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Apples to apples

Politics should have little to do with education funding; unfortunately, we know all too well that it often interferes. We've just had another round of political gamesmanship during budget time and a series of confusing campaign commercials during the primaries. Communications to our public on education funding are a jumble of mixed messages, sounding something like this:

"...brutal cuts to education..."

"...slashed the education budget by nearly three billion dollars..."

"...historically high education funding..."

"...dramatically increased head start funding..."

These conflicting and contradictory statements are actually describing the same administration; our current Governor's record on education funding. Depending on what you read, or which political commercial you hear, your opinion on current education funding could be radically different. Even worse, each of these comments contains an element of the truth.

As public relations professionals, we are always on the alert for misleading information. The comments above have been cherry picked to advance a certain point of view. Regrettably, the public does not usually have the background knowledge or the time to discern the truth between misleading, or cherry picked statements. Each political "side" is guilty of cherry picking, and in our work we want to ensure that the public has access to accurate and timely information so that they are able to make knowledgeable decisions and understand the current situation in our districts.

In order to sift through the barrage of information on current education funding in Pennsylvania, a review of the budgets was clearly necessary. Obviously the same administration could not be cutting three billion dollars from the budget, AND passing historically high education funding. Or could they? The numbers break down this way. For the last year of the Rendell administration, total education funding was \$9.95 billion, or 35.5% of the PA budget. For 2011-2012, Corbett's first budget, total education funding was \$9.26 billion, or 34.1% of the budget. For 2012-2013, total education funding was \$ 9.69 billion, or 35% of the budget. For 2013-2014, total education funding was \$9.96 billion, or 35.1% of the budget.

A few major points become clear from this data. First, Rendell did commit more of a percentage of his budget to education, 35.5% compared to Corbett's high of 35.1%. Corbett, however, does fund the highest dollar amount of \$9.6 billion, compared to Rendell's \$9.5 billion. You can see from these figures that Corbett didn't "cut nearly 3 billion." He cut just under a billion, over three years. The claim about "historically high funding" is accurate, but only for one of Corbett's budget years, and as a dollar amount and not as a percentage of the budget. Some experts would argue the percentage number indicates more of a commitment to education. Inflation also enters into this argument, as Rendell's budget is of course now 5 years old.

Much of the conflicting information on the education budget stems from which budget figures are used in the message. These figures discussed here use all the K-12 education line items from the Governor's official budget, and required significant research to locate and calculate. Other articles or campaign commercials only reference the Basic Education Funding (BEF) line or the BEF and a handful of other large budget line items. If we are to compare budgets accurately, however, we must compare the same numbers; we must compare apples to apples. When one commercial only compares the BEF and

another compares the entire budget, the end result is contradictory statements like those referenced earlier, and confusion for the public.

In your home district, for example, funding from the state may be significantly more or less than what the average district receives. It's important to be aware though, of overall state funding trends and the messages your public is receiving about education funding. Your district may be receiving less funding than last year, yet campaign commercials are insisting that education funding is at an all-time high. Since your district isn't likely to have hundreds of thousands of dollars for TV commercials as political candidates do, which message is your community more likely to receive?

Funding for our schools is not a game, even though political maneuvers might make it seem so. We can continue to be the best advocates for education simply by knowing the facts and communicating them effectively with our communities. If you hear a claim that sounds too good or too bad to be true, chances are that claim does not compare apples to apples. It's likely the claim is missing or adding information, and comparing apples and oranges. Ask questions, research, and share accurate and timely information with your community, so you can control the message on education funding during this campaign season. With these few proactive steps, you can maintain community support and understanding and protect your resources.

Member request

Member Paula Foreman is looking for feedback:

"Employee evaluation continues to be a hot topic for all of us in education. Teachers continue to express concerns about evaluations based on student performance and other suggested topics of measurement, the principals are facing a new evaluation system, and then there are those who fall into the category of administration. School Boards are making it clear they want to see a merit based pay raise system. We have begun internal discussions on what that evaluation system may look like at the administrative level. It is difficult to quantify many of the things we do on a daily basis but yet, we need to develop some form of measurement.

I guess I am curious as to whether or not any of our colleagues could provide feedback on how they are being evaluated. Do they in fact receive a yearly review by their Superintendent? On what measures are they evaluated?"

You can contact Paula with your comments at pforeman@asdcats.com

NSPRA seminar

It's not too late to attend the NSPRA seminar next week in Baltimore. It is very close to us this year; a great opportunity to learn and make new connections. Here's all the information:

http://www.nspr.org/national_seminar

Infographics

Here are some interesting infographics that might be of use:

Arts in education. Did you know that the arts are listed as core subjects in the No Child Left Behind Act?

Twitter hashtags for educators

5 best twitter practices

Why early childhood education is important

Social media superpowers

News from around the state and nation

Current situation in Harrisburg with the budget

http://www.philly.com/philly/news/politics/20140708_Pa__budget__related_bills_remain_in_Harrisburg_limbo.html#RUxq9q0WJV5A0WbU.99

Budget re-cap and a review of the fiscal code issue that may hold up budget passage

http://www.pennlive.com/midstate/index.ssf/2014/07/lights_camera_budget_work_on_p.html

New poll finds education most important issue to voters in the fall election

<http://citizensvoice.com/news/poll-education-remains-weak-spot-for-corbett-with-voters-1.1714365>

77% of PA districts raised taxes this year

<http://thetimes-tribune.com/news/as-area-school-reserves-dwindle-taxes-climb-for-2014-15-1.1715132>

A teacher seniority bill and a bill to reform special education funding didn't make it out for a vote in the spring session; will wait for fall or later

<http://watchdog.org/157847/teacher-seniority-special-ed/>

Reports from around the country about common core implementation and issues

<http://www.politico.com/story/2014/07/common-core-test-anxiety-108527.html>

The Healthy Hunger Free Kids Act is being rejected by the School Nutrition Association (SNA) because of several issues

<http://www.educationnews.org/education-policy-and-politics/school-nutrition-association-flip-flops-on-healthy-kids-act/>

Texting makes for better spellers?

<http://www.educationnews.org/technology/uk-study-texting-makes-for-better-spellers/>

What do you teach? The school PR person as lead teacher

<http://socialschoolpr.wordpress.com/2014/06/16/what-do-you-teach-the-school-pr-person-as-lead-teacher/>