmation that such toys and equipment are not used by children and are not on the facility premises.

Federal Budget Update

Just prior to the close of the federal fiscal year (which expired Sept. 30), Congress passed and the president signed into law a continuing resolution to fund the federal government through March 6, 2009. As in years past, Congress did not pass the complete series of 12 or so appropriations bills that make up the federal budget. Appropriations bills funding the Department of Defense, military construction, Veterans Affairs and Homeland Security were passed with funding for the entire federal fiscal year. The continuing resolution will fund the rest of the government at existing levels with several exceptions. The measure provides \$22.9 billion for disaster relief, \$5.1 billion to fund LIHEAP through the whole fiscal year, and \$6.7 billion for WIC (about \$600 million above last year's funding level).

The House passed the measure by a vote of 370-58. All members of the Pennsylvania House delegation voted in the affirmative with the exception of Representative Pitts. The Senate passed the measure by a vote of 78-12. Both Senators Casey and Specter voted in the affirmative.

Child Tax Credit Advances, but Final Action Elusive

Both the House and Senate passed separate versions of legislation that would extend certain taxes and tax breaks before wrapping up the 110th Congress. Of prime importance to PPC is expanding and improving the Child Tax Credit (CTC). The CTC is a \$1,000 per-child tax benefit intended to help working families defray some of the costs associated with raising children. What is not widely understood is that, because of the way the credit is structured, it currently shuts out many of the children whose families face the greatest financial hardship. This year, families will not receive any benefit from the CTC unless their incomes exceed \$12,050. To receive the full benefits of the credit, families need much higher incomes; a married couple with two children, for instance, would need an income of at least \$25,000 – nearly twice what full-time minimum wage work pays. As a result, millions of low-income working families with children are unable to benefit in full or at all from the CTC.

A provision in both House and Senate tax extenders legislation would reduce the CTC threshold to \$8,500. This provision would extend the benefits of the credit to 91,659 children in Pennsylvania who would otherwise be ineligible. It would provide an increased tax benefit to an additional 317,510 Pennsylvania children. The Senate bill would apply to tax year 2008. The House bill delays the improvements until tax year 2009.

The Senate passed its version of the tax extenders legislation by a vote of 93-2 (with 5 absent). Both Senators Casey and Specter voted for the measure. The House passed its version by a vote of 257-166 (with 10 absent). The following U.S. House members voted for the legislation: Altmire, Brady, Carney, Dent, Doyle, Fattah, Gerlach, Holden, Kanjorski, Patrick Murphy, Tim Murphy, Murtha, Platts, Schwartz, and Sestak. Representatives English, Pitts, and Shuster voted against the measure. Representative Peterson was absent.



The Senate inserted its tax extenders provisions, including the CTC improvement into the financial market rescue legislation. The Senate passed the measure by a vote of 75-21 (with one member absent). Both Senators Casey and Specter voted for the measure. At the time of publication of this issue of Cap Watch, the measure is poised for a vote in the House.

Fiscal Stimulus Proposals Moving

House and Senate leaders are advancing separate versions of legislation intended to stimulate the economy and help struggling families deal with the current economic slowdown. Both versions provided much needed assistance by enhancing and extending unemployment benefits, Food Stamps and other nutrition programs, and LIHEAP. Both measures also provide direct fiscal assistance to states to help them deal with mounting problems.

The Senate passed its fiscal stimulus bill by a vote of 52- 42 (with six not voting). Both Senators Casey and Specter voted in the affirmative. The House passed its version by a vote of 264-158.

Representatives Altmire, Brady, Carney, Dent, Doyle, English, Fattah, Gerlach, Holden, Kanjorski, Patrick Murphy, Tim Murphy, Murtha, Platts, Schwartz and Sestak voted to pass the measure. Representatives Pitts and Shuster voted to oppose the measure. Representative Peterson was absent.

The White House released a statement noting that President Bush opposed both the Senate and House bills. Since the measure failed to garner the necessary 60 votes to override a presidential veto, some Capitol observers think that the Senate could possibly schedule a vote on the House version in an attempt to build a veto-proof margin.

Healthy Start Awaiting Final Action by President

The House approved legislation reauthorizing the Healthy Start program by unanimous consent. (The Senate previously approved the measure in the same

manner earlier in the year.) Healthy Start - which seeks to reduce infant mortality and improve early childhood through grants to communities most at risk - has been successful at reducing infant mortality, reducing low birth weight, improving prenatal care, and reducing barriers to health care for pregnant women and newborns.

Healthy Start began as a program targeting 15 communities with high infant mortality rates. It now provides support for 100 programs in 36 states and Puerto Rico. Pennsylvania currently has six Healthy Start sites in Chester, Philadelphia (two sites), Pittsburgh, Uniontown, and West Chester.

The reauthorization legislation authorizes \$120 million in funding for FFY 2008 indexes the funding by the Consumer Price Index. The authorized funding will support current grantees, allow for new grants. The measure is currently awaiting final action by the president.

Child Health Day is Oct. 6

The country's 80th National Child Health Day Oct. 6 focuses on childhood obesity. Recent studies suggest that one in six U.S. children between 2 and 19 is overweight. Childhood obesity is an even more serious - and growing - health concern for children and adolescents. In fewer than 30 years, obesity has more than doubled among children ages 2-5 and more than tripled among youth ages 6-11 and adolescents ages 12-19. Overweight kids are at risk for asthma, diabetes, heart disease and other chronic conditions.

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