



Education Advocate

Summer Edition 2010
Vol. 10, No. 2

A Publication of the Commonwealth Education Organization

This issue...

National Standards Adopted by Pennsylvania—What does it all mean?

Healthy, Hunger Free Kids Act

Updates on PSERS and IB

Annual Commonwealth Freedom Award Essay Contest

Attention!
We have moved our office, please see back cover for more details

Commonwealth Education Organization

3830 Saxonburg Blvd
Cheswick, PA 15024
Phone 412-967-9691
Fax 412-967-9694
E-mail
ceopa@ceopa.org
Website
www.ceopa.org

CEO is a 501(c)(3) non-profit so your contribution is tax-deductible as allowed by law. The official registration and financial information of Commonwealth Education Organization may be obtained from the Pennsylvania Department of State by calling toll-free, within Pennsylvania, 1-800-732-0999. Registration does not imply endorsement.

National Standards Adopted by Pennsylvania— What does it all mean?

The Common Core Standards initiative is a component of the federal administration's "Race To The Top" (RTTT) competitive grant program. Federal Education Secretary Arne Duncan has described this unprecedented national education policy as a "quiet revolution" in the U.S. school system. As of August 2, 2010, the deadline to receive maximum grant application points toward RTTT, forty-one states have decided to replace their own existing math and language arts standards with the uniform common core or "national standards". States facing massive state budget deficits are largely motivated by the possibility of receiving short term federal grant money. In a federal overreach to guarantee adoption by all fifty states, the Obama administration has tied all Title I funding to those states willing to fully adopt the Common Core Standards. Title I funding, a 1965 presidential education initiative, provides funding to all states and schools to level out the socio-economic inconsistencies related to education policy. The intent of this program is to narrow the disparities within the achievement gaps existing amongst a diverse group of students.

While the National Education Association (NEA) opposes Secretary Duncan's "slush fund" insisting it should be based on need and not on competition, they are finding their voice falls on deaf ears. In a speech to the National Urban League on July 29th, President Obama faced his toughest critics of the RTTT program. Civil rights groups argue that distribution of the competitive education funds hurt minority students and school districts who need funding the most and who lack the resources to competitively access the national grants.

With Pennsylvania being one of the states competing for RTTT funds, the Commonwealth will work in partnership with three different assessment consortiums to achieve the following objectives:

1. Align state standards to the Common Core

- Standards
2. Develop common, internationally benchmarked assessments.
3. Develop benchmarked assessments aligned for college and career readiness.
4. Formulate assessments to improve teacher instruction.
5. Create a process with the National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE) to pilot a program in which individual high school sophomores, who demonstrate proficiency on internationally benchmarked assessments, have the option to pursue community college level work at the completion of that school year. They can also return to high school to enroll in AP courses, or career/technical education classes. (PA Department of Education will pilot this program in 2012 to "volunteer" school districts).



New national standards will now drive a new curriculum which will involve many school districts replacing existing textbook and technology curriculum resources. The NCEE recently sold their "America's Choice, Inc." affiliate, which consists of their curriculum ideas, practices, and international research based on years of study of other countries educational practices. This division was sold to Pearson, an international education textbook publisher. The funds from the sale of the Pearson proceeds will fund expanded research efforts for NCEE through the creation of an endowment for the nonprofit organization. This recent development confirms the possibility that a majority of school districts and states will gravitate toward purchasing Pearson resources for their local curriculum needs creating a monopoly. Based on a ruling in a Florida State supreme court case, states and schools may not be able to utilize curriculum resources unless they are completely aligned to the standards and assessments.

While this is happening behind the scenes, it will cause Pennsylvania to surrender their sover-

eign curriculum setting authority and local control. In turn, new national curriculum driven by the federal government will determine the necessity of the adoption of new national and international benchmarking assessments. These will be used to draw comparisons between our students and students from other countries. A driving force in the benchmarking movement is the Gates Foundation who is collaborating with not only the National Governor's Association in proposing and endorsing this initiative, but is also entrenched with the Obama administration by providing funding and sharing employees.

Not all states competing for the RTTT funds will be recipients. Even though this program is considered "voluntary", all states will be expected to continue full implementation. How will states who are not recipients of funds sustain and implement such comprehensive reform with no additional resources? While it is yet to be determined, it will likely become an under funded government mandate with the expense being passed on to the taxpayers in each state.

With so much at stake, it is crucial to ascertain if the academic standards will actually be superior for students. After all, we have generations of students cyclically passing through this education system. In 1997, the Fordham Foundation awarded Pennsylvania a D+ for their state academic standards. In 2010, despite the mantra from PA Dept of Education (PDE) officials, Pennsylvania is in no better shape. The Fordham Foundation recently has rated *both* Pennsylvania's math and language arts standards as "clearly inferior". Regardless, Pennsylvania's education officials continue to spin to teacher unions, school administrators, school boards, and legislators that Pennsylvania's state standards required "little tweaking" as they are comparable to the new Common Core Standards. Just as in the state standards movement of 1997, PDE officials ignored early warning signs by national and independent institutes, while pouring millions of dollars into school districts to

improve student achievement and proficiency of standards with mixed results.

Why does any of this matter? The common core process was started with high schools, and is working backwards to elementary standards. Learning is cumulative, and how is it possible for Pennsylvania students to effectively meet a different set of national standards based on what they have already learned? Is it realistic to assume that every Algebra I student in every district across Pennsylvania, as well as the country, is capable of meeting all the same objectives? What will this also cost districts based on the need for additional remediation caused by these new standards?

