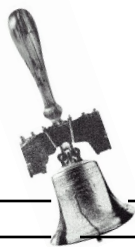


# Education Advocate

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## School Choice Is About Students and Their Options For Success

*"We Need School Choice"* was the headline to a New York Times news article published on January 26, 2011 immediately after the President's State of the Union speech. The President spoke of our need for more people being able to go into STEM programs (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math). Some reference was made to the number of students in India who are moving into those fields, which is very obvious when we look at the number of their students coming to this country to go to graduate school. What does India have that the United States is lacking? India's Right to Education Law provides poor students with the opportunity to attend better private schools. They provide School Choice. Unfortunately, too many of our legislators talk about children and the need for better education, but are more worried about supporting the adult groups who are busy protecting the status quo for their own benefit.

Pennsylvania has two state legislators willing to step forward to start the process of real education reform within the Commonwealth. Senate Bill 1 (School Choice) legislation has been introduced by Senator Piccola (Republican and Chair of the Senate Education Committee), and Senator Williams (Democrat from Philadelphia). This bipartisan piece of legislation was written to address the needs of low income students in failing schools. If education is about the real needs of children and learning, and not about the needs of adults or the perpetuation of a failing system, then there needs to be options for the students and their families. School Choice is a key element to providing students with the opportunities they need to be successful, and to be given alternatives to schools that are underperforming.

The following are some of the main elements within Senate Bill 1:

- It will include scholarships for both public-to-public and public-to-private school choice.
- It will also include an EITC (Earned Income

Tax Credit) funding increase bringing the program to a total of \$100 million. This will also bring the EITC provision back to being part of the School Code, and will include an increase of \$25 million over the \$75 million that will be in effect in the fiscal year 2011-2012. Pre-k scholarships are included in this legislation.

- In addition to helping low income families, EITC scholarships would be available to families with an annual household income up to \$60,000 plus \$12,000 per child. For example, a family with two children with a household income under \$84,000 would qualify.

- An Educational Choice Board will be established to administer this program, and will be an independent board within the PA Department of Education.

- The PA Supreme Court will have exclusive jurisdiction over challenges, and will have the ability to render a

judgment on the law's constitutionality.

- Funding for the scholarship portion of the program will be subject to annual appropriations.

Students eligible for parts of this program must come from families who are low income, or 130% of the poverty level. For a family of four this would mean an annual income of \$28,665. Low income children will be phased into the program in three steps.

- Year 1 - low income students currently attending persistently lowest-achieving schools only
- Year 2 - all low-income students residing within the attendance area of a persistently lowest achieving school
- Year 3 - will include all low-income students regardless of school

What is the definition of a low achieving school for the purpose of this legislation? It is a



public elementary or secondary school in Pennsylvania achieving within the lowest 5% on the most recent assessment for which data is posted on the PA Department of Education website. As of this date, 144 schools are within this category.

There was an all day hearing on this legislation and School Choice on February 16<sup>th</sup> in Harrisburg. From there the bill will go into committee, and then to the floor of the Senate for a vote. It must also go through the same process in the House.

In conclusion, in order to chip away at the status quo, it is imperative that the funds follow the student instead of going into a broken zip code school.

For a much more in-depth look at all provisions of this legislation, please see Senator Piccola's website at [www.piccola.org](http://www.piccola.org). His site includes a link to the actual bill along with a link to a summary.

## PA Keystone Exams (Graduation Testing)



Field testing for the multimillion dollar Keystone Exams started this past fall. The tests are available for students starting in the spring of 2011, and will include Algebra I, Biology, and Literature. Students who are in the graduating classes of 2015 and 2016 are the first students required to take the

test for graduation purposes. Students taking the required test this year will not have an actual score attached.

The PA State Board of Education did indicate that districts had the opportunity to use their own assessments as long as the tests were independently validated and reviewed. The state was to share in the validation costs with the districts. However, it appears that this was an attempt at window dressing to preserve the appearance of local control of education. When contacting the PA Dept. of Education, it was indicated to CEO that the cost for the validation process was so high that most districts intend to use the state's Keystone Exams. The schools can use the Advance Placement tests, or the International Baccalaureate tests when applicable. To date, the state has not determined what will be considered an acceptable score on those tests.

School districts will eventually be given an option by the PA Dept. of Education to either use the Keystone Exams as 1/3 of the student's grade, or as a pass/fail exam. This decision is based on subject area. If a district chooses the exam to be 1/3 of the grade for Algebra I then all future Keystone Exams in other math areas, such as Algebra II, must be the same. The district will have the choice to select the pass/fail option for other subjects such as Language Arts.

Students who do not score at least proficient on the

Keystone Exams will be given a second attempt. It is not clear as to the length of time given to take the second test. However, tests will be administered in August, September, and May of each school year by the use of a paper/pencil test, or a computer adapted test. If the student is not successful on the second attempt then the student is given a project-based assessment. At this point in time, the Dept. of Education has not established the guidelines or criteria for this type of alternative assessment.

Special need students and English language learners will be entitled to special accommodations during the test. There is also a waiver process for students with extenuating circumstances, but it was obvious when speaking with the Department of Education that it was not clear as to what this process involves.

