



Capitol Watch for Children

An update on state and federal policies affecting Pennsylvania's children

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Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children

State Update

Developing New High School Graduation Requirements

The Pennsylvania State Board of Education currently is holding a series of regional public roundtable meetings to gather input from interested parties regarding a potential change in the state's high school graduation requirements that would require students to take and pass a series of graduation competency assessments (GCAs) in English/language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies. Roundtables have been conducted in Harrisburg, King of Prussia and Pittsburgh and additional roundtables are planned over the next few weeks in Clarion, Williamsport, and Luzerne County.

The roundtables are the first step in the State Board's process of developing state education regulations and providing an opportunity for a dialogue between Board members and interested parties.

In a paper released earlier this year, Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children recommended the Commonwealth take steps to assure that all Pennsylvania high school graduates have the academic foundation they need by improving our statewide accountability system. PPC urges the

Commonwealth to develop and require that every student take and pass a series of statewide end-of-course exit exams – or graduation competency assessments – that are aligned to state standards in English/language arts, math, science and social studies to graduate from high school. The proposal should be phased in by 2014. The purpose of the state accountability system is to guarantee that all children, regardless of where they attend school, master the core standards.

Benefits of the GCAs include placing assessments closer to the point of instruction and creating a sense of relevance for testing and progress of all students; providing opportunities to assess more in-depth knowledge; assessing smaller bodies of knowledge at one time; allowing students to begin taking the GCAs earlier and having multiple opportunities to retake and pass; diagnosing specific areas of weakness allowing for targeted remediation, and offering a valuable credit-recovery tool for dropouts who are returning to get their high school diplomas.

“Graduation competency assessments will help ensure students are proficient in the

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state standards and have the academic requirements they need to be successful in postsecondary education and careers,” said Joan L. Benso, president and CEO of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children (PPC). “All youth in Pennsylvania deserve to acquire the necessary skills, abilities and readiness that will help them effectively navigate postsecondary education, training or work after high school.”

Stay tuned to *CapWatch* and our website at <http://www.papartnerships.org> for more news on GCAs and other youth issues. This work is just the very beginning of our enduring commitment to youth in Pennsylvania.

Majority of Pennsylvanians Support Equal Access to Education

According to a recent poll commissioned by the Education Policy and Leadership Center (EPLC), nearly nine in 10 Pennsylvanians believe that public school students should have equal access to high quality education and that state government is responsible for guaranteeing this access.

Only 30 percent of respondents agreed with the statement that “Pennsylvania’s system of funding schools is fair,” and 84 percent either agreed or strongly agreed that the state should pay at least half the cost of local schools’ education expenses. Sixty-two percent “strongly agreed” that the state should pay a greater share of school costs than the approximately 36 percent it does now.

EPLC reported that more than nine in 10 respondents said that the quality of public schools varies among school districts, and 46 percent said that they felt the quality varies “a great deal.” Respondents agreed strongly that effective public schools are vital to the future of the state and local economies, and many are disappointed with the job they are doing now. About half – 51 percent – said that they thought the state’s schools were doing an excellent or good job of preparing students for college, and 44 percent said they thought the

schools were doing a good job of preparing students for the job market.

While respondents were divided about how efficiently their schools spend current funds, 65 percent agreed with a statement that their local district needs more money to provide students with a quality education. Few respondents – just 8 percent – said that either their own schools or those around the state spend too much. About a third – 37 percent – said they thought their own schools spent too little, and 54 percent said they thought that public schools around the state in general spend too little to adequately educate their students.

The poll was commissioned by The Education Policy and Leadership Center (www.eplc.org) and conducted by the Center for Opinion Research at Franklin and Marshall College and is available online at <http://www.eplc.org>

Legislative Action of Interest

The Senate passed SB 1147 December 3 which requires additional criminal history record and child abuse registry checks for prospective foster and adoptive parents, child care service employees and self-employed family day care providers. The new requirements are necessary to comply with federal law.