Under this national plan, teachers will be evaluated based on student test scores under RTTT. These test scores will be based entirely on the inception of the Common Core Standards and related assessments. Will this create another scenario of teaching to the tests since schools that consistently produce low test scores may ultimately be closed, or taken over by private management, or turned into charter schools? Pennsylvania Senator Jeff Piccola's education empowerment legislation, which will be brought up this fall, supports the concept of creating more charter schools. This also assures the elements of the RTTT federal framework will bring Pennsylvania in lock-step with the Obama administration's education policy. The ultimate concern has to be whether any of this helps students to learn, teachers to teach, or parents to have a greater say in their local schools. Given the layers of bureaucrats and organizations involved in this movement, is this the final nail in the coffin of state and local control of education?

Article written by Kimberly D. Geyer, Policy Analyst for Mars Research & Retrieval Services and President of Mars Area School Board who has studied Pennsylvania education policy since 1993.

Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act

The U.S. Senate recently approved the \$4.5 billion **Child Nutrition Act**, which promises to feed more hungry children and promotes school food nutrition. It passed the Senate unanimously and now goes on to the House where the bill is expected to pass. The United States Secretary of Agriculture will be authorized to develop the standards for this act. The following are some points to consider related to the possible standards.

1. Both the House and Senate version of the bill seeks to regulate food sales anywhere on a school campus throughout the school day. This could impact the faculty lounge, booster and PTO activities, and concession
2. The House bill applies the standards to the extended school day and to school sponsored events, but excludes events where parents and adults are a large portion of the participants. Therefore, sporting events could be excluded.
3. The bigger issue is the fact that a federal cabinet agency is given a great deal of authority to regulate outside the school meal programs it is responsible for administering. There is no consideration for school governance, or a regard for the impact on school districts budgets or operations.

stands anywhere on school grounds. This could also impact fundraising activities.

Update on the PA State Employee Retirement System (PSERS) Financial Crisis

In CEO's Fall of 2009 newsletter, *Education Advocate*, the financial crisis related to PSERS was addressed. "The Public School Employees' Retirement System of Pennsylvania (PSERS) is quickly going bankrupt. Due to a combination of the global financial situation and the ensuing negative pressure on all investments; the rising number of retired educators in Pennsylvania (generally twenty years of service); and state government interventions which have had an uncertain effect; the amount of money available for PSERS fund has not been able to continue to fund growing liabilities. The result will be dramatic increases in tax dollars that are funneled away from the classroom and towards the generous pension plans." 1

Unfortunately, to date, no long term solution has been adopted or implemented to correct this growing problem. It appears this crisis will be dropped in the lap of the newly elected governor. Given the state does not have the funds to address this issue, they have decided to delay the inevitable for another year. The PSERS Board voted to recertify the employer contribution rate, reducing it to 5.64% for the current year from 8.22%. School districts will pay half the amount and the state will pay the other half. PSERS contributions are based on a 50/50 formula. While this change provides immediate relief, it is not a

long term solution to the problem. This is very much like a person who decides to only pay the principle portion of their mortgage while not paying the interest. Eventually this financial sleight of hand will catch up to both the state and school districts.

However, there have been proposed solutions. It will be interesting to see if Harrisburg will embrace these ideas in 2011.

- establish a unified defined contribution plan for new members
- mandate funding reforms for newly created defined benefit and retiree medical liabilities
- increase the vesting period from five to ten years
- increase the retirement age from 65 to 70
- prohibit pension obligation bonds or other post employment bonds
- consideration of modifying unearned pension benefits

In the end, if the state continues to delay fixing PSERS, the taxpayers in the Commonwealth will be forced to pay more in taxes to correct the problems.

1. *PSERS Threatens the Economic Viability of PA School District*, CEO's *Education Advocate* – Fall 2009, article written by Rich Herko.

International Baccalaureate (IB) Update

The International Baccalaureate Programme (IB) has received increased interest locally and nationally in recent years. The IB has not been without controversy as school boards are supplanting traditional AP classes with what is called a "transnational" education program, whose stated objective is to create students who are "world citizens" with a globalist view.

Commonwealth Education Organization used original source documents in an attempt to provide parents and school directors with a comprehensive overview of the IB, while showing how it can be compared to the traditional Advanced Placement option.

CEO has posted the original IB article on our website from our newsletter, *Education Advocate*. Please check our website at www.ceopa.org to access this article from the March/April 2006 newsletter.



Annual Commonwealth Freedom Award Essay Contest

Each school year, eighth grade students from the Greater Pittsburgh area are given an opportunity to participate in an essay contest sponsored by CEO. Topics vary each year, and materials are available in September. The first round of judges review all essays, with a final round of judges selecting the winners for a presentation in May. Monetary prizes are awarded to the top three winners.

This contest provides students with an opportunity to practice their writing skills while learning more about our founding documents and founding principles. The contest is open to public, private and parochial schools, as well as to homeschoolers. To learn more about this essay contest, please contact the CEO office @ 412.967.9691.

Commonwealth Education Organization
3830 Saxonburg Boulevard
Cheswick, PA 15024

**NON-PROFIT ORG
US POSTAGE
PAID
PGH PA
PERMIT NO 5239**

***Attention: We've moved! Please note
our new address:***

***Commonwealth Education Organization
3830 Saxonburg Boulevard
Cheswick, PA 15024
Phone: 412.967.9691
Fax: 412.967.9694***

***Please feel free to stop in and visit
our new office!***