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Corbett Announces Possible Changes to the Pension System

There has been surprisingly little press on last week's announcement by Governor Corbett that his team is working on reducing future pension benefits for current Pennsylvania state employees and teachers. In a press conference where the results of the "Keystone Pension Report," were released, Corbett discussed the difficulties faced by the state in funding the two major pension systems. Legislation in 2001 increased benefits and allowed for reduced contributions to the systems, while the bad economy of the past four years significantly reduced investment returns. The combination of factors has resulted in steep increases for the next decade and beyond, a situation cash strapped municipalities and school districts can ill afford.

Despite case law interpreting the state constitution that bars reductions in benefits for current employees, Corbett said he believes it is legally possible to limit the reduction to future benefits employees have yet to accrue. If this proposal survives the legal challenge and took effect, it would mean the current employees of (SERS) and (PSERS) would see a reduced pension amount on retirement from what they are currently promised. Such a reduction would be a tough blow to school district employees who value their pension as a substantial benefit. Corbett's suggestion is actually not unique to Pennsylvania; a similar proposal is circulating in Rhode Island and could indicate the start of a trend.

Both news articles included below on the proposed pension changes mention two items which are misleading. The first is that contributions to the pension systems were "underfunded by school districts" over the past decade. This is untrue; the contribution rate is set by the state and school districts are not allowed to contribute more than the rate. The second item mentions that tax increases could result from the necessary pension contribution increases. While this is true, in both stories they neglect to mention that Act One will keep any tax increase at a very moderate level, nowhere near the amount the pension contribution rate.

Finally, PSEA released a response to the pension report. Their information states that PSERS is currently funded at 80 percent. Both Corbett's report and the news articles state it is funded at 68%. Is it 68 or 80? There is a big difference, because 80% is an adequate funding level. The discrepancy is curious, and I intend to follow up on it. No one in our communities or our state is well served if we can't count on the information decisions are based on.

I am also wondering what the response to the proposed pension changes has been in your districts. Please contact me if you have any information to share.

Louisiana Rules School Vouchers Unconstitutional

In a small victory for traditional public schools, a Louisiana judge ruled last week that Governor Jindal's school voucher program was unconstitutional. The judge ruled against the program because it transfers money expressly reserved for public elementary and secondary schools and uses it to fund private, religious and online schools, as well as post-secondary institutions, that are clearly not public elementary and secondary schools. The ruling could have implications for similar voucher programs in other states.

Central Region Workshop

The central region will hold a workshop on Friday, January 18, 2013, from 9:30 a.m. to Noon at the PASBO Office Building, 2608 Market Place in Harrisburg. Topics will include: Communicating Your Budget to Your Staff and Community; Presentation made by Julie Miller, Public Information Specialist, and State College Area School District. Roundtable Discussion; Social media and Communicating facility and capital projects and building support. Round Table Continued: Idea Sharing; What are you doing, or have you done, in your districts to showcase your schools and students? Please RSVP to Greg Hayes at ghayes@wasd.org.

Symposium Date

Pencil in Tuesday, April 16th for the 2013 PenSPRA Symposium. This year's event will be held at the Omni Bedford Springs Resort. More details to come!

PenSPRA Scholarship

PenSPRA's scholarship competition is now open! Scholarships will be awarded to one public school student from each of PenSPRA's three regions and consists of one-year scholarships worth \$500 each. The scholarships will be awarded to worthy Pennsylvania public high school students who plan to pursue a career in a communications field (i.e. journalism, English, public relations, advertising, graphic arts, etc.). The candidate should have maintained at least a 3.0 GPA, and have been accepted at or applied to a two- or four-year college, vocational-technical school, or other institution of higher learning. For more information and the application, please visit

Excellence in Communications Contest Open!

PenSPRA has an annual Excellence In Education Communications Contest. Entries are accepted in a number of categories to reflect the scope of work often undertaken by communications professionals. An Award of Excellence is given to the top entries in 12 categories. Awards of Honor are given to those entries that deserve recognition but receive a score that was not high enough for an Award of Excellence. The flier and entry form is now posted on our website and look for a copy in the mail as well soon. Entries are due by February 15, 2013.

News From Around the State and Nation

Keystone Pension Report. This is the report that was issued just prior to Governor Corbett's announcement on pensions

http://www.budget.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/office_of_the_budget_home/4408

Two articles on the pension announcement:

<http://www.wave3.com/story/20186522/pa-budget-office-releases-keystone-pension-report>

http://mobile.pennlive.com/advpenn/db_/contentdetail.htm?contentguid=tuPPQbtN&rwthr=0&full=true#display

This blog has a good description of the legal side of the Louisiana Charter School Ruling and why the Voucher Program Lost the Case

<http://dianeravitch.net/2012/11/30/louisiana-judge-rules-voucher-program-unconstitutional/>

An Update on Possible Cuts with Sequestration

<http://triblive.com/news/editorspicks/3083187-74/programs-state-cliff#ixzz2ErbtNHvN>

Funding has been secured to run one of the PA Governor's School of Excellence Science program

<http://www.post-gazette.com/stories/news/education/pennsylvania-governors-school-for-the-sciences-restored-for-promising-students-665428/#ixzz2ESM4JHAs>

This Piece is Long, but her Comparisons About International Test Results are Worth Reading.

<http://zhaolearning.com/2012/12/11/numbers-can-lie-what-timss-and-pisa-truly-tell-us-if-anything/>

A Teacher Speaks up About Charter School Performance

<http://www.plunderbund.com/2012/12/08/guest-post-by-maureen-reedy-students-first-spends-three-hours-in-opposite-day/>

Did you know the ten largest cyber charter schools spent nearly 100 Million taxpayer dollars in the past 5 years on advertising?

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/11/29/online-charter-schools-advertising_n_2212335.html?ncid=edlinkusaolp00000003