<http://www.legis.state.pa.us/cfdocs/billinfo/billinfo.cf?m?year=2007&sind=0&body=S&type=B&BN=1147>

The Senate also passed SB 1156, allowing a foster parent, preadoptive parent or relative providing care for a child to be heard at any hearing under the Juvenile Act and requires the court to provide for consultation with the child regarding the child’s permanency plan in a permanency hearing. Like the measure above, this bill is intended to place the Commonwealth in compliance with federal law.

<http://www.legis.state.pa.us/cfdocs/billinfo/billinfo.cf?m?year=2007&sind=0&body=S&type=B&BN=1156>



Heating Assistance Available for Low-Income Families

With the first significant snowfall of the season last week, the Department of Public Welfare wants to remind people about LIHEAP, the Low-Income Heating Assistance Program that helps those in need with energy assistance through the cold winter months. Applications can be completed online at Compass, <https://www.humanservices.state.pa.us/compass/PGM/ASP/SC001.asp> or by calling the LIHEAP hotline at 1-866-857-7095.

CHIP Enrollment Continues to Climb

CHIP enrollment rose to 166,151 in December, a 0.2 percent increase since November and a 10.2 percent increase since last December. Free CHIP enrollment totaled 147,234; Low-Cost CHIP enrollment was 14,716 and At-Cost CHIP totaled 924. There are now nearly 6,000 children enrolled in CHIP who were not eligible before the implementation of Cover All Kids.

In addition, adultBasic enrollment stood at 51,056 in December (including 2,478 At-Cost participants). The waiting list for adultBasic totaled 95,656 in December.

PA Revenue Update

The Pennsylvania Department of Revenue reported that the Commonwealth collected \$1.7 billion in general fund revenue in November. This is \$89.4 million or 5.6 percent more than the official estimate. Fiscal year-to-date collections total \$9.5 billion, which is \$135.9 million or 1.5 percent above the official estimate.

December General Assembly Session Dates

The House and Senate will be in session on the following remaining days in December: 11,12,13 (House only, non-voting) 17 (House only), 18 (House only), 19 (House only).

Federal Update

Good News out of Washington as Head Start is Reauthorized

A new measure reauthorizing the federal Head Start program has been approved by House and Senate conference committees and President Bush is expected to sign the legislation. If it becomes law, Head Start will receive \$7.3 billion in FY 2008, \$7.6 billion in FY 2009, and \$7.9 billion in 2010. Among other provisions, the Head Start reauthorization will:

- *Increase access to Head Start;*
 - New flexibility will enable the program to serve families just above the poverty line.
- *Strengthen and expand Early Head Start;*
- *Improve quality;*
 - All Head Start teachers would be required to have bachelor's degree by 2013;

- 40 percent of funding will go to improving program quality, including raising teacher salaries.

- *Increase collaboration between states and federal government.*

SCHIP Reauthorization Still Unresolved

Unfortunately, for the nation's children and their families, reauthorization of the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) remains elusive. Federal lawmakers have been negotiating behind closed doors for well over one month, trying to hammer out an agreement. Senate Finance Committee Chair Max Baucus (D-MT) and Ranking Member Charles Grassley (R-IA) are leading the negotiations. A bipartisan group of key members from the House and Senate are involved in the discussions.



The negotiators are working to reach agreement on a number of key programmatic provisions in order to secure sufficient Republican votes in the House to override a presidential veto. The negotiators are walking a fine line in the discussions. They must draft a bill that appeals to more Republicans, but does not turn off those Democrats and moderate Republicans who already have voted for a strong reauthorization bill. According to published reports, there are a number of hot-button issues on the table, including but not limited to, income limits (and income disregards), citizenship documentation, availability of “express lane” eligibility, premium assistance programs for working families, and coverage of adults.

The stakes are high in the negotiations. Funding for the program is a top priority for reauthorization. It is clear that the current funding level is insufficient to maintain the program, let alone grow it to meet increased demand for coverage. The program, like other federal government programs, has been operating since the beginning of FFY 2008 under continuing resolutions. The funding for SCHIP under the resolutions is flat at \$5 billion (annual amount), and thereby insufficient. The Congressional Research Service estimates that 21 states face combined shortfalls of \$1.6 billion this fiscal year. Pennsylvania is not among the shortfall states. Several of these states may have to make difficult decisions on whether to curtail the program and leave children unserved and uninsured.