Students in 11<sup>th</sup> grade will eventually be exempt from taking the PSSA (Pennsylvania State Assessment test). It currently appears that other grades will continue to take the PSSA along with the Keystone Exams. For the classes of 2017 and after, the exams will be eventually expanded to include passing 2 English courses, 2 Math, 1 Science, and 1 Social Studies.

*Please see the following site for more information:*  
[www.scribd.com/doc/47925315/pennsylvania-keystone-exams](http://www.scribd.com/doc/47925315/pennsylvania-keystone-exams)

## PA Value Added Assessment System Update

In the past, CEO addressed the issue of the PA Value Added Assessment System (PVAAS) data that is collected each year by the PA Department of Education (PDE). This information, while based on PSSA test scores, is different in that it provides education stakeholders with a much clearer picture concerning students successfully mastering a year's worth of knowledge each school year.

In 2009, CEO contacted the PDE through the Office of Open Records (OOR) to obtain the value added scores for the entire state down to grade level in each school district. The PDE was very reluctant to give up this information, even though we were not asking for individual student scores. However, these scores are considered public information under the "Freedom of Information Act" according to the ruling we received from the OOR. Thanks to the help of our legal counsel, the PDE capitulated and CEO has now received this information for two successive school years.

It is our understanding that no one else was pushing for the release of this data and it may very well be that our pressing-the-point on this, is at least in part, the reason that the PDE recently launched a site with the PVAAS data. <https://pvaas.sas.com/evaas/signin.jsf> We commend the PDE for going further than ever before toward being transparent with parents and other citizens about their

(zip code) schools. It will shed light on what programs are working and what schools are really successful with their students. Unfortunately, the site does not go down to the grade level and does not provide an easy, interactive way to compare one school or district with other schools and districts around the state.

CEO is working on acquiring grants to help us launch our own **independent** site that would be more user friendly and easier for parents to understand. Our website could possibly reach down to the value added scores at the grade level in each school since we have that data available to us. Additionally, we would like to give monetary awards to the top performing schools at each level in PA. We would also publicize our site widely across the state (something PDE seems reluctant to do with theirs). Clearly, any website can not be very helpful if the parents and taxpayers are not aware of it's existence. Our thanks goes out to Senator Piccola's office for their press release and related articles concerning the PDE website.

See the work of the Education Consumer Foundation at <http://www.education-consumers.org/>

## Strikes Versus Students

It is a staggering statistic, but according to a December 2010 article in a LehighValley newspaper, Pennsylvania has the distinction of being the state ranked number one in teacher strikes. Out of the 50 states 37 do not allow strikes.

Looking at the website *Stopteacherstrikes.org* in 2010 there were 144 PA school districts with contracts that expired along with 40 more at risk for a strike due to contracts that expired in 2009. Strikes are not about quality education programs. They are about contract negotiations.

Strikes continue to have the potential to create a wedge between the teachers, and the communities they serve. Meanwhile, on their website the Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA) has listed a summary of a report done by Dr. Harris Zwerling, the PSEA's Assistant Director of Research. According to the study, Dr. Zwerling was unable to find any statistical relationship between the incidence of teachers' strikes and their duration and the district level student performance on the PSSA tests. First of all, why should we be surprised that the PSEA is funding their own research and the conclusions reached? Also, this comparison to the PSSA and strikes may actually say more about the quality of the PSSA as an effective assessment.

What Dr. Zwerling needs to answer are questions more specific to students and their individual situations.

- How does a strike impact a high school student preparing to take the SAT, and their performance on the math section alone? After missing up to 6 wks of class, a student's ability to effectively answer some of the questions could be compromised.

- How do strikes impact Juniors and Seniors who are applying to colleges, and for scholarships? If school districts are on strike for 6 weeks then how are their students able to meet college and scholarship deadlines? Universities don't care if a district is on strike, and the student is unable to have their paperwork in on time. What is the dollar cost to the student?
- What happens to high school students who are in Advance Placement classes? The AP test will happen at a specific time during the school year, and covers a great deal of material during the course of the entire year. Again, there is no consideration for students missing class time due to strikes. How does this impact the score potential for the students taking AP tests?
- Special needs students have an Individual Education Plan (IEP). These children already have issues with the material they are covering because of reading issues, or other learning difficulties. Imagine what it means to their progress when they are pulled out of their classes mid-stream. What is the impact for individual students with IEPs, and their ability to meet the objectives?
- More school districts are opting for all day kindergarten programs. Becoming part of a public school environment may well require some adjustments for some five year olds, and it may especially be an adjustment when there are long spans of time when their school schedule is interrupted.
- Even though the PSEA's study indicates that strikes do not affect students attendance or contributes to the drop out rate—how do we know that? Common sense would tell the public that students who are straddling on the edge of leaving school could be impacted by any changes to their school situation.
- What is the impact on low income students, and students who are learning English?

Strikes have to do with adults, and adults' agendas. It is impossible to say that children are not impacted by strikes. Unless the PSEA can clearly state that NO child anywhere is impacted by a strike then there appears to be more questions than they have good answers. As state legislators work on issues like strikes, and school reform, CEO will continue to give ongoing updates.

Please visit the PSEA website at <https://psea.org/general> for more information on this topic.

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