Concern over the lack of progress in negotiating a five-year reauthorization of SCHIP and funding status of the program has led many to the conclusion that Congress focus its attention on an extension that provides sufficient funding to keep SCHIP afloat through the remainder of the federal fiscal year. PPC and other SCHIP supporters will also work to ensure that any extension also addresses the August 17 CMS SCHIP directive that places a number of administrative hurdles in the way

of state SCHIP programs (see September *CapWatch* for details on the directive).

Back to the Drawing Board on Federal Budget

Key domestic spending for FFY 2008 remains unresolved. Congressional leaders are back to the drawing board this month to try to craft and pass a spending bill for the Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services and Education, commonly referred to the Labor HHS appropriations bill. The bill is one of the 13 or so appropriations bills that comprise the federal budget.

In November, Congressional leaders combined the Labor-HHS bill with a veterans affairs and military construction spending bill in a conference report to attempt to attract sufficient votes to override a threatened presidential veto. (*See the chart below for a summary of funding for key programs under the conference report.*) The House passed the measure by a vote of 269-142. Of interest, Representatives Altmire, Carney, Dent, Doyle, English, Fattah, Gerlach, Holden, Kanjorski, Patrick Murphy, Tim Murphy, Murtha, Peterson, Platts, Schwartz, and Sestak voted for the report. Representatives Pitts and Shuster voted in the negative. Representative Brady was absent.

The Senate disaggregated the two main components of the conference report into separate bills. The chamber passed the Labor-HHS bill by a vote of 56-30. Senators Casey and Specter voted for the measure. Since the content changed, the measure had to return to the House for another vote. The House passed the Labor-HHS bill by a vote of 274-141. As was the case in the Senate, the measure failed to garner a veto-proof majority. Of interest, the following Representatives voted for the bill: Altmire, Brady, Carney, Dent, Doyle, Fattah, Gerlach, Holden, Kanjorski, Patrick Murphy, Tim Murphy, Murtha, Peterson, Platts, Schwartz, and Sestak. Representatives English, Pitts, and Shuster voted against the bill.



As promised, President Bush vetoed the measure on the grounds that it exceeded his funding recommendations. The House attempted to override the veto, but fell short. The final vote was 277-141 (with 15 absent). Of interest, Representatives Altmire, Brady, Carney, Dent, English, Fattah, Gerlach, Holden, Kanjorski, Patrick Murphy, Tim Murphy, Murtha, Peterson, Platts, Schwartz, and Sestak voted to override. Representatives Pitts and Shuster voted to sustain the veto. Representative Doyle was absent.

of the federal fiscal year October 1. Before the resolution expired in mid-November, Congress attached another such resolution to a defense spending bill which was subsequently enacted. The current continuing resolution expires on December 14. U.S. Capitol observers are speculating the Congress may attempt to split the difference between the Labor-HHS bill and funding amounts requested by the President and attempt to deliver it to his desk before the end of the month.

The federal government has operated under a continuing funding resolution since the beginning

| Program | Conference Report | +/- FFY 2007 | +/- President's Request |
|---|--------------------------|---------------------|--------------------------------|
| Overall Labor HHS | \$606.4B | +\$61B | +10B |
| LIHEAP | \$2.4B | +\$250M | +\$629M |
| Head Start | \$7B | +\$154M | +\$254M |
| Community Services Block Grant | \$665M | +\$35M | +\$665M |
| Social Services Block Grant | \$1.7B | \$0 | -\$500M |
| Child Care & Development Block Grant | \$2.1B | +38M | +37M |
| Foster Care/ Adopt Asst | \$5.1B | +170M | \$0 |
| 21st Century Community Learning Centers | \$1.1B | +\$100M | +\$100M |